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Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview

Iwona Blazwick

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Iwona Blazwick: Art Nouveau as a building style in early twentieth-century Istanbul; the rise and fall of a 1950s housing project in St. Louis, Missouri; buildings imagined by the citizens of post-Soviet Budapest why is architecture, and in particular Modernism, so central to your work?

Michael Rakowitz: Architecture is one of the very visible systems of social infrastructure that have been both background and foreground for me growing up in suburban New York. The skyline of Manhattan was the closest thing I had to a mountain range, existing at the distant, faded part of the horizon as viewed from Great Neck evidence of a world beyond where I lived. But I grew up learning to never fetishise buildings or their design. It may sound trite, but a child's world is formulated by parental narration. My mother and father reared me on *Sesame Street*, which was a microcosm of the urban environment, complete with avatars of every behavioural trait (Oscar 'the grouch', the Pollyannaish Big Bird, and Mr Snuffleupagus, who could only be seen by those with rich imaginations). On *Sesame Street*, the buildings were not important; the people inside them were. Even the Fisher-Price playset I had of *Sesame Street* while I was a toddler emphasised this, with shutters that opened up to reveal the inhabitants. Accompanying this fanciful acquaintance with the city via pop culture were my family's real trips to the city, where I would see people living outside of buildings: homeless people, who my mother explained were comprised of soldiers from the Vietnam War that our government refused to care for, or victims of the oppression of money. I don't think I ever looked at buildings again without regarding the bodies that were in front of them in opposition to the ones inside. It wasn't until my time in art school that I began to really think about buildings as a surface upon which site-specific artworks could live.

The place where I first experimented with that, the campus of Purchase College, State University of New York, was particularly special. Though widely regarded by students as a fiasco, the architectural vision of the campus was impressive, enlisting the likes of Paul Rudolph, Venturi, Rauch and Brown, Edward Larrabee Barnes and Walter Gropius's US-based firm, the Architects Collaborative, to design the college's buildings. The results were incredibly problematic and not helped by the fact that every structure was built of the same dark brown elongated brick, to somewhat fascistic effect. My projects as a sculpture major were often embedded within that architecture, so site-specific that they sometimes nearly disappeared. I was critiquing the rigidity of monolithic Modernism: one of my projects literally made it look like the bricks were turning away from the viewer, retreating into absence. Later on, while a graduate student at MIT in the mid-1990s, I learned about the social idealism of Modernism and its mixed results when put into practice. Every professor's favourite example was the Pruitt-Igoe housing units designed by Minoru

Yamasaki. Constantly presented to us in slide lectures were the images of its implosion in 1972, along with the Charles Jencks quote: 'Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri, on 15 July 1972, at 3:32 pm, when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grace by dynamite'. This bombastic, impossible locating of such a threshold was of great interest to me, and I wanted to know what it meant. Of course, there is so much to unpack, including the fact that Pruitt-Igoe was at first an architecture that abided by racism, with African American and white residents in different buildings. In December 1955, a Federal District Court ordered St. Louis housing to be desegregated, but the buildings remained largely occupied by African American residents, as whites were resistant to living alongside black neighbours. What also interested me in Pruitt-Igoe was the design, an earnest and formal ethos meant to enlist concrete as a safe democratic material, to build safe democratic space, to inspire safe democratic living. This conceptual through-line, for me, foregrounded the social responsibility of the designer.

The failure of Pruitt-Igoe to live up to its idealism, though disastrous on a practical level, was nevertheless exemplary of visionary architecture that, while often optimistically broadcasting a desire, is simultaneously rooted in inevitable failure. For me, the unbuilding of Pruitt-Igoe connects to the unbuilt, the impossible of this other category. Frequently relegated to models, drawings, and other incarnations of the paper project, visionary architectural proposals mostly remain theoretical due to circumstances ranging from sheer infeasibility to unwelcoming politics to lack of financing. Their residual ideas exist as pragmatic metaphors, statements demanding a culture capable of enabling their existence, poetic critiques of reality.

While on a residency in Budapest in 2006, I was struck by the many demolished buildings and vacant lots created as a result of urban renewal projects in the 7th District and elsewhere. The locals dubbed them 'missing teeth', a colloquialism recalled from the Second World War when retreating German forces blew up important buildings and the incoming Soviet army did the same. It seemed to me that these temporarily empty spaces offered at the very least a bit of room in which to imagine a better future. So for a project titled *The Visionaries*, I made myself available in public and by appointment to collaborate with citizens in the creation of visionary architectural collages that addressed these voids. I walked the streets of Budapest wearing a sandwich board (based on the temporary structures used to display political campaign posters throughout the city) that, when removed from the body, transformed into a portable drafting studio, complete with supplies and seating. Participants were asked to describe their dreams and visions, even the most outlandish, as a tool to ignite critical discussion and to construct alternative visual possibilities that went far beyond the ideas of real estate investors. The sandwich board sported a hand-painted sign that depicted the Pruitt-Igoe being demolished and a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome rising above it like a hopeful moon. This was the logo for *The Visionaries*, a symbol of the desire to free Modernist architecture from its legacy of failure and unrealized potential, to reformulate it from the ground up, to demand a future that could be envisioned together rather than something done to us from the top down.

IB: We are in an age of iconoclasm (the destruction of the World Trade Center, of Palmyra) and of historical revisionism (the removal of statuary from former Soviet republics, the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement). From your Lamassu on London's Fourth Plinth to the Tatlin Tower you made in Sydney, you are rebuilding the monument. Why is it a recurring motif in your work?

MR: I understand these projects not as rebuilding or reconstructing but as *reappearing*. They can only ever be ghosts of their originals and, like all good ghosts, their job is to haunt. As a child of

Jewish parents who were both born in 1945, in the aftermath of the Second World War, I learned from a very young age about the book burnings that preceded the burning of bodies during the Holocaust. As I have seen throughout my own life, and as humans have seen throughout history, destruction of cultural works often precedes the destruction of the people who live alongside them. It is another kind of unbuilding. This is one of the reasons why I resist the term 'reconstruction', which in recent years has become more common via the digital 3D scanning and printing of destroyed or threatened monuments such as the archaeological site of Palmyra in Syria. These practices suggest that history is easily reproducible and thus no longer vulnerable, but they ignore some crucial impossibilities: you can't reconstruct the lives that have been destroyed, maimed and interrupted alongside ravaged archaeological ruins. Reappearance, on the other hand, is a recurring motif in my work because disappearance recurs throughout history.

One of the artefacts remade in the ongoing series *The invisible enemy should not exist* is a copper fragment of a foot from c. 2600-2400 BC that was looted from the National Museum of Iraq. The accession card includes a quote from art historian Diana McDonald: 'The damage, if ancient, might have been intended to render the image less potent'. That object and that information together convey that the loss and collective grief experienced globally in this scenario did not begin, and will not end, with the looting of the museum. It was just the latest in a long series of events. And my project has now unfortunately become a lifelong commitment, as the disappearance of artefacts and monuments in the aftermath of the Iraq War shows no signs of abating. While the Lamassu is indeed monumental, I think it's important to mention that it belongs to that ongoing series, *The invisible enemy*, whose objects fluctuate widely in scale. Some of those objects are small votive statues, with hands clasped in prayer. Votive statues constitute a large part of what went missing during the looting of the Museum. Some archaeologists believe that when people went to the temple they would leave these statuettes behind as an offering, a surrogate to continue to pray in their stead. I, too, think of these artworks as surrogates, as ghosts who represent lost Iraqis, and I believe the Lamassu does this as well, but on a public scale. Set on the Fourth Plinth, it haunts Trafalgar Square at a time when we are witnessing a massive migration of people fleeing Iraq and also Syria. It is a ghost of the original, a placeholder for those human lives that cannot be reconstructed, that are still searching for sanctuary.

IB: You also draw our attention to the minutiae of material culture. But the status of your vernacular objects is very distinct from the Surrealists' found object or Duchamp's readymade - how do everyday objects signify in your work?

MR: Funny that you bring up Duchamp, because although we make completely different use of everyday materials, there is one work of his that bears direct relationship to my practice. It is a piece I first learned about in 2013 through my friend Ana Prvacki, who produced a fabulous project, a cocktail called the *Ghostess*, which was a feminist version of a multiple Duchamp designed for an exhibition in Paris. His was a candy wrapped in green foil upon which were printed the words *A Guest + A Host = A Ghost*. Many of my projects investigate the culinary as a way to build the social, and I have often thought about the intersection of hospitality and hostility, which derive from the Latin *hospes*, meaning 'host', 'guest', or 'stranger'. *Hospes* is formed from *hostis*, which means 'stranger' or 'enemy'. Armed with this etymology and art history, and inspired by Ana's project. I have come to use the term *(g)hosting* as a way of identifying those moments when one is held in a space of tension, where one is a guest but also an enemy, or where a host can become hostile. My introduction to this Duchamp piece happened long after I had enlisted papier mâché derived from

the wrappers of Middle Eastern foodstuffs found in the US to build the artefacts that comprise *The invisible enemy*. So it was also a discovery that added a new dimension to my own understanding of the series and its materials. And of course, more broadly, the signification of the everyday in my work owes some debt to Duchamp and even to Warhol, for the ways in which they opened up what is considered valuable or deserving of elevation.

But the way I make use of quotidian stuff especially points back to provenance, which is central to archaeology. Where something is from, who may have used a certain tool, the agency of an object and the stories it can tell - all this is so important to me. Here's an example: in August 2004, I discovered a large red can of date syrup at Sahadi Importing Co., on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Sahadi's was one of the stores my maternal grandparents frequented when they first arrived in New York after fleeing Baghdad in 1941. When I brought the can to the cash register, Charlie Sahadi, the owner, said, 'Your mother 's going to love this. It's from Baghdad '. I looked at the label, which was clearly marked 'Product of Lebanon'. And that's when he told me that the date syrup is processed in the Iraqi capital, put into large plastic vats, and driven over the border into Syria, where it gets packed into unmarked tinplate steel cans. It then crosses the border into Lebanon, gets a label, and is exported to the rest of the world. From 1990 until May 2003, this was one method that Iraqi companies used to circumvent UN sanctions. When I asked why it was still being practiced in August 2004, more than one year after sanctions had been dropped, Charlie replied that prohibitive customs and security charges were to blame. Importing products directly from Iraq was just too much of a risk: it would be bad business. Everything was in this everyday object. It made visible so much of the power and politics that are often invisible. In science, if you want to know how a system works, you introduce a colouring agent. For me, this product was that colouring agent, disclosing the suffering caused by the sanctions as well as the object's trauma from the xenophobia that forced it to conceal its identity and adopt a veiled provenance. It went from being a consumable product in a disposable vessel to being something holy.

The discovery of that date syrup can lead to my project titled *RETURN*, where I reopened my grandfather 's import-export company as a storefront in Brooklyn to address the absence of anything bearing the label 'Product of Iraq' on store shelves in the United States. The reopened business sold a variety of date products and succeeded in signing the first contract in nearly thirty years to import one ton of world-renowned Iraqi dates. The subsequent narrative of those dates, of their ill-fated journey to the US, mirrored the plight of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees as the dates waited in a line of cars that was four days long at the Jordanian border, only to be sent back and forth to Baghdad, then finally on to Damascus where it was determined that they had spoiled. When ten new boxes of dates were finally airlifted out of Baghdad and into New York City in December 2006, the overall transaction served as a surrogate for a larger tragedy. Having a store open for three months without the main product left a lot of down time. It was during these quiet moments that my attention was drawn to the shelves stocked with the date syrup and date cookies that are product of Iraq but could not say that they were. When you sit with an object long enough, it starts to tell you about itself, and what it wants to be. The empty store made me think of other empty spaces, like the emptied-out National Museum of Iraq. I began to imagine its looted artefacts coming back as ghosts. But like any ghost, these objects would have to look different in order to properly haunt. Suddenly, I put it all together: I thought of the provenance of the artefacts, which gave the looted items their value, and the veiled provenance embedded in the packaging of the Iraqi date products. My idea was not to make replicas but to think about these things that have disappeared and then come back as a spectral presence, as a mutant. Their size would be the same but their material

culture totally different.

Method

IB: You combine historical research with forensic analysis - what triggers a line of enquiry? In gathering documentary, archival and anecdotal materials, how do you evaluate and verify evidence? What judgements are involved in privileging the balance of materials?

MR: This goes back to my childhood training as a devoted collector of baseball memorabilia. We understood certain details in, for instance, the original printing of a scorecard versus a reprint or a counterfeit, or how to identify a real autograph from a fake. But mostly, my father taught my brothers and me to valorise the opportunity to meet people like Joe DiMaggio and to cherish the experience of speaking with him, rather than treasuring the autograph, and to enjoy the friendships we made with other collectors. One of those friends was Kip Ingle, a man a few years younger than my father, who was also the editor of *Yankees Magazine*. The New York Yankees are our favourite team, and he had access to the players. One year for his birthday, my brother Robert got a card signed by the entire team. For my birthday, I got an original game-worn baseball cap by a marginal player named Omar Moreno. I tried very hard to make Omar Moreno my new favourite player, but I couldn't, he just wasn't that good. But, still, I had something authentic, from a trusted source: an object that was on the baseball field at the same time that Omar Moreno's teammate, first baseman Don Mattingly, who was my hero, won the batting title. It was at this moment that the minor object became for me a way of connecting in a direct way with a major event. This ability to appreciate the background as opposed to just the foreground is fundamental to the stories and materials I gather. What I question even further, though, is what constitutes a trusted source or legitimate verification. The appearance on eBay of artefacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq (the auctions were eventually shut down by international policing agencies) is what led me to begin closely monitoring the sales of other Iraqi goods. It was scouring through listings of what Iraq seemingly did not want back that I found items like the Iraqi Fedayeen Saddam helmets, which were based on the design of Darth Vader's helmet from *Star Wars*. These became the centrepiece of *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own*, a project that explores the influence of Western science fiction and fantasy on the design of the uniforms, weapons, and monuments in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The helmets were being sold by a US soldier serving with the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul, and the listing's description read like a museum accession label, describing first the US soldiers' reaction of utter astonishment when seeing these black-clad Iraqi soldiers firing on US forces wearing the helmet of a character who is iconic in the cinematic depiction of evil, and then the testimony from local Iraqis who explained that Saddam Hussein and his son Uday were huge *Star Wars* fans. This digital marketplace had just broken a story I had not heard anywhere else, and I regarded the item description as a form of embedded journalism. I bought those helmets. When I later showed them to Dr Nada Shabout, an art historian who is an authority on Iraqi modern and contemporary art, she told me that Saddam had the Iraqi army march under the Victory Arch (a monumental sculpture conceptualized by Saddam and based on his own hands) in Baghdad to the theme song from *Star Wars* on the eve of the First Gulf War in 1991. Then I discovered that an illustrator named Boris Vallejo designed a poster for the *Star Wars* sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, that featured Darth Vader wielding two lightsabers in a pose that mirrors the hands of the Victory Arch, but eight years after the release of the movie. Vallejo, it turned out, was the mentor of Rowena Morrill, a science fiction illustrator whose work Saddam collected and displayed in his

villas. So, while verification is important, being able to draw idiosyncratic and multidirectional connections is crucial to my way of working, since I aim not to document and clarify but to unsettle. Pushing against settling, against remaining in one place, is a way of dismantling the dominant forms of information and materials. I see these alternative narratives in opposition to the monolithic histories that colonialism often constructs at the expense of the stories of the colonized. But my 'evidence' is not canonized, nor is there a wealth of primary source material, and what I've often had to privilege is storytelling through text or through drawings of events that weren't photographed or otherwise documented. So eBay has since become like a search engine for me; when I hear a story about an object, that's where I go looking for it. Such was the case with Special Ops Cody, the toy figurine I read about in the *New York Daily News* in early February 2005. For three years I searched eBay for the type of doll shown in the newspaper photos, a male African-American soldier, and in doing so I discovered that there were other dolls in the series, made to represent the different races, ethnicities and genders of the US forces serving in Iraq. The dolls were available for sale exclusively on US bases in Kuwait and Iraq, and were often sent home to soldiers' children as a surrogate for a deployed parent. Had I found Special Ops Cody immediately on eBay, I never would have learned all of this. The resulting video, *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, distils all of this information but more crucially builds on the idea of the surrogate. Indeed, since being a type of surrogate made the doll something of a votive, I wondered what an American votive statue from 2005 AD might say to an ancient Iraq votive statue from 2005 BC.

IB: There is an alchemical process in your work where you take one object, fragment or situation and recycle it so that it takes on a new form, even an aura. Could you describe this process?

MR: One of the things I tell my sculpture students is to pay close attention to a material and its inherent metaphors. A form rendered in bronze is going to say something much different than that same form rendered in birdseed. I described the importance of aura and provenance earlier in our conversation, but of course this changes from one project to another. I often work site-specifically, and I try to engage with materials with that same ethos. I think of the material, how it materializes, what is its source, the conditions under which it is created, the way it is extracted, by whom, how it lives and how it dematerializes. A material is an encapsulation of time. During a presentation with Giuseppe Penone, Carolyn [Christov-Bakargiev] referred to the organisms that are comprised within the sediment of certain stones and that thereby make it akin to a 'long body' or a 'slow body'. This is echoed in my material approach for the project I made for dOCUMENTA (13). *What dust will rise?* recreates selections from the State library of Hesse-Kassel that were destroyed by fire in the Fridericianum (which has served as one of the main venues for the dOCUMENTA exhibitions since 1955 and is where my project was sited) during a bombing by the British Royal Air Force on 9 September 1941. With the help of stone carvers from Afghanistan and Italy, I remade these lost volumes out of travertine quarried in the hills of Bamiyan, where two monumental sixth-century sandstone Buddhas had been dynamited by the Taliban in March 2001. The undertaking conjures tombstones and recalls the tradition of stone books serving as surrogates for the illiterate. In *What dust will rise?* I was interested in how the material of one cultural trauma (the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan) could attempt to suture the wounds created in another (the burning of books in the Fridericianum). Placed side by side, we see those materials share physical and historical indexes.

Libricide and state-sponsored iconoclasm are characteristic of every war, of every human conquest of one people over another. At the Hessian State Archives, I saw a charred book of prayers called

the *Halskrause* [neck brace] because, as a parchment book, its pages curled into the very form of a neck brace from the heat of the fires. It burned like human skin. When I saw it, it looked like stone, as though the book had become petrified from fear. I saw the trauma it endured. I also think a lot about the tools that are used to transform material. As part of *What dust will rise?*, I collaborated with Afghan sculptor Abbas Allah Dad - who survived threats from the Taliban for his realistic work - and German art restorer Bert Praxenthaler on a workshop for local students in a monastery cave close to the niche where one of the Bamiyan Buddhas used to stand. The aim was to recuperate the traditional skill of stone carving that had for centuries been part of the heritage of the Hazara region, but forbidden by Taliban rule. The chisels that the students used were fashioned by a local blacksmith from the suspension springs and axels of destroyed cars and military vehicles.

This example of the chisels, whose malevolent material origins were transformed through the new and recuperative uses to which they were put, finds an echo in *Enemy Kitchen*. An Iraqi-Jewish food project, it began in 2003 as a series of cooking classes meant to make Iraqi culture visible in the US beyond the war, and later has evolved to include a food truck in Chicago where Iraqi refugee chefs head up a kitchen of Iraq War veteran sous-chefs and servers, thereby inverting wartime power dynamics. Since 2014, all the food has been prepared using knives custom-built for us by Haidar Sayed Muhsin, a talented Iraqi metal smith who for many years was unwillingly conscripted into serving as Saddam Hussein 's personal sword-maker.

IB: I believe you had training as a stone carver - is this what draws you to artisanship?

MR: I think it does. I believe it also pertains to all we've discussed about material, form and aura. But I also think it is about elevating the hands that make things to be as important as the thing made. Making things over and over again makes a person more intimate with and bound to their material. I am hesitant to say that I desire the mastery that is a part of artisanship, but I definitely desire care. My training as a stone carver draws me to this, but even before that, it was watching my grandmother and my mother cook. Good food takes time and care. Time allows for the discursive to be foregrounded and sculpted, and as Alice Waters once told me, care is beauty. If we speak of artisanship, we should also speak of craft. My hope is that my engagement with questions of craft complicates our understanding of the historical forces acting against transmissions of skill and expertise, hinting at the maintenance of tradition as a form of resistance to cultural erasure.

IB: You delivered stone carving workshops for the people of the Bamiyan province, worked with Iraq War Veterans, high school students, New York's homeless population - are you interested in the participation or the narratives that emerge from these communities?

MR: It is both-and more. The participation of homeless individuals in *paraSITE* was foundational to my understanding of how participation is more than just interaction with an artwork. It can be about thinking together, generating new forms through which knowledge and stories get told. It can be about intersecting communities, narratives and struggles. *paraSITE*, the inflatable shelters I custom-build for homeless people, began when I was a graduate student at MIT and living in Cambridge, MA. Its genesis was an architecture and urban planning workshop I participated in in Jordan after my first semester. I had a keen interest to visit a place close to where my grandparents had fled. Around the same time I had been looking through a book of photographs documenting Palestinian refugee camps. One photograph showed a Palestinian family standing in front of a structure they had built in the camp, a recreation of the façade of their house in the West Bank that

had been bulldozed by the Israelis, rebuilt out of recycled materials: plastic bottles, pieces of zinc siding, cardboard, and other detritus. It was a ghost of the original, refusing to disappear: an architecture of resistance. I felt for the first time the links between the disappearance of Arab Jews from countries across the Middle East and North Africa, and the disappearance of Palestine. Our fates seemed intertwined, and I felt an intersecting struggle to remember, to combat amnesia and cultural erasure. This photograph prompted me to request to visit the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, a request that was ultimately denied by the hosting institutions and the government. Refused access to the camps, I ended up spending time near Kerak, Jordan studying Bedouin tents. One of the amazing things I learned was that the tents were set up differently every night, depending on the wind patterns. Positioning the cloth membranes and rigid structural poles to account for something that seems so unpredictable was like the aerodynamics of sailing. It was magic. So I had all this beautiful, poetic data but no idea what to do with any of it.

When I returned to Cambridge in the dead of winter, I saw a homeless man sleeping under the exhaust vent of a building's heating, ventilation and air-conditioning [HVAC] system. Here was another kind of a wind, a wind that was the by-product of a building's service system, recycled and juxtaposed with another kind of nomadism, homeless people dispossessed not by tradition like the Bedouin, but by consequence due to a myriad of urban ailments including capitalism and private property. I recognized that it was possible to engage with questions of dispossession and exile without actually travelling very far. Alienation was in my own backyard. I decided to harness that invisible air and turn it into something strange and visible and functional. In the *paraSITE* project, now ongoing for twenty-two years, I build inflatable shelters for homeless people that attach to the outtake ducts of a building's HVAC system so the warm air simultaneously inflates and heats these double-membrane structures. The shelters are made on a zero-dollar budget, constructed from polyethylene rubbish bags that I either heat-seal or attach to one another with waterproof packing tape. Individual designs are based on conversations that reveal the participant's personal, pragmatic and aesthetic requests, and I try hard to meet those desires and needs. I was conscious of continuing the material culture and resistance architecture presented in those photos of the reconstructed façade of the demolished Palestinian house.

I was very fortunate to be able to develop this project with input from my mentor Krzysztof Wodiczko, who in 1988 designed the *Homeless Vehicle* in solidarity with the Tompkins Square Park rioters. We have both worked at the intersection of art and other, more pragmatic fields, a position that has allowed me to address expectations of utility and function. Thus in my work 'doing' has often been a critical moment: art as shelter, art as food, art as archaeology, art as commercial enterprise. In each of these endeavours, however, I am also consciously constructing a kind of failure meant to expose problematic mechanisms. Krzysztof calls this strategy 'scandalizing functionalism'. It names a place where problem solving is also trouble making. This trouble can take all kinds of forms: for *paraSITE* it was in part the simple act of making the homeless visible, people cities constantly try to hide rather than help. For the passer-by, the project is agitational in its warning: given the availability of these vents on buildings, the readily available materials, and the enormous number of homeless people abandoned in our cities, could we one day wake up and find these encampments engulfing buildings like ivy? The shelters problematize the problem but also offer themselves as a bandage by unflinchingly recycling a thermal waste stream to create a kind of architectural CPR, where one building is sustaining another, breathing life into its lungs. The dialogue with each individual for whom I have constructed a shelter has shifted over the years as the homeless population has evolved and grown. I have used the word intersect a few times already,

but recently I have found my own projects intersecting, as many of the homeless people I connect to now for *paraSITE* are veterans of the Iraq War, returned to the US as another kind of refugee, discarded by neoliberalism and the war culture that bolsters it. I constantly learn from this project. and I try to keep its engagement with material culture and individual people central. I owe my initial awareness of the latter to Joan Jonas, who came to teach during my last semester at MIT. During a studio visit I told her the stories of each individual *paraSITE* user and she pointed out that that exchange, like the exchange of the air from the building into another one, was a critical moment of the work. Joan told me about the Wandering Jew, the accumulation of stories, and the importance of storytelling, that it could be transformational. That opened up so much for me.

IB: Museological display is very much part of your aesthetic - is this a form of critical intervention, a pedagogical strategy or a Dadaesque theatre of the absurd?

MR: I think it is something that is simultaneously functional, reverential and iconoclastic. For *The invisible enemy should not exist*, the display strategy I employed was based not on the museological vitrines, which were smashed and emptied in Iraq, but on what comes after the museum. I wanted to make present the makeshift wooden tables, set up by the Iraq Museum and the Coalition Forces, upon which recovered items were placed, indexed, and photographed to create an archive of what had been returned. It was like a triage centre for traumatized and dispossessed objects, a way of displaying displacement. It's true that this series uses accession cards, but they are not entirely proper museological elements. They list information about provenance, materials and dimensions, but instead of a paragraph describing how the object was used, there are pertinent quotes from related parties, ranging from Donald Rumsfeld to Dr Donny George Youkhanna, the former director of the Iraq Museum. These quotes act like a puncture of the stability normally offered by museum labels, while also constituting an ongoing conversation between people and objects.

For *What dust will rise?* I experimented with new strategies. I knew I was going to have access to fragments of the Bamiyan Buddhas that most people would have never seen, and that these precious items needed to be housed in protective vitrines. I was receiving new information about these objects as I was putting together the exhibition, so it didn't make sense to have a typical printed (and unchangeable) label. I experimented with writing directly on the vitrine glass with a paint marker, which allowed me to include new information as it emerged, to indicate second thoughts and the precarious nature of these fragments in exile. It also meant I could draw directly on the vitrines, so there were overlaps between the factual information, my idiosyncratic voice as it emerged through handwriting, the irreverence of quick sketches I made as a way of including secondary images, and the artefacts housed inside. It also allowed for some important moments of tension. On one of the vitrines containing the remnants of the Buddhas, I scrawled a quote from Mullah Mohammad Omar that illustrates the inescapable legacy and culpability of the West in deploying cultural heritage and its preservation as a shield:

I did not want to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha. In fact, some foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct repair work of the Bamiyan Buddha that had been slightly damaged due to rains. This shocked me. I thought, these callous people have no regard for thousands of living human beings - the Afghans who are dying of hunger, but they are so concerned about non-living objects like the Buddha. This was extremely deplorable. That is why I ordered its destruction. Had they come for humanitarian work, I would have never ordered the Buddha's destruction.

-Mullah Mohammad Omar in an interview with Pakistani journalist Mohammad Shehzad,
19 April 2004

The handwriting on my drawings and on the vitrines invokes the museological display, but it is also a way of raising the idiosyncratic voice over the aloof, objective tone of the institution. My friend, the curator Stephanie Smith, explains it as a way of making my voice present as a guide, even in my absence.

Themes

IB: A recurring theme in your work is of things falling apart, of destruction and loss. Is your work a diagnostic of the psychological wounds that communities undergoing trauma suffer?

MR: The physical and the psychological are often enmeshed. The people who survive moments of libricide or iconoclasm are often traumatized and indeed, there are psychological wounds. Bert Praxenthaler, with whom I collaborated on the stone carving workshops in Bamiyan, introduced me to several local Hazara citizens who witnessed the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Most recalled the moment they were lined up by the Taliban to watch the destruction. The Taliban made an announcement, telling the people, 'Now we destroy your pride', just before the charges were detonated. So while *What dust will rise?* diagnoses that moment of dehumanization, humiliation and trauma, I also try to make those scenes of destruction somehow run in reverse, though without denying them. This is why I thought a stone-carving workshop would be the best way of addressing the loss of the Buddhas, as well as the controversial question of whether they should be rebuilt, which the local population would like to happen, even as it is discouraged or prohibited by UNESCO. I thought the people should have their own say over the future of their cultural heritage, and I wondered what it might mean if there was a return of the craft of stone carving, something that had once been a rich tradition in the Hazarajat region of Afghanistan. I suddenly had a vision of the dust cloud that was the violent evaporation of the Buddhas settling on the people of Bamiyan. What if the skillsets of stone carving could be dispersed and transmitted, just like the dust? Diagnosis is one thing. Acting on it is something else entirely, and I don't have answers on how to do that outside of my own ongoing experience in psychoanalysis. Acknowledgement and accountability are important. I believe, to a process of healing. This is one of the reasons why I chose to address the Armenian Genocide in *The flesh is yours, the bones are ours* for the Istanbul Biennial in 2015. One hundred years after the Armenian Genocide, it would have been complicit to not address it, to bolster its invisibility and erasure in Turkish society. But I wanted to do it in a way that was not simply an admonishment. Istanbul 's famed Art Nouveau buildings rose at a time when its Armenian population was about to fall as a result of the coming genocide. A member of this community, the artisan Garabet Cezayirliyan, was responsible for crafting the mouldings and friezes installed on the façades of these edifices. Many are still visible today.

As part of my project for the Biennial, I collaborated with Cezayirliyan's former apprentices, including Kemal Cımbız, who owns and operates the atelier that continues to produce these decorative architectural elements. Together we created a new series of friezes and also recast ones Cezayirliyan had made for the Emek Cinema, whose 2013 demolition was a flashpoint for the Gezi protests: a moment when gentrification intersected with genocide. When giving Cımbız over as an apprentice to his master, his parents told Cezayirliyan, 'the flesh is yours, the bones are ours'. A

customary Turkish saying, the phrase is meant to convey that the teacher is granted influence over the learner. The expression cuts deeper, too, as the many architectural flourishes found on the 'skin' of Istanbul's buildings were created by Armenian craftsmen like Cezayirliyan and their ateliers. These plaster decorations, the traces of Armenian fingers and hands, have borne silent witness to the traumatic stories of the city's Armenian population. If their designs were to disappear like their authors from the buildings they adorned, Istanbul would appear barren. This was not an easy project to do, and several mentions of the Armenian Genocide in my handwritten texts, which accompanied the objects in the installation, were repeatedly erased or vandalized by visitors. I did not expect the work to become a reliquary of the continued erasure of a people, but it is important to mention this, as it holds the refusal to acknowledge the trauma in a very visible space of tension. Mine is a desire to suture, to mend the breach, all without erasing the wound.

IB: A Leonard Cohen book of poems published in Farsi; Saddam Hussein's obsession with Darth Vader; the unrealised Beatles concert in North Africa, restaged in Jerusalem. Your research methods always reveal invisible and unexpected connections across time, space and culture. Is this a kind of metaphor or is it about fluidity between geography, identity and history?

MR: Those connections surface whenever I dive deeply enough into a subject. What it is about can be different each time, but I do think these entanglements indicate the even coating of modernism and its associated popular cultures across the globe. Of course, there are metaphors and allegories: the exciting invitation from Jack Persekian and Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem to conceive of a site-specific project had me thinking about ways in which I could address the overload of sacredness within that city, but in ways that had not been spoken about in religious or political contexts. Jerusalem is an orthodox city and I wanted to be unorthodox. My lifelong obsession with The Beatles - which has its roots in martyrdom and sacrifice, after watching my mother grieve John Lennon's murder when I was seven years old - is the closest thing to zealotry I've experienced. While I was growing up, Liverpool was my Jerusalem, and it is a city to which I have still not made a pilgrimage. *The Breakup* was borne out of my own history as the child of an Arab-Jewish mother from Baghdad, for whose family the nationalist ideologies of Zionism on one side and Arab Nationalism on the other created an unlivable situation in the Middle East. The entire project is meant to make a poetic and allegorical connection between two seemingly disparate subjects: the coming together and falling apart of The Beatles, and the coming together and falling apart of Pan-Arabism. They share the same time line, beginning with Syria and Egypt uniting in the late 1950s around the time that John meets Paul, and concluding with Nasser's death in September 1970, just a bit over a year after John announced his intention to leave The Beatles.

Initially the project was proposed as a simple narration of the 150 hours of audio recorded for the film *Let It Be*, presented as an allegorical reference to the collapse of collaboration and unity which led the resultant Balkanization of the group as seen through the lens of geopolitical relationships across the Middle East and North Africa. But Radio Amwaj in Ramallah, Palestine told me, 'If you are going to tell us how they came apart, you have to tell us how they came together'. Thus, what would have been a two hour show became a 10 episode, drive time radio programme that was a historical retelling of The Beatles and their not-so-indirect connection to all that was happening in the Middle East in 1957-70. There is also something to be said about the ways in which pop culture is always seen in the frame of the West, which allows for an othering of the East or the Global South. A project like *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own* made clear that Uday Hussein and I were likely playing the same games in our backyards, pretending to

be Luke Skywalker blowing up the Death Star, and fantasizing about doing what is right. A cultural phenomenon like *Star Wars* has a global impact, its thickly rendered lines of good and evil differently understood depending on the viewer's context. But we were all looking at the same thing at the same time. Likewise *The Breakup*: when I proposed the programme to Radio Amwaj, their station manager Waed Shrouf explained that *Sgt. Pepper 's lonely Hearts Club Band* was released days before the start of the Six Day War in June 1967. The album was the soundtrack of the Palestinian people at that time, and it opens with an anthemic, powerful electric guitar riff that Waed associated with Nasser's bellicose promise to liberate Palestine. It ends with the crashing piano chord of *A Day In The Life*, a disaster that reverberates long after it is played, like the continuation of a war long beyond when we believe it has ended.

IB: Dispossession and ruin are the dark threads that run through your installations; yet you always recoup objects to create something new is this a form of redemption?

MR: It is, certainly. But again, I insist on the reappearance of what has disappeared being a way of also keeping the wound visible and felt.

IB: Does your passion for cooking and communal rituals also propose pleasure as a force for renewal?

MR: Absolutely. But I also believe in turning the stomach while simultaneously filling it. It is in those moments, when eating off a plate that once belonged to Saddam Hussein, or ingesting a kebab formed by the hands of Iraq War veterans and Iraqi refugees, that a strange communion takes place. This is the primal scene in Iraqi cooking: it is called *hamudh helou*, or sweet and sour. If one makes a *kubba* dumpling that is sour, then the broth in which it is cooked must be sweet, and vice versa. It is a way of holding those flavors in tension with one another. This is where I always want to make work, and my hope is that it helps the work resist being reduced to the folkloric or the simply pleasant. Renewal is possible, but nothing can ever be the same as before. Iraqi cooking for me will always offer flavors of the traumas endured, like a *bharat* or spice mix whose list of ingredients grows ever bigger as the pile of ruins grows ever higher.