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## ***Ties that Bind***

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*Storytellers in Africa say that if a story is nothing, it belongs to the teller; if it is something, it belongs to everyone*  
popular saying

For some years now, the American artist of Jewish Iraqi origin Michael Rakowitz (Great Neck, New York, 1973) has been collecting remnants of religious objects such as prayer books, parchments and manuscripts that once belonged to the Jewish community in Iraq. According to Jewish tradition, such damaged materials must be gathered together and stored in a *geniza*, a special area of the synagogue used for this purpose, while awaiting burial. This operation is governed by a complex liturgy and a set of precepts called the *minhag*. In the Talmud, the Jewish holy book, the *geniza* is sometimes described as a storage place and sometimes as a place where treasure is kept.

Rakowitz created the work *Geniza for Ostia* in the synagogue of Ostia Antica near Rome, the second oldest in Europe, in 2013. On the Day of Memory, the artist buried his personal archive of remnants of prayers and damaged religious objects. Constituting an authentic *geniza*, Rakowitz's archive provides fragmentary illustration of the spiritual history of the Iraqi Jewish community. The site is marked by an Iraqi date palm tree of the Barhi species, a name said to derive from the *barh* wind that blows on the city of Basra during the summer. In this way, the artist tells us, the roots of the palm will draw sustenance from the decomposed parchments and materials, and the dates, historically the major Iraqi product for exportation, will be the fruit of earth made up of negotiation and hospitality, listening and interrelation: 'The objects were blessed by the Chief Rabbi of Rome and interred inside an amphora, atop of which an Iraqi date palm grows. Over time, its roots will entangle with the decaying prayer books to create a compost of knowledge to nourish the tree.'<sup>1</sup>

This work expresses all the complexity of Rakowitz's thinking. On the one hand, it helps us to understand the importance and meaning of memory; on the other, it explores the idea of emptiness and absence, which the artist each time fills with intricate storytelling, the fruit of new connections and narrative patterns.

*Geniza for Ostia* also offered Rakowitz an opportunity to talk about his mother, who was found to be seriously ill in 2013 (she later completely recovered). According to the artist, the project is a way of saying goodbye to what must be allowed to depart, which is the most difficult thing for those who remain.

Rakowitz's works are seeds and critical germs in the sense given to the term by Donna Haraway

(Denver, 1944), a pioneer of contemporary thought who has studied the implications of science and technology for modern life. Her essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the late Twentieth Century', published in the *Socialist Review* in 1985, uses the figure of the cyborg, a chimerical fusion of organism and machine, to develop a critique of patriarchal, colonial, anthropocentric Western culture. Through the elaboration of *situated knowledges*,<sup>2</sup> her vision launches a bitter attack on perfect communication and the laws that govern predetermined positions in society, while encouraging paradigm shifts and the transition from modern to postmodern.

In *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), her latest book, Haraway addresses the idea of nature as a system of production and reproduction, revealing the complex interweaving of relations and connections on which it is based. In stating that 'we are all compost, not post-human'<sup>3</sup>, she imagines a way of being in the world based on new social bonds, 'entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings'<sup>4</sup> and 'learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in *response-ability* on a damaged earth'.<sup>5</sup> Haraway imagines the agent position of living beings capable of fostering a new way of being in the world by virtue of their ability to enter into contact and establish bonds of kinship with the other.<sup>6</sup>

And for Michael Rakowitz, everything is a matter of 'kin', ties, starting with his own history. His father is an American of Eastern European and Hungarian descent and his mother's Jewish family moved to the US as a result of a pogrom of Jews and their expulsion from Iraq. His grandfather Nissim Isaac David left Baghdad and his flourishing import-export business with his wife and children in 1941. Before reaching Long Island, where they were to settle, the family lived for some years in Bombay, India, where the fourth and fifth daughters were born, the latter being Michael's mother. With this intricate family history, all of Rakowitz's work is an interweaving of oral narratives, personal experiences, testimony, anecdotes and historical memory. Through the use of different forms and materials, the artist creates works that are participatory artefacts, mobile sculptures, collective actions born out of the *intricate* encounter of archaeology, urban planning, ethnography, history, personal memory and listening to the other. They are works that tell of destruction and reconstruction, frontiers and borders, protests and conflicts, failures, legitimacy and resurrections, all themes gathered together in a single operation of interweaving that is nothing other than the result of what Haraway calls 'making kin', the aim being a representation of a world capable of restoring the social value of the actions of living beings.

For this catalogue, produced in connection with his first European retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and Castello di Rivoli, Rakowitz develops a project entitled *Imperfect Binding. A Homage to Francesco Federico Cerruti*, a tribute to the collector of the same name, a captain of industry who made a fortune in the publishing field with the patent for 'perfect binding'.

Born in Genoa in 1922, Cerruti lived in Turin where his father founded the Legatoria Industriale Torinese (LIT) book binding company in the early 1920s. Cerruti joined the family firm after 1940 and modernized its production methods by replacing cotton, linen or hemp thread with wire for stitching. He demonstrated his flair for innovation in the 1950s with the introduction in Turin of a binding process discovered in the United States that replaced stitching with the application of vinyl adhesive on the spine. The innovations he introduced brought the LIT to its highest-ever levels of production. Parallel to his industrial activities, Cerruti developed a passion for art and built up a huge collection of works, including furniture, rare editions of books, and paintings, which has now

entered Italy's first museum of contemporary art, the Castello di Rivoli.

Inspired by the life of this Turinese collector and philanthropist, *Imperfect Binding* consists of the binding and repair of an entire *mincha* prayer book. Part of Rakowitz's personal *geniza* awaiting burial in accordance with Jewish law, the book is intended to be entrusted to the Piedmontese binding company to be repaired, thus becoming a symbol of their vocation.

'In repairing this book in Torino, words are restored and the spine of the book evolves from the stitching that previously held it together to the glue that renews the pages' proximity to one another.'<sup>7</sup> What was damaged and disconnected, made up of fragments, becomes a whole. The damaged book with all its wounds, a metaphor of trauma and injury, is at last stitched together once again in a healing process.

This catalogue endows the project with further resonance through the inclusion of scanned images of all its pages. Through their reproduction, the prayer book is ideally repaired and the very fact of being placed in a 'perfect binding' of invisible threads restores its memory and guarantees that it will be passed on: A disconnected and damaged book is repaired and bound conceptually in the catalogue. 'A book within the book, that exhibits the wounds of the unbound pages whilst being simultaneously put back together.'

Interweaving 'myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings', Rakowitz's art is a slow process of reconstruction in which his vocation for experimentation and his training in sculpture, graphic design and architecture converge. The latter leads him to develop works equivalent to intricate architectural studies, which establish bonds through the combination of different elements, including analysis of the characteristics of the place, historical and vernacular connotations, social mission, oral narratives and collective knowledge. As the artist says, what he wants is to be in a place where dialogue is possible. Just as an architect develops a construction project on an empty building site, he constructs his narratives on the void of war and devastation.

*The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007-ongoing) is a processual work about the destruction and looting of about 15,000 items (some of which are still untraceable) from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad after the arrival of the American troops in 2003. These items are reconstructed with the packaging of Middle Eastern foodstuffs and local Arabic newspapers in a 'perfect binding' of cheap and humble materials. Each object is accompanied by a caption that tells its complicated story in the words of archaeologists, historians and American soldiers. Sometimes placed in display cases and sometimes on long tables laid out like the ancient Babylonian Processional Way to which the title of the series refers, they are always accompanied by a temporal narrative outlining the stages of their history. 'This was the first project I did after moving to Chicago from New York, working with these young artists who are from the American heartland between 2006 and 2007. There was this war that none of us could do anything about, which we couldn't stop, and there was something about the slowness of making this work that allowed for a conversational space to open up where we were actually discussing the war. That moment in 2007 actually feels far enough away now for me to be really able to actually log it as a time when the American psyche was feeling these complicated emotions about complicity and a certain kind of impotence at what could be done, if anything. In making these things, we didn't replace the original things, but there was something recuperative and hopeful about it while, in time, admitting its failure in terms of whether it adequately replaces something that was lost.'<sup>8</sup>

Another work involving reconstruction to fill a void is *What dust will rise?* (2012), created for dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, which involved a selection of books from the Kassel library destroyed by fire as a result of bombing by the British Royal Air Force on 9 September 1941. The books are reproduced in travertine stone from the Bamiyan quarry in Afghanistan, not far from where two monumental Buddhas were blown up by the Taliban in 2001. The installation is accompanied by historical testimony, various remains, a fragment of the meteorite Arbol Solo, which fell to earth on September 11, 1954 in the province of San Luis, Argentina, and a piece of Libyan Desert Glass, which is literally a piece of the Libyan Desert that was turned to glass from the heat of a meteor that struck the site 26 million years ago. All these are gathered together in a display case to form a sort of ethnographic story that combines the space of collective narrative and the negotiation of fiction and reality.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev describes Rakowitz's work as 'a metaphor for all the invisible, yet no less real, exchanges that occur in everyday life, for how we aggregate and disaggregate as multitudes, for how our breathing creates endless patterns of movement in and through social space'.<sup>9</sup>

In 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', Walter Benjamin (Berlin, 1892 - Portbou, 1940) uses the work of the nineteenth-century Russian writer to stress the importance of telling stories and explain the difference between information and narration. This reflection is meaningful above all today in the era of digital information. 'The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.'<sup>10</sup> Pointing out that the time we know, namely the present, is permeated by the periodic reformulation of forms of power, Benjamin crystallises memory as the subjective force capable of producing change through the construction of a dialectic relationship with the past, with history. For Benjamin, narration is the filling of a void: 'For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship.'<sup>11</sup>

The approach of many of Rakowitz's works appears to reflect Benjamin's analysis of historical events in fragments. Avoiding any literal reconstruction, i.e. the way in which events actually took place, the artist uses oral narration, understood as the moment prior to the formal realization of his works, to drag individual destinies, his own and those of the people involved, into a collective happening that captures the meaning of the entire event in its individual strands.

Rakowitz's reconstruction is not a scholarly process, obedient to the objectivity that Haraway calls into question with the concept of situated knowledges, but rather the ability to construct worlds, to offer new possibilities and patterns of connection, to create ties and narratives in virtue of a subjective and relational value that enables us all to reassemble reality and rethink history through

our power of agency. By holding onto fragments of life and preserving them from the oblivion of careless memory, Rakowitz shows us how to reassemble ourselves too.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from the text written by Michael Rakowitz on his artistic project, which is included in this book.

<sup>2</sup> *Situated knowledge* is a new form of objectivity that represents the agency both of the producer of knowledge and of the object of study.

<sup>3</sup> D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> It is in this sense that Haraway talks of "making kin", two kinds of which are distinguished, one being *odd* and the other *god*.

<sup>7</sup> Excerpted from the text written by Michael Rakowitz on his artistic project, which is included in this book.

<sup>8</sup> A. Downey, "From Invisible Enemy to Enemy Kitchen: Michael Rakowitz in conversation with Anthony Downey", in *Ibraaz*, London, 29 March 2013, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/62> (accessed 4 March 2019).

<sup>9</sup> C. Christov-Bakargiev, 'Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on Michael Rakowitz', in *Artforum*, vol. 43, no. 5, January 2005, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> W. Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' [1936], in *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn (Boston: Mariner Books and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), VI, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., VIII, p. 35.