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## ***A Particulate History***

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*'The roar of bulldozers drowns out the faint moan of stone buildings pulverized by dynamite. Like a man taking a bullet in his spine, a building buckles before collapsing in a rumble surrounded by the void. The drone of silence. Dust rises to cover faces and hands. The bulldozer mounts the debris, and the moaning of things dying begins'*<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1972, carefully placed explosives brought down the first blocks of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate, designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki. By 1976, all 33 blocks of the sprawling estate had been pulverised. Beginning life in 1954 as an iconic project filled with the promise of green and light-filled democratic living, it had by the end of the 1960s become derelict, its architectural form coalescing with the broader socio-political spaces of the city of St. Louis, Missouri to render it uninhabitable. Its demolition – one of the first demolitions of modernist architecture<sup>2</sup> – was widely broadcast on television and came to symbolise 'the day modern architecture died'.<sup>3</sup> The mounds of rubble were used to lay ground for upscale housing in Missouri's Ladue neighbourhood, then one of the most affluent in the country.

In the autumn of 2001, the violent death of another Yamasaki project would be one of the most televised events of the new millennium. On 11 September 2001, two passenger planes would cause the twin towers of the World Trade Centre to collapse, coating a wide radius of lungs, streets, trees and windows in a thick, white dust. Over time, this dust and debris would travel thousands of miles east, intermingling with dust from the bodies of exploded Buddhas, shattered lamassu and drone-strike targets in unnamed locations.

The spatio-temporal reverberations of these interlinked moments in history – the collapse of the Pruitt-Igoe estate and that of the Twin Towers – would come to form the backbone of Michael Rakowitz's practice. The first was materialised in his 2005 work *Dull Roar*, an inflatable monument to the ill-fated estate, marking the threshold between the collapse of post-war social state and the advent of aggressive neoliberal policies across the globe. The second, heralding a new era of unilateral warfare, sanctions, drones and destruction, with yet no end in sight, gave rise to *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing). Through mining the dust and debris generated by the collapse of grand narratives, Rakowitz's project is at once a work of restitution, reconfiguration and reconciliation, producing new forms for engaging with and making visible histories of violence and oppression.

*The invisible enemy should not exist* is a continual process of reproduction, now numbering almost 900, of lost, looted, or destroyed objects from The National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad and other archaeological sites since 2003. Using reference material from the Oriental Institute of the

University of Chicago's Lost Treasures of Iraq database of over 7,000 objects, as well as information posted on Interpol's website, each artefact is carefully constructed at a 1:1 scale using detritus from food packages – such as Puck cream cheese and Swan tea – that circulate in the diasporic Arab community in the US, mixing traces of the living with forms of the dead. Often emulations of foods manufactured locally in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon, these brands are produced for consumption by diasporic communities craving a taste of home, though their ingestion never quite lives up to the original culinary experience. Their existence points not just to the presence of diasporic Arab populations in the US and elsewhere, but to the economies of exile and the desire for the original, be it a home or a plate of fresh *labneh*. By materialising the forms of disappeared artefacts through the excess of diasporic life, the object's very skin speaks to the impossibility of historical and cultural return.

The biographies of objects, whether a plastic pack of Puck Cheese or those encased in the vitrines of the Oriental Institute, exceed the temporal and geographic limits of a single human life. They are touched by many hands; they live through the transitions of many empires. Plastics have such a long life that they will most likely exceed the existence of humans themselves. They are material witnesses to the future that we are casting forth from the present, enabling – through those same processes of examination that we give to museological artefacts – a future species to deduce facts and traces of our existence. At each stage of the long lives of these artefacts, from their creation to their exhumation and eventual museification, we are able to read the traces of a multiplicity of existences, of a myriad of ideological forces and vast flows of migration, bearing witness at a scale greater than that of any one human or people.

Displayed using museological tropes, such as contextual labels including provenance and identification information, the objects in *The invisible enemy should not exist* are positioned as contemporary artefacts that, when studied, may illuminate the arena of the ongoing war in Iraq. At the same time, they stand in for disappeared and dead human beings, creating a 'congregation of bodies, voices, and witnesses'<sup>4</sup> that the artist hopes will work to make apparent the multiplicity of lives that co-existed around these objects, as well as revealing what Judith Butler calls the 'interpretive frames' that condition our affective responses to death; that is, the way structures of power determine whose lives are publicly 'grievable' and whose are not.<sup>5</sup> As she writes in *Frames of War*, in order to ensure tacit consensus for war, dominant powers must de-humanize the enemy, rendering enemy deaths as events unworthy of public grief. For when a life is grievable, it is when we see ourselves in that life, when we understand the entanglement of that life with our own. To make the enemy invisible, unknowable, is the foundation of warfare. It is precisely by bringing these lives into view, by making the 'enemy' visible, that Rakowitz hopes to shift discourses around the war in Iraq and US imperial violence in general.

While Rakowitz's objects point to the devastation wrought by war, they also connect back to a longer history of looting and pillaging that links directly to museums in Europe and the US. They also link to a desire for possession that continues today through the slew of recent projects that seek to make 3D reproductions of lost or inaccessible sites and objects mostly from Syria and Iraq. Rakowitz's work dives deep into the messiness and complexity of restitution and the desire that drives the reconstruction of material heritage, which, in his eyes, is a futile attempt at the reconstruction of history. What is at stake in the dialectic between the clean digital 3D reproductions of Iraq's lost artefacts and Rakowitz's tactile copies is not the bringing back of the human in contrast to the machinic, but rather the illumination of the biography of the object itself.

He reminds us that it is not only the visual form of the object that was lost, but its very materiality, within which the artefact contains its data. When we lose these objects, we don't just lose the thing, we lose the biography of all the lives that ever brushed against it, and whose dust settled on it. Rakowitz's work should not, then, be understood as a re-humanising of the digital drive, but rather as a re-materialisation of the object, and a recognition that it is through its materiality that it acts as a witness testifying to the excesses of war; not to the spectacular violence through which an individual or many die, but to an ongoing slow trauma in the quotidian lives of all those caught in war's ever-extending blast radius.

A key element of Rakowitz's practice is the ability of his work to resonate both inside and outside the art world. The forms and situations he produces do not only reference particular spaces or stories, but actively work to affect these spaces and the actors that constitute them. The real-world implications of his multifarious practice were crystallised during the culmination of his 2011 work *Spoils*, an at first seemingly simple, almost tongue in cheek project that had unexpected consequences.

Commissioned by Creative Time, *Spoils* was a part of a larger initiative connecting artists to high-end restaurants in New York City to collaborate on a dinner experience. Rakowitz, together with chef Kevin Lasko at Park Avenue Autumn Restaurant, created a dish featuring venison, Iraqi date syrup and tahini (*debes wa'rashi*). The meal had to be served on plates looted from Saddam Hussein's palaces, including Wedgewood wares that had themselves been looted from King Faisal II's palaces following his execution in 1958. Rakowitz purchased the plates on e-Bay from an active soldier serving in the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division – the same unit that captured Saddam – as well as from an Iraqi refugee living in the US. The plates had been acquired and exported out of Iraq through the regular military post, never being flagged as potentially sensitive artefacts.

Shortly before the culmination of the project, the restaurant received a 'Cease and Desist' letter from the US State Department and the Iraqi mission to the United Nations, stating that the plates were illegally acquired national artefacts of Iraq. They were summarily seized from the restaurant and taken to the Iraqi mission to the United Nations, where they were 'returned' in the presence of Rakowitz, who documented the process of restitution. The plates were said to be destined for display in Saddam's palaces, which would be transformed into museums. It was through their insertion into the value system of art, as part of Rakowitz's culinary intervention and its subsequent coverage across a range of media, that the plates were 'discovered' and calls for their repatriation as cultural artefacts were made.

*Spoils* is an intervention into the material culture of war that demonstrates the networks of actors that can come to encircle objects exposed through conflict. The soldier seeks to derive economic value from the loot, the Iraqi state seeks to conserve the historical value such an object contains, while the artist intends to solicit an almost animistic performance from them. He wants the objects themselves to become affective agents for the people who dine off their surfaces, bringing them to face a proximity to war that they can no longer deny.

For Rakowitz, the material objects that he produces, acquires, recycles and moulds are not symbolic representations of truths that exist elsewhere, but are themselves the fact of the matter, whether in the form of buildings, plaster friezes or carved votive statues. He thus reclaims the radicality of a formal aesthetic practice as an action capable of producing claims that counter and intervene within

state-sanctioned historiography and erasure. The strategy for this is not to isolate the material from the concept, the figure from the form, the subject from the object, but rather to collapse and merge these binaries. In the process, these works create collectivities, form and mould unexpected relations and merge connections that allow concealed narratives to, quite literally, take shape.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Khoury, “The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future”, in *Al-Mulhaq*, weekly cultural supplement of the daily paper *An-Nahar*, April 1992. As quoted in K. Saghieh, “1990s Beirut: Al-Mulhaq, Memory, and the Defeat”, in *e-flux journal*, no. 97, New York, February 2019: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/97/250527/1990s-beirut-al-mulhaq-memory-and-the-defeat/> (accessed 4 March 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Prospero, “Why the Pruitt-Igoe housing project failed”, in *The Economist*, 15 October 2011: <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2011/10/15/why-the-pruitt-igoe-housing-project-failed> (accessed 4 March 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Cahill, “Michael Rakowitz,” in *Artforum*, New York, 18 August 2015: <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/michael-rakowitz-speaks-about-his-work-for-the-istanbul-biennial-54249> (accessed 4 March 2019).

<sup>5</sup> J. Butler, “Precariousness and Grievability,” in *Versobooks Blog*, London, 16 November 2015: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2339-judith-butler-precarioussness-and-grievability-when-is-life-grievable> (accessed 4 March 2019).