

# Michael Rakowitz: *A Museum Without Walls For Baghdad*

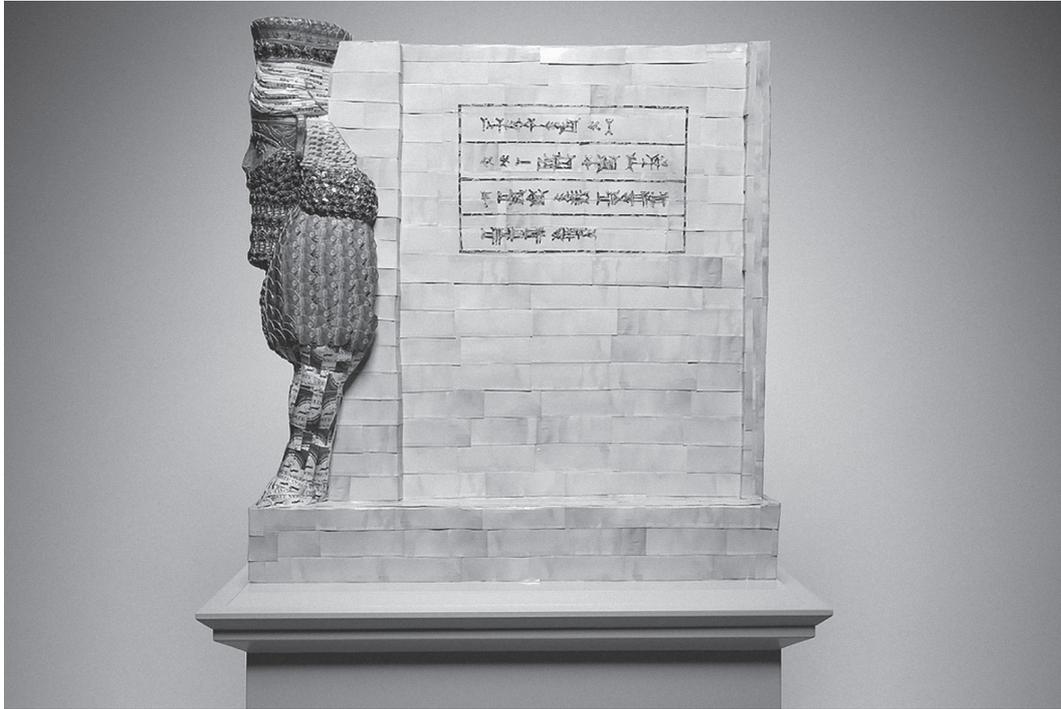
*There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.*<sup>1</sup>

How is it possible to resign yourself to watching Baghdad and Iraq pass from being the cradle of mankind to the grave of history, from the Mesopotamian dream watering its land to the conflicts of the last few decades, relentlessly burning it? In this tragic context, how are we to rethink the fate of the national heritage, when the museum-city of Baghdad has seen its vestiges first moved to European museums (in the colonial era), and then reduced to ashes by war (in the postcolonial era)? Eventually how does contemporary art set forth on the trails of a heritage that is, if not erased, at the very least riddled with missing spaces? Undoubtedly Michael Rakowitz's timely project *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (which he began in 2007 and is ongoing) stands out as most committed. It shows a restless and Sisyphean effort to 'recreate' the looted objects from the Baghdad Museum<sup>2</sup> since the invasion of the American armed forces and their allies in the Second Gulf War in 2003. Playing an important role in raising consciousness about the destruction and loss of cultural heritage, the American artist of Iraqi-Jewish descent can be seen as attempting to establish not less than a *museum without walls* (or a nomadic museum) for Baghdad.

The artist is not shy about the implications of working on archaeological artefacts with a Western background. Indeed, he describes his work at *Art Basel, Room Z, Northwest Palace of Nimrud* (2018), as "a double iconoclasm," adding that "institutions like the British Museum and others acquired many of these reliefs. What remained ended up being destroyed by ISIS."<sup>3</sup> This recent series (which shifts from the context of the American invasion to that of ISIS in 2014) feels like a culmination of Rakowitz's long-term process. Working with a team of assistants, the artist has reconstructed, as a symbol of the Assyrian golden age, the monumental limestone reliefs that once lined the walls of King Ashurnasirpal II's ninth century BC palace (near present-day Mosul in northern Iraq). Rakowitz operated with his landmark makeshift figuration, applied to reproduce like a copy the palace's depictions of winged guardians and offerings of young date fronds, beneath cuneiform chanting of the King's greatness (excavated by British archaeologists in 1854 and destroyed by ISIS in 2015). *Room Z* appears as it stood from the time of its dismantling with only



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seven of thirteen panels displayed. Rakowitz recalls the previous removal of six panels by leaving a blank space and museum label underlining their integration to Western museums' collections. Thus acknowledging the continued history of displacement in Iraq, the artist creates what he calls a "palimpsest of different moments of removal."<sup>4</sup> By this almost metaphysical approach to the catastrophe, not to be studied from where it surfaces but from where it *re-surfaces*, such an artistic statement not only opens a breach to study the role of museology in colonial history, but also to imagine what could be the museum's future, through the thin line between preservation and reinvention; re-rooting and nomadism.

Since 2007, Rakowitz has devoted himself to creating papier-mâché replicas of looted and destroyed artefacts, made to their true scale; a faithful attitude that expresses his ethics guiding the remakes and also his reluctance for spectacular or monumental strategies (one can mention the quite exceptional reconstitution of the Ishtar Gate at the scale of the original building in Rakowitz's 2018 exhibition at the Chicago Museum for Contemporary Art). Nevertheless, their materiality shifted from the stone, marble, gypsum and clay to our mundane consumers condition: alluding to the imposed invisibility of the museum treasures, the replicas are made from the packaging of Middle Eastern foodstuffs sold in the USA (where Rakowitz now lives) and from local Arabic newspapers; thus highlighting the presence across America and Europe of Iraqis who have sought refuge from the fighting that has continued to ravage their country.

Utilising the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute database (one of the first deep academic attempts to cope with the dismantling of Iraqi heritage), as well as information posted on Interpol's website and other sources, Rakowitz has reconstructed more than seven hundred artefacts since 2007. As a 'museum without walls', his constructed collection of antiquities is displayed by series or individually, on pedestals, tables and vitrines of variable dimensions, thus emphasising the museum concept to which they belong and escape at the same time – though Rakowitz often intentionally uses a lesser number of vitrines (unlike in a proper museum) in order to enhance the visitor's eye-contact experience with the objects. To accompany these objects, labels describe the origin of each item, incorporating misleading quotes, at times dramatic or humouristic when heard retrospectively, from either Iraqi archaeologists or American political leaders.

As a 'museum without walls' Rakowitz's system underlines their display conditions, instead of acting as if they didn't matter, and both question the lost heritage (following the lootings) and the colonised heritage (of Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Babylonian artifacts in French and German museums). By their provocative materiality and rough compositions (refined in their own way when it comes to miniature objects) the remakes of the Baghdad Museum appeals to reconnecting our subjectivity to ancient artifacts which the Western museum taught us to look at as "things from the past"; while the lost and dismembered heritage plays a big role in the blurring of national identities for younger generations of Arab people. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* explores the museum as the metaphor of a culture surviving somewhere between dream and nightmare, a culture which is showing itself to be all the more alive because it is resisting its programmed destruction – condemned not so much to extinction as to *reinvention*.

It's all the more so compelling to think that Rakowitz's recreational but unachievable process has begun at a time (in 2007) of general dilapidation and disgrace for the Baghdad Museum. This museum is now in a much better condition, as after having recovered around half of the approximately 15,000 objects initially looted, it has taken on a new life and been partially reopened to the Iraqi public. Probably as one of the most fascinating effects on us – and how it plays on different temporalities – *The Invisible Enemy...* performs alternatively the phantom-like and traumatic museum of Iraq – and its dream of a reinvented museum. When asked about his makeshift antiquities as symbols of resilience to the loss of culture and human life, Rakowitz commented, "It's meant to do two things; to be a ghost that's supposed to haunt, but also a spectral presence that's supposed to offer some kind of light."<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to what might be thought, this surviving symptom does not date back to the Gulf War, but relates to the history of the avant-gardes in the 1950s and 1960s, and the post-independence period of the 1930s, when the idea of the National Iraq Museum was born. The whole narrative begins with the National Museum, a pivotal resource in the making of modern Iraq from that period onwards, and the permanent symbol of an "antique modernity" to be reinterpreted by artists: the museum presentation of Islamic, Sumerian and Assyrian influences acts as a symbolic platform for the project of a new nation.<sup>6</sup> It was also within this boundary that the forming of an artistic avant-garde would be played out. It featured such renowned artists as Jewad Salim, Lorna Salim, Shakir Hassan al Said and Dia Azzawi, who were keen to take part in this national movement of modernisation and, in a cross-disciplinary way, studied art, archaeology and architecture. They managed to create a hybrid aesthetic, inspired directly by national collections of antiquities, while at the same time ushering in an at once complex and straightforward dialogue with European modernism (references to Picasso, for example, recurred regularly, but more in the form of a visual and ironic citation than an 'influence' in the strict sense of the term).

We may well wonder if the history of the Iraqi national collections does not reveal a template – in both postcolonial and postmodern terms – of a form of modernisation understood as a process of formal hybridisation, or even formal self-conservation. In this respect, the national collection of modern art (presented in the 1960s in the Gulbenkian building in Baghdad before being transferred in the 1980s to the aptly named Saddam Art Centre) is all the more significant in that its works explicitly reinterpret the iconology and mythologies taken from collections of antiquities. This is a heritage intent on crossing borders (beyond the frontiers of the nation- and postcolonial-state), which is cosmopolitan and multifaceted, in the face of foreign and colonial domination (which certainly did not fade with the Independence of 1932) and faced more broadly today with the destruction of its heritage. Over and above past and present military invasions, many contemporary artists in Iraq and outside the country have devoted themselves to this protective impulse, be it in the form of allegory, parody, documentary or archival work (Walid Siti, Salam Atta Sabri, Latif Al Ani, Sherko Abbas, and Hanaa Malallah amongst others).

The 2003 looting of these collections has in fact given rise to as much illicit speculation as real scientific and heritage programs involving Iraqi and non-Iraqi protagonists (in particular in British and American universities). Auction houses and the black market became infested with the trafficking of looted objects circulating internationally and threatening the museums as well. Various databases for tracing these objects, whether compiled by customs and police or academic, private or public bodies, kept growing in number, paradoxically offering a new life to these artefacts: theft and destruction are turned into systems of recollection and other areas of online circulation.



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The cross-border spirit of Mesopotamia and that of the Internet meet up, for better or for worse, creating an anachronistic space to be navigated where artists like Michael Rakowitz help us find our way. *The Invisible Enemy...* has provided a most complete platform by acting both on the materiality of the objects and their circulation, through different international exhibitions and by museums acquisitions<sup>7</sup> (which acquire smaller or greater parts of the *The Invisible Enemy...* like recently the Tate Modern in 2018). Maybe this interesting relation to trade, collection and circulation comes with a better example, if one is reminded that in 2006 Rakowitz opened a store in Brooklyn to sell dates, with the admitted goal of importing the fruit directly from Iraq, but packaged in boxes that advertised their true provenance. In the context of United Nations-imposed sanctions, Rakowitz's goods would be the first imports labelled "Product of Iraq" to enter the USA in over twenty-five years. Hence these reproductions from the Baghdad Museum could appear no more as mere objects with their thought-provoking materiality, but as the value exchange or *currency* for enforcing these missing objects into our present of *transitional condition*, where the general stability of infrastructures and knowledge structures is challenged by nomadic collections and database museums.

As part of the Fourth Plinth project in London's Trafalgar Square, in March 2018, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* extended into public space with a remake of the *Lamassu* statue, the Assyrian winged bull destroyed by ISIS in Nineveh in 2015; facing the National Gallery and the City of Westminster. Here we probably see Rakowitz's most spectacular act in this sculptural history of removal and displacement, where modernism and antiquity meet in a preposterous contemporaneity of crisis (including the current global migrant crisis). The *Lamassu* statue remake stands for a symbol of displacement from the Ancient Nineveh, late Assyrian Empire (911 BC–612 BC), but also for its eventual collapse. As a symbol of power, it recalls the time when the Assyrian kings sponsored vast buildings and royal palaces decorated with glazed tiles and sculptured bas-reliefs representing the King's glory, festivities and hunting scenes. It revives the cultural narrative of a pre-Islamic and cosmopolitan Iraq, as the ISIS video staging the destruction of the Nineveh *Lamassu* aimed at annihilating it. Indeed ISIS's lethal operations entailed not only onsite propagandist filmmaking with the destruction of heritage objects, but also the deliberate blurring between reality and deception, as they sometimes staged the destruction of a fake object, with the real item kept for trafficking. Therefore Rakowitz's *Lamassu* stands for a hope of transferring the object's essence (or aura) into the replica that can be newly shared in a safe place.

But as a newly implanted monument in the heart of the City of London, the largest Western contemporary art capital, Rakowitz's *Lamassu* also abruptly becomes a shadowed mirror to Western collections such as those in the British Museum, or New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which hold such winged-bull statues expropriated from Iraqi archaeological sites. From an iconographic perspective, it draws our subconscious beyond the Assyrian borders to correlate it with a transhistorical stream of figures of orientalist sphinxes, neoclassical lions, baroque imagery or science-fictional monsters. Its public square siting gives it more strength to its literal outdoor presence and metaphorical 'museum without walls' destination. Perhaps the main metaphysical and political rupture signified by this gap in history can be explained by the role of the oil economy in modern (and museum) culture—underlined by the involvement in the 1960s of the Gulbenkian family in shaping the National Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad and Iraqi modernism in general, alongside British oil companies who supported, documented and financed parts of that Iraqi heritage. A resulting irony would be to see this heritage destroyed only to reappear under the form of this



*Lamassu*, at a precise time when we see concepts of “collapsology” and “survivalism” promoted in the mainstream media, based on the belief of a gradual decline of the industrial and oil-generated world in the next thirty years, concomitant with an overt growth of museum culture and investment in the Gulf States and in China, as the East and new art softpower strikes back.

By investing a central Western symbol of political power (the pedestal, upon which a nation exhibits its icons of sovereignty), Rakowitz’s *Lamassu* can be seen as a performance of cultural transfer and hybridity, and one of counter-orientalism: it stands out as the most provocative reminder of the Western nineteenth century Great Exhibitions and World’s Fair, from London to Paris, and Vienna to Chicago, where oriental countries were represented through fake statues, temples and belly-dancers.<sup>8</sup> A strategy that no longer looks at the Orient, but more so celebrates an oriental unconscious. Interconnectedness becomes privileged to dependence, and Baghdad’s golden age nostalgia is thus expressed in its own emotional space to an international audience directly from the cultural temple of the City of London—where as it happened, major public demonstrations occurred protesting the second Gulf War in 2003.

It should also be understood that the political rationale for Rakowitz's art practice – informed by his role of Associate Professor of contemporary art practice at Northwestern University in Chicago, and at the International Academy of Art Palestine in Ramallah – is one of a 'cultural archaeologist' uncovering unexpected networks between history and fiction, relying on a critical, research-based approach. In 2010, Tate Modern in London presented his project *The Worst Condition is to Pass Under a Sword Which is Not One's Own* (2009), which traces links between Western science-fiction and Saddam Hussein's regime (revealing the Iraqi leader's fascination with Jules Verne's novels and *Star Wars* films). Rakowitz also follows a more socially committed and non-gallery practice, for instance, with his project *paraSITE* (1998-ongoing), consisting of inflatable shelters for homeless people in the USA, inspired by the Bedouin who change the form of their tents every night in response to the wind. Equally, *Enemy Kitchen* (2006-ongoing) is an iterative performance in which hospitality fights against hostility by serving Iraqi food to the public. A major survey show was held at the Chicago Museum for Contemporary Art in 2017-18 and a retrospective of the artist took place at Castello di Rivoli, Turin and the Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2019.

In a more philosophical perspective, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, supported by the trophy of the *Lamassu* erected in London, questions our capacity to cease obsessional ontology of the true and the authentic (going alongside the authority of the monument in Western culture) in order to welcome and act on a genuine empathy and even international resilience through the remake, the crafted and the nomadic. As true art rarely lies in the art of truthfulness.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Thesis VII*, 1940

<sup>2</sup> The museum's official and historical name is National Iraq Museum, but is also informally called the Baghdad Antiquities or Archaeology Museum

<sup>3</sup> Gareth Harris, *The Art Newspaper*, 12 June 2018; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/london-s-whitechapel-gallery-and-turin-s-castello-di-rivoli-to-hold-joint-rakowitz-survey>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in 'The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist', *Arte por excelencias*, 4 November 2018; <https://www.arteporexcelencias.com/en/news/michael-rakowitz-invisible-enemy-should-not-exist>

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Naomi Rea, 'The Ghost of Iraq's Lost Heritage Comes to Trafalgar Square as Michael Rakowitz Unveils his Fourth Plinth Sculpture', *Artnet News*, 27 March 2018; <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/michael-rakowitz-fourth-plinth-1254095>

<sup>6</sup> For a historical survey of the Baghdad Museum, see Lamia Al-Gailani Werr, 'A Museum is Born', *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005, p. 27

<sup>7</sup> The project has been shown in multiple venues including the *Sharjah Biennial* (2007), *Istanbul Biennial* (2007), the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-On-Hudson, New York (2008), Modern Art Oxford (2009), the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (2013), and the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago (2014). Parts of it are held in the following public collections: Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; The British Museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, amongst others

<sup>8</sup> See Zeynep Celik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at the 19th Century World's Fairs*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1992