

## THE SWEET AND BITTER ROAD MICHAEL RAKOWITZ



**SPOILS**, 2011, venison topped with date and tahini sauce on a plate taken from Saddam Hussein's private collection, which was served to guests at Park Avenue Autumn, New York, 2011. Photography by Christopher Kissock. Courtesy Creative Time, New York, and Lombard Freid Projects, New York.

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The waiter brought a tender cut of Australian venison served on a bed of *Debes wa rashi*, an Iraqi dessert that combines tahini and date syrup, and garnished with pomegranate seeds, pine nuts and scallions. It was a special dish presented as the main feature of the New York restaurant Park Avenue Autumn's 2011 seasonal menu. The gourmet dining experience, however, came with a catch: the meat was served on a dinner plate that had been taken from the palaces of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

The provocative (reportedly delicious) entrée was a collaboration between Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz and Park Avenue Autumn's executive chef Kevin Lasko. For its 2011 program, the restaurant had invited the New York nonprofit Creative Time to facilitate joint projects between Lasko and four contemporary artists, who each created a dish for one of the four seasons (the restaurant overhauls its design and menu every four months). The final installment of the program, the autumn menu, featured Rakowitz's project, entitled *Spoils*, which challenged Lasko to create a dish inspired by the cuisine of Iraq.

With some bearing the seals of the Iraqi state, the ornamental dishes that Rakowitz contributed were part of Saddam Hussein's personal collection, as well as from another set originally owned by

Faisal II, the last king of Iraq who was killed during a military coup in 1958. Rakowitz purchased all of the items on eBay: Hussein's personal plates, used at the al-Salam Presidential Palace in Baghdad, came from Usama Alkhazraji, an Iraqi refugee and collector of Iraqi militaria who now lives in Michigan; the Wedgewood china of Faisal II from Lorenzo Luna, an American soldier who served in the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, the same unit that helped to capture the former Iraqi leader in December 2003. Luna is also a collector, and claims to have acquired many of the plates from antique shops and Iraqi vendors at bazaars organized by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service.

Diners at Park Avenue Autumn displayed mixed reactions to the Iraq-inspired entrée. In the first two weeks of *Spoils'* debut, the restaurant received volumes of angry emails from people denouncing the project. Yet at the same time, demand for the dish became so high that the restaurant even considered purchasing more of the plates—to add to the 20 that Rakowitz had initially provided—so that more of the dishes could be served at one time. Not without reason, many restaurant guests, despite ordering the entrée and loving the food, nevertheless remained upset by the thought of digesting its historical and cultural implications.



Detail of black and gold trimmed Wedgewood china dinner plate that belonged to Saddam Hussein. Photography by Christopher Kissock. Courtesy Creative Time, New York, and Lombard Freid Projects, New York.

Eating the dish proved a complicated task even for the artist himself, who told *ArtAsiaPacific* that he could not bring himself to eat directly from the plates. Putting the consumer in the position of the dictator, or one of his family or guests, was, as Rakowitz says, “the whole point of the project: it puts the diner into a situation where they are forced to take a position, both morally and ethically.” With his characteristic humor, he adds, “I liked the idea of somebody really wanting a dish that they just can’t order. It’s like Moses not being able to go into the Promised Land.”

Interest in *Spoils* was not limited to members of the art world and the restaurant’s posh, Upper East Side clientele. In late November, nearly two months after Rakowitz’s dish was added to the menu, the restaurant’s owners received a cease-and-desist letter from the US State Department and the Iraq mission to the United Nations, ordering them to “surrender” the plates, which had officially been deemed national artifacts of Iraq. (Rakowitz insists the purchase of the plates from the two sellers were both legal transactions.) Though the letter arrived just two days before the intended “last orders” for Rakowitz’s project, the restaurant promptly removed *Spoils* from its menu.

When Rakowitz saw the lawyer’s letter, which was forwarded to him on Thanksgiving Day, in November last year, he decided returning the plates was the appropriate course of action. Though originally planned to take place sometime after the Christmas holidays, the repatriation was brought forward to mid-December, to coincide with Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki’s visit to Washington, DC. Rakowitz, who happened to be in New York at the time, was able to witness the plates being handed over to the Iraqi mission. He documented the whole process on video, as he saw the returning

of the artifacts to Iraq as a powerful finale to his culinary art project. For the artist, the repatriation was a sign of possibility: that Iraq is perhaps moving toward putting an end to systematic amnesia regarding its societal problems. The artist’s hope is for the plates to keep the memory of the past alive, and serve as a tool for Iraq to learn from its tragic modern history.

## Why don’t we do it in the road?

When Michael Rakowitz stepped into the Iraqi embassy in New York City, following the plates’ journey of repatriation, he realized he was the first member of his family to set foot on Iraqi soil since his mother’s family was exiled to the United States in 1946. Born in Great Neck, New York, in 1973, to a Jewish father and a Jewish-Iraqi mother, Rakowitz began his art education as a graphic-design student at the State University of New York, Purchase. Yet midway through his second year he switched his concentration to sculpture. Rakowitz then began constructing site-specific installations that incorporated the architecture of buildings and other environments. Other early works involved matchbooks, from which he would remove the matches, delicately paint each stick, reattach them to the book, place them with other matchbooks at a smoke shop and watch as customers encountered his “sculptures.”

With an interest in the interaction between artist, public and artwork, after graduating from SUNY Purchase in 1995, Rakowitz continued his studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he enrolled in the visual studies program in public art at the Department of Architecture. In 1997, following the first semester, he was invited to participate in a three-week architectural residency, organized by MIT’s Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement, which played a significant role in the creation of his first major artwork. The residency, which took place in Kerak, Jordan, held most of its workshops in the desert near the Dead Sea region, where Rakowitz studied the tents and housing structures of the local Bedouin tribes. He took particular interest in the Bedouin’s construction of tents, especially the way that tent poles were set up differently each night to accommodate the ever-changing wind patterns of the desert, based on a system that was similar to the aerodynamics of sailing.

This experience became the inspiration for *paraSITE* (1998– ), in which the artist applied the concept of Bedouin tents to create shelters for the homeless. On his return to Boston, Rakowitz noticed people sleeping near ventilators of corporate buildings to stay warm. He imagined using these exhaust vents to create heated, inflatable shelters, and soon set to work with a group of homeless men he had often seen around town. In meetings held at a local municipal shelter and Rakowitz’s studio, the men offered the artist suggestions on ways to build refuges that were practical to their lifestyle. For example, the artist’s initial idea of using black plastic bags for the structure, as a way to ensure privacy, was vetoed because they impeded the inhabitant’s ability to look out for potential danger. Rakowitz recalls that the homeless men in fact expressed their desire to be seen by the public: “They said, ‘We already have plenty of privacy. Nobody says anything to us on the street and that’s the problem. You can take us from being invisible to being visible.’”



**BILL STONE'S PARASITE SHELTER**, 1998, an inflatable plastic shelter connected to an exterior wall vent, installed in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Projects, New York.

In 1998, while still a graduate student at MIT, Rakowitz launched *paraSITE* on the streets of Boston. The inflatable, double-layered plastic tents were made from translucent trash bags and clear, weatherproof packing tape. Designed to attach to the exterior vents on buildings, each shelter is also custom-made to a specific individual's desires and needs. Rakowitz still continues to make new *paraSITE* shelters from time to time, and has also produced step-by-step instructions on how to build one, which he published in *Spare Change News*, a local newspaper sold by homeless people as part of an initiative to empower their community.

## Get Back (To Where You Once Belonged)

Following his studies at MIT, Rakowitz continued his interest in architectural interventions, including a commission for the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York, in 2000, where he created a large climate-control system made from galvanized steel that occupied a whole room, effectively protecting only itself. In 2004, with the war in Iraq in the headlines, he began a project in collaboration with the nonprofit Creative Time called *Return*, in which he reincorporated Davisons & Co. This was the business that his grandfather, Nissim Isaac David, operated in Baghdad (and later in the US, until the 1960s), an import-export business that was among the most successful and active in the Middle East. In September 2006, 60 years after his grandfather's immigration to the US, Rakowitz revived Davisons & Co. as a storefront in Brooklyn.

The new Davisons & Co. stood in the heart of Brooklyn's Arab community on Atlantic Avenue, its front window adorned with stenciled portraits of himself and his grandfather. Displaying a sign in its window that read "Free Shipping to Iraq," Rakowitz invited members of the Iraqi diaspora, families with military personnel stationed in Iraq, and other interested people to send packages to the country. The offer of free shipping was not a small gesture considering that an eight-by-ten-inch envelope cost nearly USD 50 in postage to Iraq in 2006. Many people took the store up on its offer, to send family gifts and charitable contributions; the shipping costs were covered through funding from art institutions, including



**RETURN**, 2006, a temporary storefront in Brooklyn, New York which housed Davisons & Co., a revived edition of the import-export business once owned by the artist's grandfather.

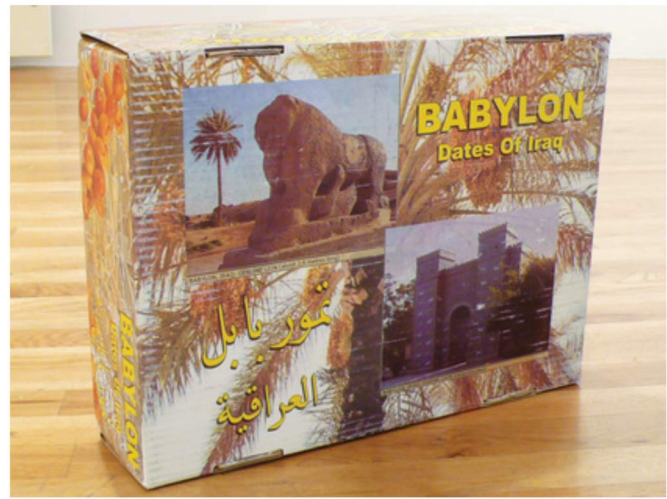
Creative Time, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

The storefront, which was on loan to the artist for several months while the building awaited remodeling, also had merchandise for sale. There were date cookies and date syrup, as well as four varieties of fresh dates, all brought in from California (from plants grown with the seeds of Iraqi varietals). Texts on the wall explained that date products are often shipped out of Iraq with labels that say they originated in a different country, such as Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates or even the Netherlands, to circumvent the United States' prohibitive import charges and security regulations. On another wall of the store hung a history of the fruit, printed in Arabic and English, noting that dates are a distinctive national product of Iraq, and that for much of the 20th century they were the country's second-largest export after oil, but that in recent years, political turmoil and resulting trade sanctions have kept Iraqi products from entering the US and other countries, with devastating consequences for the nation and its people. Traditionally considered a symbol of good fortune in both Jewish and Muslim families, the date's current status as a dying industry added a layer of poignancy to the storefront installation.

One of Rakowitz's main goals with *Return* was to import dates from Iraq and sell them at Davisons & Co. labeled "Product of Iraq," which, by most accounts, had not occurred in the US for more than 25 years. Working with a contact at the Baghdad-based al-Farez Company, Rakowitz ordered 200 boxes (equal to one ton in weight) of dates harvested in the city of Hilla that September. The fruit began a lengthy journey, which was chronicled on a blog on Creative Time's website. After leaving on a truck from Baghdad to Amman, the shipment was repeatedly turned back at the Iraq-Jordan border, along with many refugees who were also trying to leave Iraq. The goods were then diverted to Syria, where their progress stalled, and ultimately the dates rotted at the Damascus airport. Not giving up, the exporter settled with Rakowitz to ship 10 new boxes through DHL's express service. That shipment was inspected for three weeks by various agencies, including the US Department of Homeland Security, US Customs and Border Patrol, the USFDA and the USDA, and finally reached Davisons & Co. in Brooklyn on December 5, two months after Rakowitz placed the original order.

The narrative that emerged from the shipment's complicated journey was a significant factor of *Return*. The dates became a surrogate for the tales of Iraqi refugees struggling to flee their country. The project also addressed the disheartening irony of the US occupation of Iraq: if the supposed goal was to rebuild Iraq, why were there still obstacles preventing American business relationships with Iraqi citizens? On view at the store counter, where Rakowitz manned the desk, was paperwork filled out for US government agencies illustrating the near impossibility of international trade with Iraq even after the 2003 lifting of trade embargoes, in place since 1990.

Though the Atlantic Avenue store closed with the end of the project in December 2006, Rakowitz continues to renew the business license on Davisons & Co., in memory of his grandfather. Asked if he has any plans to reopen the shop, Rakowitz asserts that the project has already served its purpose. "I think the most important thing now," he says, "is for companies that really want to import Iraqi dates [to the US] to contact the Department of Trade and Commerce and register that desire with them. With enough of a demand for Iraqi dates in the US—because they *are* the best in the



One of ten boxes of dates shipped from Hilla, Iraq, to be sold at Davisons & Co. All images in this article unless otherwise noted, are courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Projects, New York.

world—things can start to happen.”

Many US soldiers, in fact, have written to Rakowitz, after reading the *Return* blog while stationed in Iraq, wanting to help in the recovery of the country's date industry. One soldier sent a PowerPoint presentation for a proposed collaboration with local agriculturists to rebuild date groves in Iraq. Rakowitz reflects: "I thought it was a really beautiful way that the project could transcend being just an art project. If the project were to live on, I would like to see it being continued by those who have a lot more expertise than I do, including people who are involved in the import-export business professionally.”

## Come Together

In the ongoing work, titled "Enemy Kitchen" (2006– ), Rakowitz again uses food as an agent in subtly bridging different cultures. The multi-part project began as a series of cooking classes organized with the support of New York-based nonprofit More Art, which invites artists to work in the Chelsea neighborhood. Rakowitz led a ten-week workshop with a group of middle- and high-school students from the Hudson Guild Community Center. He collaborated with his mother to compile and teach the preparation of family recipes, such as *kubba bamia*, an Iraqi dish of lamb-stuffed rice-flour dumplings in okra stew, and a vegetable salad dressed with *amba*, a pickled mango condiment.

It was 2006, and sectarian violence in Iraq was at an all-time high. In many American schools the topic of war had become taboo, with educators deeming it too sensitive or incendiary an issue to be discussed with children, especially those with relatives in the US military stationed in Iraq. Rakowitz thought this silence signalled a "very dangerous" trend. Through "Enemy Kitchen" he believed the process of cooking Iraqi recipes with the teenagers would provide a platform whereby conversation would happen naturally, with fewer boundaries than in a classroom setting. Rakowitz spoke of a memorable moment in the third week: "One of the students walked in and said, 'Why are we still making this nasty food? [The Iraqis] blow up our soldiers everyday and knocked down the Twin Towers.' At that point another student spoke up and said, 'It wasn't the Iraqis who knocked down the Twin Towers, it was Bin Laden.' Then another student piped up and said, 'It wasn't Bin Laden, it was our own government.'" It was a panoramic snapshot of Americans'

wildly divergent views on the Iraq War and the 9/11 attacks, which ranged from misinformation to half-truths to conspiracy theories—a friction that the artist felt was necessary to expose, and counter, in order for young adults to understand the times, and the culture of war, they were living in.



**ENEMY KITCHEN**, 2006–ongoing, for the first incarnation of the project, the artist teaches Baghdadi recipes at the Hudson Guild Community Center, in Chelsea, New York, to a group of middle and high school students who have relatives in the US Army stationed in Iraq.



## Tomorrow Never Knows

Rakowitz began to explore other aspects of the US-led invasion of Iraq, and its devastating effects on Iraqi society, in the ongoing series “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist” (2006– ). The project came in response to the US military’s failure to protect the country’s museums, historical artifacts and archeological sites from looting and arson, particularly after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. It is estimated that around 15,000 objects, dating as far back as 4,000 BCE, were stolen from the National Museum of Iraq in this chaotic period. Approximately half of the items have been recovered, but due to the lack of stability in Baghdad, many objects remain in private hands or in museums abroad.

In 2006, Rakowitz and a team of assistants began to replicate dozens of these still-missing artifacts from the National Museum by gluing together scraps of Arabic-language newspapers and packaging from Middle Eastern food products. They constructed the objects in consultation with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, which, with a long history of partnerships between various Iraqi institutions, had a massive collection of precise, detailed photographs documenting the country’s historical artifacts. Immediately after the looting of the Iraq Museum took place in 2003, the Oriental Institute created a website to track the missing items, where the image of each object is listed along with its most current status: “missing,” “stolen” or “unknown.”

In January 2007, Rakowitz held an exhibition at Lombard Freid Projects in New York, where he displayed 53 of these replicas on a long wooden table (the installation was also shown at the Sharjah Biennial that March, where it won the Jury Prize). There were brightly colored plates, jugs and human and animal figures, ranging in size from a few inches to several feet tall. Some of the “artifacts” included a large bull’s head (modeled on an alabaster object from the Early Dynastic II era, circa 2600 BCE) made from newsprint; bearded and skirted statuettes (from Tell Asmar, in the same era) constructed from date-cookie and dried-apricot wrappers; and a dagger (based on a gold and lapis lazuli weapon from Ur, circa 2400 BCE) with an intricately ornamented sheath created from packaging for a processed cheese spread.

“The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist” is a direct translation of *Aj-ibur-shapu*, the name of an ancient processional way that led to the Ishtar Gate built by King Nebuchadnezzar II, circa 575 BCE, as one of the entrances into the ancient city of Babylon. The table that holds Rakowitz’s replicated artifacts has a slight slant, modeled on the angle that the historic street was believed to have had. Archaeological museum-style labels provide details such as accession numbers, dates, provenances, materials and status (“missing,” “stolen” or “retrieved”). On the bottom of the labels are quotations from historians and archaeologists—many of whom lament the pillaging of the museum and hundreds of other archaeological sites in Iraq—including Lamia al-Gailani Werr, the National Museum’s former director of education, who wrote, “Some 10,000 years of human history were destroyed.”

The replicas were accompanied by a number of drawings, including four pencil-on-vellum pieces from *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist (Recovered, Missing, Stolen)* (2007). These four drawings include text that places the looting of the National Museum in the context of Iraq’s history and the decades of archaeological abuse that has marred the country. One drawing shows the excavation by a German team in the 1910s of the Ishtar Gate, which was then taken to Berlin’s Pergamon Museum in the 1930s. Another drawing tells the tale of a three-quarter-scale replica of the Ishtar Gate that now stands near the site of ancient Babylon, which was created by the Iraqi government in the 1950s as an entrance for a proposed museum that was never realized. In yet another drawing, viewers discover that, in 1987, against the protests of archaeologists and UNESCO, Saddam Hussein built a brick monument on the original foundations of Babylon, with inscriptions that glorified himself as the “son of Nebuchadnezzar.” The neglect of ancient Babylon culminated with the establishment of a US military base in its vicinity in 2003, which is said to have caused damage to the

historic grounds through strong vibrations from the helicopters that flew to and from it.

Rakowitz continues to re-create the artifacts, and has made around 350 pieces since the start of the project in 2006. “When you talk about 8,000 objects that are still at large, it becomes very clear that this is a project that will outlive me, my assistants and my entire studio,” he says. The futility of the replicating process, and their rendering in disposable packing materials, emphasizes the grave tragedy and irreversible loss that the country has suffered. “And that’s really one of the critical themes of the work,” Rakowitz continues, “which is that you can’t rebuild history.”



**THE INVISIBLE ENEMY SHOULD NOT EXIST (RECOVERED, MISSING, STOLEN SERIES),** 2007, sculptures created from Middle Eastern food packaging and Arabic newspapers, made to resemble artifacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad, in 2003, installed at Sharjah Biennial 8, 2007.

## Across the Universe

Shifting gears from the grim reality of “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,” Rakowitz’s 2010 solo show at Tate Modern in London explored the bizarre yet true, stranger-than-fiction narratives surrounding former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and his family’s obsessive fascination with science-fiction fantasies. The exhibition, “The Worst Condition Is to Pass Under a Sword Which Is Not One’s Own” (first held at Lombard-Freid Projects in 2009), borrowed its title from a 1985 speech given by Hussein, and also refers to invitation cards that announced the inauguration of the Hands of Victory, which is a monumental arch in Baghdad erected in 1989 to celebrate the self-proclaimed defeat of Iran in the ruinous but inconclusive Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).

The centerpiece of the exhibition was a re-creation of the Hands of Victory, also known as the Swords of Qādisiyah. The original



**VICTORY ARCH INSTALLATION (STRIKE THE EMPIRE BACK SERIES)**, 2009, large-scale sculpture of two arms, made to resemble the Hands of Victory monument in Iraq, holding Star Wars light sabers and plastered with pages from Saddam Hussein's novels. Installation view at Tate Modern, London, 2010.

monument, which consists of massive, bronze-cast fists holding up and crossing a pair of 43-meter-long swords, was modeled on Hussein's right forearm. Rakowitz's replica is a smaller statue (roughly six meters across), in which the hands are plastered with enlarged pages from a sci-fi fantasy novel that was allegedly written by Hussein himself. Rakowitz has also replaced the original swords with red and green light-sabers, the iconic weapon from the *Star Wars* films, and surrounded the base of each arm with a pile of clear plastic helmets embedded with parts from GI Joe figurines.

The other standout piece in "The Worst Condition" was an original military helmet that had been used by Fedayeen Saddam—a paramilitary group under Saddam Hussein's regime—that bears a striking resemblance to the helmet of Darth Vader, the iconic antihero of *Star Wars*. The Fedayeen headgear was displayed alongside three other helmets: a samurai warrior headpiece, which apparently served as an inspiration for *Star Wars* director George Lucas in creating Darth Vader's look; a mock-up by the film's costume department, which combined the World War I-era German *Stahlhelm* ("steel helmet") and a gas mask as a sketch for Darth Vader's head; and an actual Darth Vader costume helmet. The timeline of helmets illustrates an uncanny chain of influences that have traveled from the battlefield, onto the cinema screen and back onto the battlefield.

*The Lord, The Homeland, The Leader Installation (Strike the Empire Back series)* (2009) comprises pencil-on-vellum drawings that, among several narratives, tell the tale of Uday, the oldest son of Saddam Hussein (who was killed in a shootout with American troops in July 2003). An illustration shows that in 1980, when Uday was 15, he accompanied his father to a screening of *Star Wars* in Baghdad, just prior to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. Lucas' sci-fi classic made an impression on young Uday, much as it did on Rakowitz, who himself was a passionate fan of the space-fantasy saga as a child. In 1995, when Uday was charged with forming the Fedayeen Saddam ("Saddam's Men of Sacrifice"), he personally designed their helmets and uniforms based on Darth Vader's outfit. Though the Fedayeen were known to be the fiercest of the Iraqi troops, fighting on long after the rest of Saddam's military had collapsed after the 2003 invasion, later discoveries indicated that their *Star Wars*-inspired gear—black shirts, trousers and a ski-mask worn under the Darth Vader-esque helmet, which was actually made from plastic—was not at all ideal for combat.

A series of coincidences had led Rakowitz to discover the bizarre and uncannily related components of the project. He had come across the Fedayeen helmet on eBay, and it was sold to him by an American soldier who claimed that locals in Mosul, Iraq, where he picked up the helmet, had confirmed its Darth Vader-inspired origin. This led Rakowitz to connect his encounter with the Fedayeen helmet to a book he had read in college by Kanan Makiya called *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq* (1991), which sports an image of the Hands of Victory on its cover. When Rakowitz first saw the image of this monument, he immediately associated it with a poster of *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), which had hung on his bedroom wall as child. The movie poster shows all the protagonists in the foreground and Darth Vader looming over the background, wielding two swords in a similar pose as the Hands of Victory monument. Then, years later, he learned that on the eve of the first Gulf War in 1991, Hussein had the Iraqi army continuously march beneath the swords to the theme song of *Star Wars*. As Rakowitz says, "All of these connections started to tell this unbelievable

story.” He adds that people often think these are fabricated tales, but he believes that they are too clumsy to be works of fiction, and would make for a “horrible project” if they were. The beauty of “The Worst Condition” lies in its almost-unbelievable truthfulness, one born from an absurdist cycle of puerile fascination for science fiction and fantasy.

With the food-truck edition of “Enemy Kitchen,” Rakowitz’s hope is for the project to become a place where people can get food created by both Iraqi refugees and Iraq War veterans—two groups that many Americans have never come in contact with—and see that these two communities, who are supposed to be “enemies,” could, and do, get along with one another. Once the exhibition opened, the artist, who is now an associate professor of art theory and practice at Northwestern University in Chicago, handed over the operations of the truck to the owners of Milo’s Pita Place, the local restaurant that served as the project’s prep kitchen, as part of the artist’s vision for the project to live on beyond the exhibition period.



**THE LORD, THE HOMELAND, THE LEADER INSTALLATION (STRIKE THE EMPIRE BACK SERIES), 2009, from left to right: a Japanese samurai headpiece; World War I-era German Stahlhelm and gas mask; plastic Darth Vader helmet and mask; an original Fedayeen helmet.**

## A Day in the Life

For his latest project, Rakowitz followed his culinary art experiment *Spoils* with a new incarnation of the “Enemy Kitchen” project, which was exhibited as part of “Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art,” at the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, in February. In the newest edition of “Enemy Kitchen,” Rakowitz rolled out a food truck at the opening of the exhibition. The vehicle is a 40-year-old, converted ice-cream truck that is painted camouflage green and sports the official flag of Chicago (usually consisting of a row of four red stars on white in between two rectangular bars of pastel blue) rendered in red, white, green and black—resulting in an uncanny resemblance to the national flag of Iraq. Cooks from a nearby Iraqi restaurant created food from Rakowitz’s family recipes, which were then served by US military veterans who had been stationed in Iraq. The artist and his team also served meals on paper plates that were modeled on chinaware recovered from Saddam Hussein’s palaces—a nod to the controversial dishes that were part of *Spoils*.

In addition to the opening event, Rakowitz had plans to launch the food truck on the streets of Chicago in mid-March, to roughly coincide with the ninth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. However, at press time, the tour had been temporarily halted due to licensing issues, although Rakowitz remained determined to take the food truck out of the museum setting. Typical lunch areas in Chicago, historical sites and military academies with Reserved Officers’ Training Corps programs for colleges were among the locations the artist listed as potential sites for business. “We’ll be running the truck as much as we can and going rogue if we need to, to make sure that it gets out to these places,” he vows.

Most recently, Rakowitz is devising a new project in Afghanistan to teach stone carving to the villagers from the Bamiyan Valley, a site known for the 37- and 55-meter sixth-century CE Buddha statues that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. The project will culminate in an exhibition as part of Documenta 13 this June. Also taking place in 2012 is the artist’s fourth solo exhibition at Lombard Freid Projects, which will feature documentation of his 2010



project *The Breakup*, developed at the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem. While in residency there, the self-declared "Beatles fanatic" recorded a series of programs for a Ramallah-based radio station that explored the breakup of the Beatles as an allegory for the collapse of pan-Arabism, and he restaged the Beatles' final public performance on a rooftop in the Old City with Arab musicians playing songs from the Fab Four's last studio album, *Let It Be* (1970).

Whether overseeing the operation of an Iraqi food truck manned by refugees and war veterans, or creating replicas of looted artifacts, Rakowitz's interventionist projects and site-specific installations explore the idea of making "the invisible" visible. They are archaeological in nature, uncovering traces of history in the modern world (thanks often to sellers on eBay or amateur photographers on Flickr) and re-inscribing the past into the present. By encouraging viewers to examine hidden or uncharted aspects of their surrounding environment and society, Michael Rakowitz, ironically, refuses to just "let it be," instead following something akin to the ethics embedded in the Beatles' lyrics from *A Day in the Life*: "A crowd of people turned away, but I just had to look."

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