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ArteEast Quarterly: On Peculiar Affairs

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On Peculiar Affairs

a conversation with Michael Rakowitz and Ceren Erdem

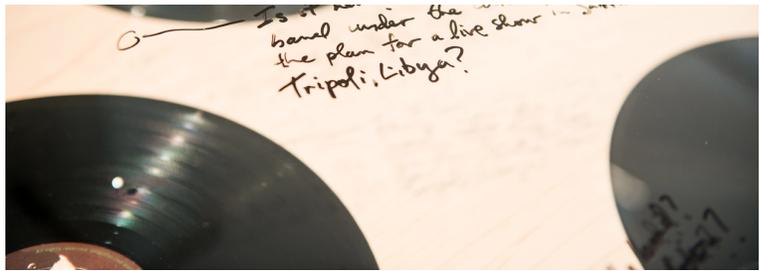
TWO OF US
 THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD
 DON'T LET ME DOWN
 GET BACK
 LET IT BE

Ceren Erdem: Your contribution to The Jerusalem Show culminates in a performance featuring celebrated Palestinian rock band Sabreen playing five Arabic inflected Beatles songs, selected and ordered to form a kind of poem about collaboration and collapse, and about dreams that cannot be deferred indefinitely. Can you speak to the poetics that this project engenders through its multiple forms and sites?

Michael Rakowitz: One of the things that attracted me in the first place was to take this indirect approach and think about the collapse of The Beatles as a way to somehow engage with Jerusalem as a city that is divided by fear more than by its representative four sections—Muslim Quarter, Jewish Quarter, Armenian Quarter and Christian Quarter. Although no walls separate these quarters, you really feel like there are walls that keep people out of one space versus another. Of course the Israeli army occupying the city can easily enforce this too. The other thing was hearing the sound of collapse occurring in the midst of these five beautiful songs either on the radio program or performed by Sabreen. It made me think about Shostakovich in Leningrad during the Nazi siege and his seventh symphony that was written and performed during the siege. What happens with poetry and art in the midst of these horrific moments? We know from the trench art of WWII that soldiers needed to make art in order to keep themselves somehow fixated and to think about something other than death. So I was thinking about the importance of poetry in the midst of such an occupation, and choosing those songs was not about just listing their names one after the other for the sake of a concrete poem, but also thinking about the Palestinian voice singing the refrain of *Two of Us*: "We are on our way home," the pleading of *Don't Let Me Down* or the symbolic meaning in *Get Back*. In terms of the component of the project set in Jerusalem, those are the things that play out when you narrate the collapse of a band on Palestinian radio: sometimes you don't know whether I'm talking about The Beatles or Palestine, and similarly whether I'm talking about the gap in band members' relations or about the wall. I like the possible slippery nature of that space but also doing something to keep myself from saying anything direct.

CE: You work with a lot of archival material. In your work these elements can appear as themselves or in different forms including the objects you make, music, drawings, and text. You also use traditional museum methods of display such as vitrines. When have the historical artifacts become the material for contemporary art as well as the everyday practice? And why are you choosing this museum structure over and over?





Detail of *Study for The Breakup — The Moment(s)* (The Breakup Series), 2010-2012
 Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

MR: The culture that I grew up in was a collecting culture. We grew up collecting baseball memorabilia; the entire attic of my parents' house is like a museum. And I learnt to preserve everything in a kind of sensibility of registrars or the conservationists of museums—not allowing too much light in the room so that the autograph can retain its full vibrancy, putting the magazine into polyethylene plastic and making sure it stays in neat condition. So I grew up with a lot of reverence for the relic or artifact. I started The Beatles collection with this mindset. For me, the museum has always been there, at home, not just a place to visit. In that sense I see it as something very domesticated, it is about everyday life. There is something that is clearly iconoclastic about writing on top of the vitrines, which is relatively a new development in the work. Whereas before that a lot of those artifacts may have been distilled into the drawings the way I used to do and accompanied by a text like in *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* or *The worst condition is to pass under a sword that is not one's own* (2009). I want to incorporate these objects because they have become primary source material for me. In this case it happened by having these two weird collections, the Middle East ephemera and The Beatles ephemera that were built simultaneously over the years and then setting up pairings to firmly ground the work in something that is museological but also at the same time incredibly idiosyncratic. The institutional language of the museum allows me to form a kind of a thread that carries through. It becomes a vehicle more than it's anything. Otherwise I don't have anything to say about the museum that hasn't been critiqued before.

CE: Do you think it makes it easier for the audience to see what you've gathered and follow the way you think?

I think so. I also want to explore this idea of always being clear. Those vitrines in *The Breakup* don't necessarily have an order. When you walk into the gallery you're confronted with the one that's about the maps, fragments of stone that gives you a little bit of an introduction but you can go to anyone of those vitrines before and afterwards. So I am not interested in the linearity of reading them; they are there as a diversion and also a support for what you are hearing on the radio. For me the critical components of the piece are the radio program, the performance and the record. In that sense I'm not looking at it as an exhibition design format. It was done in a way to simultaneously preserve the work in a way that my voice can communicate. Usually you would find a text below or right on the object, and that is me projecting these ideas onto it.

CE: How long did it take you to build those collections?

MR: Since the age of eleven.

CE: Are they all real or are there things that you...

MR: ...lied about?

CE: Yes.

MR: No, I didn't lie about anything. The only thing I constructed is the fantasy album. I liberated The Beatles from their album cover and I placed them in Sabratha, Libya, dreaming of how that album might have looked at the time. It is very clear that I've drawn the little apple label. Everything else is the stuff I collected. One of the things I enjoy is that I go shopping for my work. When I am in the market, I start putting things in a story. When I start, it becomes more solidified or concretized. I knew immediately that I was interested in doing this project just to make that unlikely connection between The Beatles and the Middle East. They are already there: *Sgt Pepper*, the beginning of the 6-day war, four Beatles, four sections of Jerusalem, the relative chronology of the implementation of Pan-Arabism through Nasser coinciding with the lifespan of The Beatles. Then there were all those references I came across when I listened to the tracks from their documentary about the Middle East and their discussions about Libya and Gaddafi. I was getting more and more into the state where I think I can pair these things that are poetically connected.





Study for The Breakup — Maps (The Breakup Series), 2010-2012
Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

CE: Are you ready to give up on them?

MR: Yes, I can live without objects. This is an impulse. The impulse of collecting The Beatles is one that I cannot continue. Because life doesn't allow it and I am not interested in collecting for myself as much as I am interested in collecting for my projects. I can build an archive with each project. When you're researching a particular topic, you get yourself surrounded by the primary source material. I also find myself gleefully taking the role of the curator or caretaker of these different objects and aligning them in ways that they would have never been aligned with.

CE: Speaking of the alignments, do you associate any of The Beatles with the countries and figures in the Middle East? And if so, how do you use/align the medals to refer to such an association in the paintings?

MR: I wanted the paintings to be a map of the manic nature of a way of thinking so that you could make the comparison. But the comparison is also hard as much as you can hold it together afterwards; you can suggest it. You realize every Beatle ends up being somebody who is loyal and also a betrayer at the same time. That's also consistent with the Middle Eastern politics. When this project started out, it was a project for Jerusalem. However, so many of those governments that were outside Jerusalem had more or less turned Jerusalem into an icon. Look at any of the stamps, any of the money from any of these places and inevitably you're going to see the Dome of the Rock. One of the objects I have but then didn't fit anywhere in the show is an envelope sent from Tripoli to the West Bank in 1970. It is a Libyan post office envelope and had a picture of a Palestinian fedayeen together with the text, "They are not resisting Judaism, they are resisting Zionism." There was also a kind betrayal, because let's be honest, Palestinian people were often abandoned by all these countries. Look at what Jordan did in September 1970, you look at how Palestinians are treated in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In terms of the bigger picture, there is no way of not taking John Lennon as Nasser—they even look alike, the beautiful nasal voice of both of these people, and the fact that John was so insistent on calling himself the leader. That is the most distinct comparisons one can make. But I am more interest in mixing up the medals and then talking about the things that happened afterwards whereas for instance John getting the Israeli medal and then crossing out the idea. One thing I can say is that Ringo is Jordan because he is the one most uninterested in the politics and getting along with everyone, including Israel. In terms of who the leader was you could also make a connection between Nasser and Brian Epstein, the manager of The Beatles, who held them together. That's something we also explored in the radio program. But for me the painting become a place to shut in the messiness of the thinking but also preparing something for The Beatles nerds. I basically removed the medals they wear on the cover of *Sgt Pepper* and replaced them with the medals received by Arab armies and the Israeli army after 1948, 1956 and 1967 wars.





Study for The Breakup — The Summer of Setback (The Breakup Series), 2010-2012
 Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

CE: Who is your favorite The Beatles member?

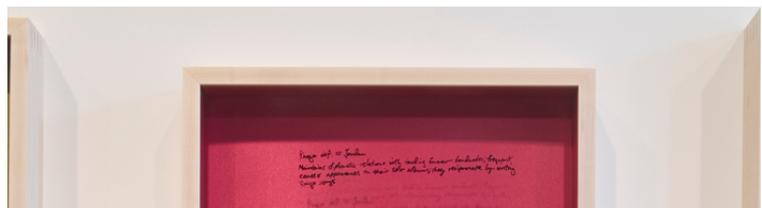
MR: It has to be John. He was the genius. I don't think Paul lacks genius and I ended up loving Paul, because I couldn't love John. I became interested in The Beatles basically through John Lennon's death, so he wasn't there. But his music was the first music I got connected to because they were playing all his songs all the time when I was six or seven years old. I enjoy John's propensity of using language in different ways, I enjoyed his drawings, I enjoyed his thoughts. It was also great to be going to art school and to be introduced to conceptual art to find out John's connection to many people including Jonas Mekas, Maciunas and Yoko. How can you enjoy just making music with the same three people after being introduced to all those radical ideas?

CE: Do you also feel the same affection to Nasser?

MR: From a purely idealistic sense, yes. But he is still a top-down power. I am much more interested in the horizontality and the dispersals of power in being a good leader. You cannot help but bring nostalgia into the conversation a little bit, but that's always dangerous. There are reverences still, but also there are more forward ideas out there from communities that don't involve leadership and would go beyond this idea of allowing everyone to have power. So yes and no. I certainly think he was doing it best at that moment, and he's heartbroken when you think about how he was trying to play matchmaker to Arafat and King Hussein.

CE: In your text for the cover concept of *Live in Jerusalem 2010* you explain that it refers to *Live Peace in Toronto 1969*, an album documenting a September 13, 1969 performance by the Plastic Ono Band at Varsity Stadium in Toronto. "For the cover of *Live Peace*, John Lennon and Yoko Ono began with *Blue*, a painting by Yves Klein. The work depicts a sky of pure, sparkling azure; John and Yoko introduced via photo collage the image of a single cloud. 'By us putting a cloud there,' Ono said, 'it suddenly became the real sky—and the real world—as opposed to perfection.' The cover concept adapts the original and extends its form, in much the same way that Ono and Lennon adapted the original Klein painting. Can you discuss how you draw on adaptation and collage as a form and aesthetic and the way it builds your project?"

MR: It is about transposition in a lot of ways and I was really happy that John and Yoko started that for me. They were already playing with that idea when it came to this cover. They were also playing with it on the cover of Yoko Ono's *Feeling The Space*, which was in one of the vitrines in the exhibition, where there is a photo collage of a stereoscopic photograph of the Middle East, the pyramids and the sphinx of Yoko's face and John Lennon on one of the camels. John went to art school and he was interested in collage. I learnt they were playing with art history, doing something sort of iconoclastic, simultaneously celebrating and critiquing Klein. John and Yoko collaged in the cloud on Klein's painting *Blue*—an ideal blue sky—rescuing it from the ideal and putting in the real. For me it went even further. In the poetic snapshot of Palestine, I really didn't want to forget about Gaza. It had been bombed in January 2009 and still wasn't acknowledged. So I worked around this poetic realism of John and Yoko, the arena of horrible realism in the Middle East, the realism of an Yves Klein painting—making references to art history but also making references to political history.





Ringo (Jordan) (The Breakup Series), 2010-2012

Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

CE: You keep referring to the moment of John Lennon's death and how your obsession with The Beatles started. So a significant part of your project is based on your childhood memories. I guess somewhere in your mind you always had the idea that you were going to do something about The Beatles. Is there a matching significant memory for the other part of the project, the politics in the Middle East?

MR: When Sadat was killed in 1981, I remember it being announced over loud speakers in my elementary school. We all had a moment of silence. I knew that it was historic; I knew that we were supposed to feel good about the Camp David Accords that Sadat signed with Begin as Jewish kids. I think for me that was when I first started to learn about the Middle East, before that it was stories about Baghdad that my grandmother would tell. I remember the scorpion they used to leave in the glass jar in the basement. They were great stories and they always seemed like from a faraway place. I didn't know where to put it in the geography at all until Iran-Iraq war started to be reported and I paid attention to it and recognized those things. The interest really didn't happen until high school when the first Gulf War was happening. I must have been sixteen and felt in the middle there. It was the place where my grandparents had come from. Then I really became aware of that part of my identity.

CE: The project has this other multicultural element of Sabreen's making The Beatles covers at a place a Beatles concert could have taken place but never did. Is it realizing a utopic condition where everything else fails or it is in fact reenacting The Beatles' rooftop performance?

MR: That is one way of reading it. I didn't want it to be like pathetic Las Vegas style Elvis copies. I wanted it to be however they wanted. I liked their arrangements of them, I gave them the songs, I told them the order that I wanted it to be presented because of the poem from the song titles. And I wanted it on a rooftop in Jerusalem because I knew that the things like the Dome of the Rock would be in the frame. In the radio program, when I speak about that performance of The Beatles, I described their disembodied voices and the pedestrians who could not see them. They were almost at the same height of church bells and minarets. One final hail to the fanatics down below, the devoted followers. In Sabreen's performance you see a moment where the minaret is the same height as the amplifiers and the speakers. Yes, they are both on the rooftop but their clothes, instruments and playlists are different. So it is like a reenactment of a failure but also a prayer. It is also a kind of thing that could happen in Jerusalem impromptu.



Paul (Palestine) *The Breakup Series*, 2010-2012
Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

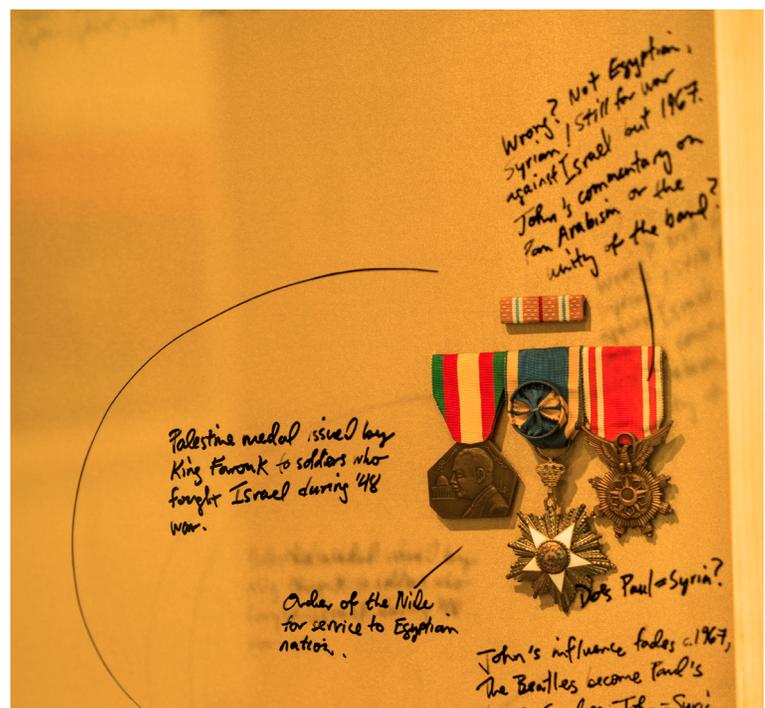
CE: How do you define your strategy for making the invisible visible and reinscribing the past in your work?

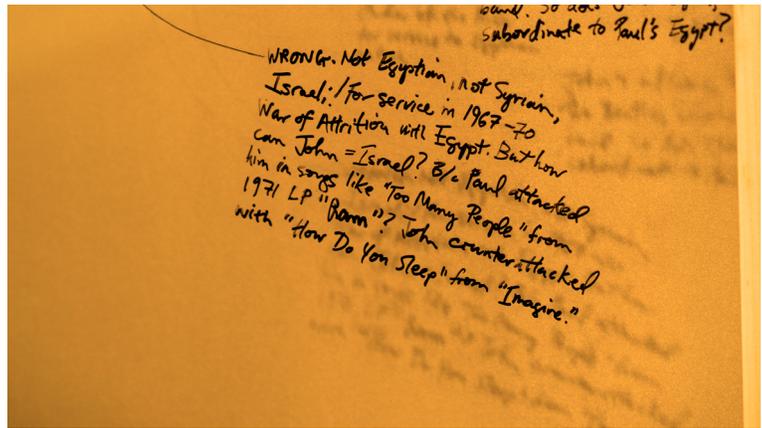
MR: I am interested in the metaphoric, allegorical side of the story. And when you make a story and insert dates, it automatically fills in, such as in the case of making the story of The Beatles but also the Middle East. I don't have to prepare a documentary. I would fight for

Palestine till my last breath to put their flag up, but also at the same time I'd be the first person to put it down, because I don't believe in flags and I don't believe in borders. Maybe that sounds naive and idealistic. We have to articulate what we can. I reinscribe the past with its impossibilities and the things that never happened with an eye on the future, thinking about what didn't happen in the past may be a proposition for something it could look like in the future. I am also interested in the material and its provenance. For instance, in *paraSITE* (1998) using garbage bags was really essential for the understanding of the work because materials communicate in urgency. I use the materials in a way it was never meant to be used. In the stories that I tell, I also see myself telling things that we didn't know or skipped over, in a way that they speak to now as well as tomorrow.

CE: You often tell stories from, or about, the Middle East as is the case in this project as well as *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007) or *Strike The Empire Back Series* (2009). Yet you show your work mainly to a Western audience. Do you intend to address them specifically and how does your work resonate in the Middle East?

MR: I don't necessarily say that those works are only for the Western audience. It is true that they were initially conceived to be shown in New York. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* was made largely in response to a kind of frustration. It was an angry project that was about the absence of certain art in Chelsea and in a way to articulate that we're living in a world culture. I always feel like my position in a commercial gallery is one that's still sort of new and evolving. I can enjoy it while at the same time don't like the idea of making work for the art market. So when I thought about making work for the art market, I thought about the National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad in April 2003, the moment the pathos had opened up in the war. People from both sides, right or left, understood that this was devastating—a tragedy. And it wasn't just an Iraqi problem, it was a human problem. This was human culture patrimony that was potentially wiped off the face of the earth forever. When I thought about people's outrage about missing antiquities – which wasn't translated into the outrage for the missing bodies and lives destroyed in these same places – I thought about what could be a way to poetically get people to think about these issues.





Detail of *John (Egypt) (The Breakup Series)*, 2010-2012
 Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

For a lot of Iraqis, stealing one of those artifacts and selling to a buyer in the black market was their ticket out of the country. Thinking about the reasons why I was making this piece in a commercial gallery, I wanted to manipulate the market in a way that re-fragmenting the collection on the table in Lombard Freid Projects turns the collector to a complicit in this looting. A lot of the pieces are statues of figures like looking back at you, so it becomes this haunting collection. Later the work went to Sharjah. I was interested in seeing how it was going to be viewed and received in the Middle East as well as the fact that the museum in Sharjah was 800 miles away from Baghdad. I think people appreciated the work probably for reasons that were different from the American audience, which I think, in the US, came with the feeling of shame and guilt. The work in Tate was supposed to go to Beirut, and unfortunately that never happened just for logistical purposes. What I try to say is that they are not limited. The way I try to excavate history either through eBay or elsewhere is not just to be seen by Americans but internationally. In the case of the project in Jerusalem, which is now in New York, I think people can understand it is an interesting project to do in the gallery, but I would never think to air that piece on radio here in the United States. I don't think it is going to be felt in the same way and I was interested in the gallery show for finding a new way to show the documentation of the project without documentation.

CE: In the spirit of assemblage and adaptation, can you give us a playlist of the Beatles songs that conveys this with respect to cultural bricolage?

MR: The first song I'd give will not be The Beatles at all. It is *Rock the Casbah* from Rachid Taha. What I like about Rachid Taha is that he was in a band called Carte de Séjour in 1980s and he was a big Clash fan. He couldn't get in their concert in Paris but waited outside to give them the demo to Joe Strummer. Next year, The Clash came up with *Rock the Casbah*. Rachid Taha says "Obviously, we influenced them." In 2009, he made an Arabic cover of the song.



Inshallah at Sabratha (The Breakup Series), 2011-2012
 Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery

A great cover of Norwegian Wood is by the British band Cornershop, which they recorded in the Punjabi language.

There was an HBO movie called *Steal The Sky* (1988), which is a true story of an Iraqi pilot who

ends up being seduced by a Mossad agent and he ends up entangled in an affair with her. She threatens to expose the affair unless the pilot steals a Russian MiG-21 fighter jet and brings it to Israel so that they can study it. He ends up stealing it. This is one of the reasons Israel's air force was very strong during the 6-day war. In one of the scenes of this movie, the pilot and the Mossad agent who is undercover are at an Iraqi governmental event. In the background you hear a version of The Beatles' *Nowhere Man* being played with Arabic instruments. Years ago I found the soundtrack and was so embarrassed to be buying the soundtrack because it turned out the person who had done the music for this movie is Yanni.

And then The Beatles' cover of *The Sheik of Araby*. It was for their Dakka session. It's an oriental song and was written as a response to the movie *The Sheik* (1921). Rudolf Valentino ended up regretting his role because he played this completely chauvinistic and savage Arab. He denounced his role and talked how the film materialized a people and a culture. The final one is *Hava Nagila* covered by The Beatles. Imagine how my Bar Mitzvah would have been much more fun if I had discovered that earlier!

Listen to the [entire Breakup radio series](#) online.

Michael Rakowitz (b. 1973, New York) is an artist based in Chicago and New York City. In 1998 he initiated *paraSite*, an ongoing project in which the artist custom builds inflatable shelters for homeless people that attach to the exterior outtake vents of a building's heating, ventilation, or air conditioning system. His work has appeared in venues worldwide including P.S. 1, MoMA, MassMOCA, Castello di Rivoli, the 10th Istanbul Biennial, Sharjah Biennial 8, Tirana Biennale, National Design Triennial at the Cooper Hewitt, and Transmediale 05. He has had solo exhibitions at Lombard-Freid Projects in New York, Alberto Peola Arte Contemporanea in Torino, and tadtturgmgalerie/Kunstraum Innsbruck. His recent public project, *Return* was presented by Creative Time in New York. He is the recipient of a 2008 Creative Capital Grant for a collaboration with Emna Zghal, the Sharjah Biennial Jury Award, a 2006 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Grant in Architecture and Environmental Structures, the 2003 Dena Foundations Award, and the 2002 Design 21 Grand Prix from UNESCO. Upcoming exhibitions include the 16th Biennale of Sydney in June, 2008. His work is in many private and public collections including the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Architecture and Design Collection, UNESCO, Paris, and the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. Rakowitz is also Contributing Editor for *Surface Tension: A Journal on Spatial Arts*.

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