



Above: Michael Rakowitz.
*The Invisible Enemy
 Should Not Exist* (Room F,
 Section 1, Northwest
 Palace of Nimrud), 2021.
 Arabic-English news-
 papers and food packag-
 ing, glue, and cardboard
 on wooden structure;
 dimensions variable.
 Details. Photos © Arturo
 Sanchez. Courtesy the
 artist, Rhona Hoffman
 Gallery, and the Wellin
 Museum of Art.

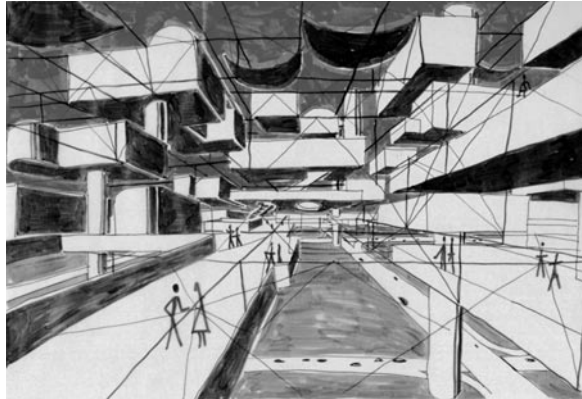
Opposite: Yona Friedman.
La Ville Spatiale, 1958.

Letter to an Encyclopedic Museum Curator

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

In January 2020, Claire Bishop and Nikki Columbus published a speculative review of the newly expanded Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).¹ Their positive assessment of the MoMA we should have versus the one we got opened up a new territory where criticism and visionary architecture met. Visionary architecture, while often optimistically broadcasting a desire, is simultaneously rooted in inevitable failure. Typically relegated to models or drawings due to the laws of the city or the laws of gravity, the residual idea nevertheless demands a culture capable of bringing about its existence.

When we demand radical change, we are often asked, “What will that look like?” So, I wanted to share with you a proposal



that tries to show that the visionary need not just be speculative. Versions of this proposal are now being seriously considered by several institutions. The proposal has been made in light of the many recent initiatives at encyclopedic museums to invite artists from postcolonial countries to make work in dialogue with antiquities.

The context for the proposal is a project I began in 2006 called The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist. The centerpiece is an ongoing series of sculptures that attempts to “reappear,” life-size, the 7,000+ archeological artifacts looted from the national museum of Iraq during the 2003 U.S. invasion, using Middle Eastern food packaging and Arab-American newspapers.

In 2015, this project grew to include archaeological sites destroyed by groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion. An example of this is the demolished Lamassu that had stood at the Nergal Gate of Nineveh since 700 BCE, and which I reappeared on the Fourth Plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square in 2018, built from 10,500 empty cans of Iraqi date syrup. In another extension,

my studio assistants and I have been faithfully reconstructing each of the rooms in King Ashurnasirpal II's ninth century BCE Northwest Palace of Nimrud (near present-day Mosul in northern Iraq). When exhibited in a gallery or museum, blank spaces are left to indicate the earlier removal of certain panels, now located in the collections of various Western museums.

In winter 2020, I began to wonder how this project could go further to acknowledge the continued history of displacement in Iraq and, more than that, push toward restitution. In response to an invitation from a major American museum to display some of these panels, I sent the following letter.



Above: Michael Rakowitz.
*The Invisible Enemy
Should Not Exist (Lamassu
of Nineveh)*, 2018. 10,500
Iraqi date syrup cans,
metal frame; 15.4 × 5.6 ×
14.7 ft. (4.7 × 1.7 × 4.5 m).
Installation view, Fourth
Plinth, Trafalgar Square,
London. Photo © Gautier
DeBlonde. Courtesy the
Mayor of London.

Dear Encyclopedic Museum Curator,

My apologies for being late to reply. When you wrote, I was laid up with the flu, and after a few days of travel, I received some difficult news about my mother's health.

The reliefs from Room F that you inquired about will be on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center until early May, so it will certainly be possible for the work to be shown at your museum in the context of the Assyrian reliefs during the time you've proposed.

But I wonder if we may think more audaciously and provoca-



Top: Destruction of Lamassu at the Nergal Gate, Nineveh, by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, 2015. Still from video.



Center and bottom: Destruction of Northwest Palace of Nimrud (Kalhu) by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, 2015. Stills from video.

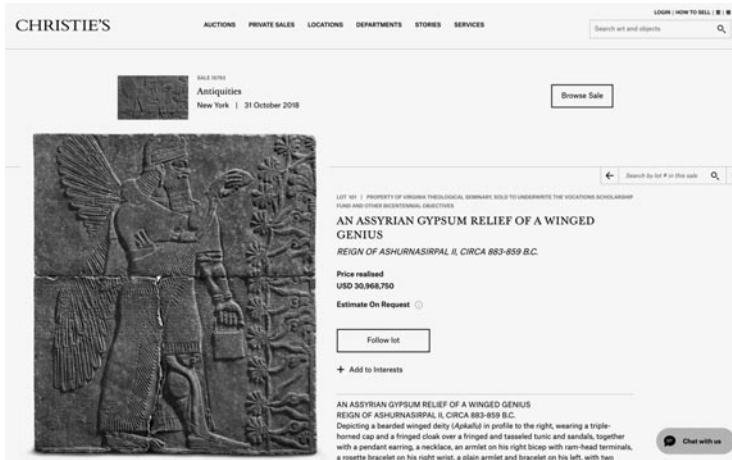


tively about how to do this. As you know, Daesh's destruction of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud was followed in late 2018 by the auctioning of a relief that was in the possession of the Virginia Theological Seminary. The price paid for this relief—\$31 million by an anonymous private collector—was enhanced by the demolition of the palace three years before, and while the money will be used for the admirable purpose of funding a scholarship at VTS, the auction bolstered further the narrative of Iraq as a site of extraction and speculation.

I am hoping my work can impact and support efforts to interrupt this cycle. In the past few years, I have been focusing more on institutional responsibility and my commitments as

an artist, descended from an Iraqi Jewish mother forced to depart her homeland. A desire to return, despite its impossibilities, fuels so much of my practice. A multitude of Iraq's cultural heritage now exists outside of its borders, away from its people, and what remains has been targeted for destruction. But what perishes is not just the monumental reliefs of colossal figures of deities like the Lamassu, it is the communities of people who live alongside them. The DNA of those lives cannot be 3D printed and replaced. That is why I have come to call my works not reconstructions, but reappearances or ghosts of the originals. An imperfect and vulnerable offering that will one day also disappear.

Let me say without hesitation that it would be a pleasure to collaborate with you on this project. But in order to do this, I'd like to up the ante and create a more complex agreement. I'd like to gift to the museum the entirety of Room F, Section 1, free of charge, in exchange for the return to Iraq of Panel F-[number withheld], currently in the museum's collection.



Left: "An Assyrian gypsum relief of a winged genius," ca. 883–859 BCE. Property of Virginia Theological Seminary, sold for \$30,968,750 at Christie's, New York, 31 October 2018 (lot 101). Christies.com.

Opposite: Rear of a panel from Room F, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, ca. 883–859 BCE. Panel number and name of museum withheld. Photograph by the author.

Given all that has been destroyed in Iraq, and the intersection of that destruction with the west's insatiable appetite for the objects of the east while not always, if ever, extending that concern to its people, this return of an original would be more than just restitutive. It would be restorative. So much is missed when our conversations around decolonization rest only on questions of repatriation. I liken this to the inadequacy of apology versus accountability. Apology, when uttered, unburdens the person saying it more than it heals the person to whom it was directed. But true accountability is an ongoing repair through discourse and reckoning. It is never finished. Restoration exists as a practice within every museum that I have known. In fact, when I visited your museum in January, the director took me to the area where some of the reliefs were being restored. I was so moved to see the backs of the reliefs. In that moment, the Apkallu were like figures in the round. I was seeing the relief as if it had turned its back on me, as if it were walking away. Going home.

Please understand the absolute sincerity of my proposal here,

and please do not perceive this as a vilification of the museum, the work you do, or some unkind purity judgement of the museum's collections. The best one can hope for in doing any kind of work is that it will continue to teach and that we will be open to learning. We know that museums are important, and at their best, they can be based on a mutual curiosity among the world's cultures. But we cannot ignore the cultural traumas caused by the extraction of many of these objects, nor the imperative to break this cycle and restore dignity and humanity to the people that have been parted from their cultural heritage.

For a long time, I thought I was making these reappearances



to replace what was destroyed in Iraq. I imagined that one day, perhaps, my reappearances might end up in places like Nineveh, Nimrud, Mosul, or Baghdad. Yet what was destroyed in Iraq was disappeared in part because the west valued it so much. And so I wish to complicate my work even more by acknowledging that a ghost needs to haunt. It is not, however, the Iraqis who need to be haunted. It is us.

I thank you for reading this and hope you and the museum will think seriously with me on this proposal.

Sincerely,
Michael

Note

1. Claire Bishop and Nikki Columbus, "Free Your Mind: A Speculative Review of #NewMoMA," *n+1*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/paper-monument/free-your-mind/>.



Michael Rakowitz. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist (Room F, Section 1, Northwest Palace of Nimrud)*, 2021. Arabic-English newspapers and food packaging, glue, and cardboard on wooden structure; dimensions variable. Detail. Photo © Arturo Sanchez. Courtesy the artist, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, and the Wellin Museum of Art.