Michael Rakowitz. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2007–ongoing. Arabic-English newspapers and food packaging, glue, cardboard, museum labels; dimensions variable. Photo: John Nyugen/PA Wire. Courtesy the artist and Whitechapel Gallery.

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# Michael Rakowitz's *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*

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In 2006 Michael Rakowitz and his studio assistants began to make a series of paper-paste sculptures of votive figurines and replica pottery, many dating back to the Old Assyrian Empire (2025–1378 BCE). Each object is made with a combination of colorful Middle Eastern food packaging, advertisement flyers, and Arabic-language newspapers sourced from cities across the United States, where the artist lives and works. What Rakowitz refers to as "surrogates" are scale copies of missing Assyro-Babylonian artworks informed by details and images compiled by Interpol and the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. Their databases list eight thousand objects lost, destroyed, or looted from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad from April 10 to 12, less than a month after the UK- and U.S.-led invasion of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist republic on March 19.[1] When displayed, the works are laid on makeshift wooden tables, as if to be photographed, categorized, or sold. Each is accompanied by an index card, like those commonly found in museums, detailing provenance information, excavation, and museum numbers—if known—alongside materials and status of the original object, together with a quotation attributed to witnesses of the looting or to archaeologists. For example, one quotation from Selma Al-Radi reads, "With war comes destruction, the loss of thousands of years of human history." Others are attributed to military figures, including Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. secretary of defense during Iraq's invasion and subsequent occupation, who is quoted as saying, irreverently, "Stuff happens."

The sculptures are supplemented further by a series of drawings, partly based on contemporary photographs. Yet like the objects, they are also based on research, supplying context rather than acting simply as corollaries to spectacular warfare. For example, the Iraq Museum's late director general, Donny George Youkhanna, is shown working tirelessly to protect and then locate missing artifacts, his efforts elaborated on in handwritten text beneath the image. Another drawing shows a U.S. marine with his left boot raised on a low terrace wall overlooking the ruins of ancient Babylon. We learn that in 2003 a base and helipad were established close to the ruins despite protests by archaeologists. Resulting damage included a collapsed wall at the Temple of Nadu and damage to the roof of the Temple of Ninmah.[2] The displacement and destruction of heritage violated international protocols, specifically the duties of occupying

powers under the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. As Abbas al-Hussainy has related, "the scope of the cultural destruction suggests of occupation authorities a profound indifference to Iraq's cultural legacy if not outright complicity in the cultural wasting of the Iraqi nation. All of Iraq's major museums were affected, with damage to the Iraqi National Museum qualifying as catastrophic."[3] Repeated warnings by archaeologists that measures were needed to prevent theft and vandalism were snubbed, and nearly twelve thousand archaeological sites were left unprotected. During the 1991 Persian Gulf invasion thirteen Iraqi museums were attacked and looted by civilians, an expression of resentment and anger at Saddam's authoritarian regime.[4] In 2003, occupying forces reportedly failed to intervene after witnessing the ransacking of cultural institutions, archives, libraries, and banks.[5] By 2007 it had emerged that Washington had ordered no interference in the pillaging.[6] In contrast, Iraq's rich oil wells were well secured, after an era of


**Left and opposite: Michael Rakowitz. *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, 2010. Arabic-English newspapers and food packaging, glue, and cardboard on wooden structure; 19.6 × 16.2 × 3.1 ft. (6 × 4.9 × 1 m). © MCA Chicago. Courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery.**

increased uncooperativeness under Saddam's presidency, and, as civic infrastructure throughout the country collapsed, the industry was systematically privatized to the prospective advantage of European and U.S.-based multinational corporations, including Halliburton, Shell, BP, ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Lukoil.[7]

More than being simple reproductions, then, Rakowitz's works raise the problem of how to mark the loss and destruction of cultural heritage while simultaneously recognizing the strategic displacement and plundering of assets as being part of a longer historical continuum. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007–ongoing), the title given to this series of objects, is taken from the Processional Way leading to the Ishtar Gate (ca. 575 BCE), which stood at the entrance to the inner city of ancient Babylon. The monuments were excavated by German archaeologist Robert Koldewey—also illustrated in ancillary drawings—from 1899 to 1914, during the Ottoman occupation, then shipped to Berlin's Pergamonmuseum and reconstructed in 1927.[8] The installation remains incomplete today, with just

the smaller frontal façade of the gate on view and the much larger portion in storage. Because some of the original panels are distributed among the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, Munich's State Museum of Egyptian Art, the Oriental Institute Museum, and many others, the installation also contains several replicated components. Rakowitz's related submonument, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* (2010), is a replica of the three-

quarter-scale model of the Ishtar Gate commissioned by the Iraqi government in the 1950s to replace the original gate. This work's title is an alternate translation of the inscription rendered as "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist," and was first exhibited at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, not far from the Pergamonmuseum.[9] The striking blue color provided by Arabic-language Pepsi-Cola packaging sourced in Berlin registers the movement of people and commodities alike. Conversely, the work's materiality reduces the gate to a façade, parodying

the paper-thin explanations provided for the original's expropriation and the German government's refusal to repatriate it.[10]

Archaeological rivalry between the Berlin museums, the Louvre, the British Museum, and North American private institutions prefigured the ca. 1908 discovery of oil in the Near East and the subsequent race to secure access to wells.[11] The Iraq Museum was founded under the British Mandate (ca. 1920–1932) rather than by Iraqis, partly to formalize the trafficking of artworks out of modern Iraq.[12] Zainab Bahrani demonstrates, however, that the dislocation and separation of Assyro-Babylonian artworks led to significant misinterpretation. British archaeologist and politician Austen Henry Layard, for instance, would often cut off "annoying" inscriptions on panels from Nimrud to facilitate easier transportation to Europe and the United States.[13] Western archaeologists considered artworks to be repetitive rather than cumulative "complex building and memory practices" expressing ideological and political authority:

> The rationale and performative power of the artwork is that tie to place, and the reverse is also true: its removal is destructive. So, in the modern-day looting practices of our own era, what we have is a stripping away of the logic of this type of artwork . . . as the ancients understood it, a real erasure of history.[14]

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.

Consider, in this context, the declaration of the "universal museum" by directors of major, exclusively Euro-American institutions in response to long-term calls to repatriate artifacts taken from the Global South: "The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums."[15] The self-designation of so-called encyclopedic museums as universal occludes the imperialist prerogatives and practices that institutions of Western modernity were founded on and continue to be instrumentalized by.[16] More than just asymmetries in travel restrictions and economic inequalities that preclude an "international public," neoimperialist imperatives arguably remain in place. Many "universal" museums are currently partnered with corporate forces of neoliberal globalization, particularly imperial-era oil multinationals that benefited significantly from the 2003 invasion. In substantive contrast, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy's recent report on the restitution of African cultural heritage makes clear the intergenerational ramifications of the extraction of cultural property, removals which "condition the flourishing of certain societies while simultaneously continuing to weaken others."[17]

Rakowitz has also remade a giant *lamassu* that stood at the Nergal Gate at Nimrud until 2015, when it was destroyed by the Islamic State group, or Daesh, during a series of mediagenic propaganda campaigns.[18] The colossal human-headed, winged bull was re-created using food packaging and Iraqi date-syrup

cans, imbricated to reflect the detailed stone carving typical of the ancient guardians, yet also representing the devastated Iraqi export industry after 2003. The *lamassu* once protected cities from widespread looting and carried inscriptions indicative of their animate relationship to their origins and peoples. Exhibited on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth in 2018, Rakowitz's work conceivably reckons with the jingoistic character of modern British monumentality (the square was also a significant site in the February 2003 anti-invasion marches staged in more than six hundred cities worldwide). The back of the work was turned toward the British Museum, where several *lamassu* removed by Layard remain contained, and its front faced toward Nimrud.

The works, then, are imbued with unresolved legacies of displacement and destruction that reach well into the present.

*Invisible Enemy* also includes ornate relief sculptures from ancient cities destroyed and looted by Daesh, such as the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (ca. 883–859 BCE) at Nimrud, which shows military narratives and mythical figures associated with the Neo-Assyrian king. When installed on gallery walls, the paper-paste panels mimic the partially reconstructed layout of palace interiors, similar to installations at the British Museum or New York's Metropolitan Museum, whose collections now also include Rakowitz's figurines. In the Northwest Palace installation, gaps are left for panels whose current locations—in contemporary Euro-American collections—are known, detailed with acquisition dates on index cards. Rakowitz's version of Room N contains Shell logos throughout its composition, an apt detail given the role oil has played in facilitating conflict in modern Iraq.[19] In this sense the reappeared works also embody a kind of discrepant contempo-

raneity, routing the current status of cultural heritage through a long history of violent dispossession, iconoclasm, and recodification.

These works are not meant to replace the absent sculptures. Rather, they are substitutes or stand-ins, embodying their own set of aesthetic propositions. They are partial reconstructions, at once works of critical restitution and reconfiguration, signaling the need to engage the imbalances of the recent past rather than erase or paper over them. In his "Letter to an Encyclopedic Museum Curator," published in this issue of *Grey Room*, Rakowitz offers to work collaboratively with the curators of a major global collection to creatively address the necessary adaptions of current museums to these histories, including how to mark and remember both the removal and return of cultural heritage.

**Notes**

1. The Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago's Lost Treasures of Iraq website has since expanded to some fifteen thousand objects, all related to looting and destruction at other Iraqi museums and historic sites: http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq.html. "In the following two months, several thousand items were returned to the museum, many of them fakes or reproductions, but some of them very important items." McGuire Gibson and Donny George, "Looting of the Iraq Museum in Context," in *Catastrophe! The Looting and Destruction of Iraq's Past*, ed. Geoff Emberling and Katharyn Hanson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 25.

2. Abbas al-Hussainy, "The Current Status of Archaeological Heritage in Iraq," in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*, ed. Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael, and Tareq Y. Ismeal (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 83–87.

3. Al-Hussainy, "Current Status," 84.

4. Gibson and George, "Looting of the Iraq Museum in Context," 13–18. Similar events took place after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

5. A significant motivation for looters of cultural institutions was the desperate hope that by selling looted artworks on illicit antiquities markets they would be able to leave war-torn Iraq.

6. Zainab Bahrani, "Archaeology and the Strategies of War," in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq*, 69. Bahrani cites comments by Barbara Bodine—coordinator of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance prior to the appointment of Paul Bremer as leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority—in Nigel Ferguson's documentary *No End in Sight* (2007).

7. Iain Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005).

8. Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 65–68.

9. The work was first exhibited at *On Rage* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 14 March–9 May 2010.

10. For instance, Ewen MacAskill, "Iraq Appeals to Berlin for Return of Babylon Gate," *The Guardian*, 4 May 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/may/04/iraq.babylon.

11. Bernhardsson, 52–56, 65–71.

12. Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 23–41; and Lawrence Rothfield, *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 10.

13. Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London: Reaktion Books), 111–118.

14. Bahrani, 111.

15. See "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," in *Imperialism, Art and Restitution*, ed. John Merryman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34.

16. James Cuno, "View from the Universal Museum," in *Imperialism, Art and Restitution*, 15–33.

17. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics," trans. Drew S. Burk, no. 2018-26, November 2018, 8, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

18. Patrick Cockburn discusses the 2013 rise of Daesh in the context of the failed "war on terror," noting the cyclicality of a war economy whereby the seizure of oil fields funded the group's autonomy, while their violent insurgency featured weapons sold by the United States and United Kingdom in the Middle East. "The movement's toxic but potent mix of extreme religious beliefs and military skill is the outcome of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the war in Syria since 2011," making the group far stronger that al-Qaeda. Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 8–9.

19. See Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011).