Babylon’s ancient Ishtar Gate is reconstructed with contemporary product wrappers; books carved from Afghan stone memorialize a German library destroyed in World War II; Saddam Hussein’s dinnerware turns up at a Park Avenue restaurant. In MICHAEL RAKOWITZ’s projects, cultural fragments are subject to a logic of transformation, replication, and circulation that allows them to telescope across regions and temporalities. If geopolitical conflicts are too often understood in abstract terms—as a “clash of civilizations”—Rakowitz traffics in the particular and the polysemic, prompting social exchange, linking disparate narratives, and opening up the historical enfilade that connects the United States’ recent military adventures to imperialism’s longue durée. In the process, critic and curator DIETER ROELSTRAETE suggests here, Rakowitz exposes the fundamental mutability of objects and ideologies alike.
Dar Al Sulh was intended to create a place for the placeless and displaced alike, enacting the spatial politics of its hopeful title in the here and now.
TWO OF THE LONGEST WARS IN US HISTORY continue to rage this day, although they do so at very different degrees of involvement and levels of visibility. The most protracted is the war in Afghanistan, which, considering the declared objectives—foremost among them ousting the Taliban and weeding out Al Qaeda root and branch—cannot be said to have been successful; the proposed withdrawal date for the remaining US troops is now set sometime in late 2014, at which point the war will have dragged on for more than thirteen years. Meanwhile, the war in Iraq, despite having been officially terminated nearly eighteen months ago, continues to affect the former belligerent states’ home fronts in profound ways. In the Middle Eastern theater of operations in particular, the war’s legacy lives on in the institutionalization and normalization of brutality and instability. War, in other words, has been the normal state of affairs for more than a decade now in the great geopolitical arc spanning from the US to the Middle East. Far from being that exceptional state alluded to in Carl von Clausewitz’s classical definition of war as the “continuation of politics with other means,” it has in fact become the quasi-absolute horizon of our daily existence, rendered awfully, palpably present in the militarization of everyday life as it unfolds in airports, elementary schools, and public spaces around the country, as well as in the appallingly broad acceptance of such practices as drone warfare.

This ongoing “great war for civilization,” as the British journalist Robert Fisk has dubbed the “conquest” of the Middle East, provides the principal backdrop for much of the work produced by Michael Rakowitz in the last decade or so, and the Chicago- and New York–based artist’s recent project Dar Al Sulh, 2013, was in fact specifically timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the US military invasion of Iraq. The work’s title may be translated as “domain of conciliation” (sulh means “peace” in Arabic). More precisely, the phrase may refer to the spatial conditions, provided for in historical Islamic societies such as medieval Al-Andalus or the Ottoman Empire, in which all manner of ecumenical dialogue took place, often leading to cultural efflorescence. In Rakowitz’s project, Dar Al Sulh became the name of an Iraqi Jewish restaurant that operated in Dubai for one week this past May (actually about ten years and two months after the invasion commenced). It was the first such restaurant to open its doors in the Arab world since 1948, the year of the Jews’ exodus from Iraq’s capital in the wake of the founding of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war. (Today, seven or eight Jews are thought to remain out of a community that once numbered one hundred thousand.) Rakowitz’s maternal grandparents were Iraqi Jews—his mother was born in exile in Mumbai, en route to New York—and the restaurant’s fare was based on his grandmother’s recipes. These dishes, which the artist has likened to fragments of a dead language, were served on traditional Iraqi Jewish dinnerware sourced, in part, from eBay. To the extent that there is a “digital” dimension to Rakowitz’s primarily analog brand of narrative Soziale Plastik, it is concentrated in the artist’s frequent use of research tools like the aforementioned consumer-to-consumer auction site. His recurring reliance on informal trading routes of this type likewise reflects his interest in a sculptural ethos of recycling and remaking, and in the cyclical processes of production and destruction.

But the restaurant’s offerings were not purely traditional—they accommodated both contemporary tastes and, more importantly, new global economic realities. A marked infusion of Indian ingredients reflected not only Rakowitz’s grandmother’s 1940s sojourn in Mumbai but also the United Arab Emirates’ dramatically changing demographics. As is well known, thousands of migrant workers, particularly from the Indian subcontinent, have streamed into the cities of the Gulf in recent decades to help build some of the tallest buildings on earth, which are often constructed at terrible human cost. Many of these workers live in the distinctly charmless industrial part of Dubai where Rakowitz decided to set up shop. Clearly, Dar Al Sulh—a collaborative venture involving the roving nonprofit the Moving Museum and Dubai’s independent art space Traffic—was not meant to look, let alone taste, like a sepia-toned time capsule for adventurous heritage tourists. Rather, it was intended to create a place for the placeless and displaced alike, enacting the spatial politics of its hopeful title in the here and now via that most immediate and visceral of social connectors, food.

Food, in fact, has been at the heart of a number of
Rakowitz’s project hints at a densely woven web of morally checkered histories of expropriation and exchange.

Rakowitz’s high-profile collaborative art projects in the past couple of years. It functions in his work not only as a marker of history, a register of cultural exchange, and a means of securing and deepening social bonds, but also—the emphasis on collaboration notwithstanding—as a site of tension or even antagonism. Indeed, the artist has referred to Dar Al Sulh as a continuation of his ongoing Enemy Kitchen project, 2004–, the most recent manifestation of which was a food truck making the rounds in Chicago as part of the Smart Museum of Art’s 2012 exhibition “Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art.” The truck served a rotating menu of regional Iraqi comestibles made in collaboration with chefs from Chicago’s Iraqi community. American veterans of the Iraq war acted as servers and sous-chefs. Food was dished out on limited-edition paper reproductions of dinnerware scavenged from Saddam Hussein’s palaces—the very same crockery that featured so prominently in Rakowitz’s Creative Time–commissioned project Spoils, 2011, and that became the unlikely centerpiece of a minor diplomatic incident.

For Spoils, Rakowitz worked with restaurateur Kevin Lasko to produce a dish incorporating Iraqi date syrup as a signature ingredient (an allusion, in part, to the artist’s 2004 project RETURN, essentially an attempt to reestablish his maternal grandfather’s import-export company, in which dates played a similarly pivotal role). The plan was to serve meals on Saddam’s china—the real thing this time, much of it bought online from a US serviceman who had purchased the items at a flea market near his base in Iraq. Rakowitz’s artful menu was available for consumption at Lasko’s Park Avenue establishment from September 28 until November 23, 2011; the US withdrawal from Iraq was officially completed on December 18, 2011. Coming to the attention of the Iraqi mission to the US mere days before the completion of the withdrawal, the project sparked an ambassadorial skirmish that concluded with President Obama’s presentation of the dinnerware to the Iraqi prime minister. The message of Spoils, like those of Dar Al Sulh and Enemy Kitchen, is doubtless in part a restorative one—in all of these works, Rakowitz reconnects body and soul as well as Americans and Iraqis, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, however fleetingly. Yet the project’s ambiguous title clearly hints at something more complex, a densely woven web of morally checkered histories of expropriation and exchange.

IF THESE CULINARY PROJECTS make history material in the most direct, physical way, elsewhere Rakowitz prefers to take a more circuitous, allegorical route through the past—as for example in his work The Breakup, 2010–12, wherein the epochal fault lines that have long defined Middle Eastern politics find a most unlikely analogy. The Breakup’s characteristically meandering narrative departs from the Beatles’ widely publicized 1969 split, which Rakowitz maps back onto the spiral of faltering communication and misunderstandings that has dogged Arab-Israeli relations since the Six-Day War of 1967; the waning dream of a secular pan-Arabism is reflected in the dissolution of the Fab Four. Originally conceived as a ten-part radio series (commissioned by the Al Ma’mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem for broadcast by a Palestinian station in Ramallah), the work eventually evolved into a sprawling multimedia installation consisting of video, drawings, a limited-edition gatefold vinyl LP, and assorted pop-cultural and political memorabilia, both real and fictitious. It culminated in a concert by Sabreen, a famous Palestinian pop band who actually started out playing Beatles covers, on the rooftop of the Swedish Christian Study Centre in Jerusalem.
This was a wry nod to the Beatles’ farewell concert on the roof of the Apple building in central London on January 30, 1969, an occasion that caused tears to flow the world over.

Yet some of Rakowitz’s most ambitious works to date have generally struck a more somber, melancholy tone, gloomily reflecting on the irreversible destruction of art and culture rather than their possible regeneration through social ritual and collective experiences (however campy). One tragic episode that made a particularly strong impression on the artist was the 2003 ransacking of the National Museum of Iraq, whose superb collection of Mesopotamian antiquities had long been considered one of the richest of its kind in the world. A mind-boggling fifteen thousand objects are estimated to have been stolen in the chaotic days following the fall of Baghdad in April 2003—among them such prized pieces as the 4,500-year-old golden lyre of Ur, one of the world’s oldest surviving stringed instruments—and while a majority of these artifacts eventually found their way back to their institutional home, several thousand have not. This long list of missing artifacts is at the center of The invisible enemy should not exist, 2007—, which consists of a procession of to-scale
A spirit of indignation at inequity, a "politics of rage," even, underlies many of Rakowitz's works.

process. Each time a missing object reemerges from the murky depths of the illegal antiquities trade, Rakowitz notes the item's new status on the corresponding label. The dynamic nature of The invisible enemy suggests, however symbolically, that perhaps one day the museum's holdings will be made complete again. We are thereby invited to read the installation as a critical reflection on the complex network of relations that connects the politics of collecting and conservation with more philosophical questions concerning notions of authenticity, recycling, and remaking—the latter clearly constituting the governing principles of Rakowitz's social sculpture.

UNMAKING, REMAKING: An even more wanton destruction of cultural treasure—and its physical reconstitution—is the subject of What Dust Will Rise?, the multifaceted project that Rakowitz developed for last year's Documenta 13. An invitation to participate in that mammoth exhibition's Afghan chapter led Rakowitz to visit Bamiyan, the location of the infamous demolition of the world's largest standing Buddha statues, a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. Taliban leader Mullah Omar authorized the razing in March 2001 (and in so doing, ironically contrived a singularly spectacular critique of spectacle if ever there was one). Teaming up with a German sculptor and restorer named Bert Praxenthaler and a small band of highly skilled Afghan and Italian stone carvers, Rakowitz used the same kind of travertine from which the Bamiyan Buddhas were carved, quarried from hills and cliffs near the empty niches where the statues once stood, to "reconstruct" a handful of books from the thousands of volumes that perished in the bombing of Kassel in World War II. (He also conducted a stonemasonry workshop in a monastery cave just above the top of one niche.) The handsome stone tomes were shown in the ground floor of the Fridericianum, which once housed the libraries of the landgraves of Hesse-Kassel. They rested on glass slabs on which Rakowitz had jotted down miscellaneous thoughts and observations related to book burning and other iconoclastic entertainments. Much is made of the fact that the citizens of Kassel were predictably shocked by the destruction of their beloved historical library, which took place only a few years after they themselves had engaged rather enthusiastically in book-burning rituals of a different kind, right outside the Fridericianum. Indeed, such circular ironies invariably energize the critical charge of many of Rakowitz's narrative installations and material reconstructions.

One chilling quote ascribed to Mullah Omar is worth repeating in full, if only for the acuity with which it balances an apparently incomprehensible iconoclastic impulse with more ostensibly humanitarian concerns: "I did not want to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha. In fact, some foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct the repair work of the Bamiyan Buddha that had been slightly damaged due to rains. This shocked me. I thought, these callous people have no regard for thousands of living human beings—the Afghans who are dying of hunger, but they are so concerned about non-living objects like the Buddha. This was extremely deplorable. That is why I ordered its destruction. Had they come for humanitarian work, I would have never ordered the Buddhas' destruction." One almost hears the artist's cautiously muttered approval while transcribing these highly problematic and deeply
conflicted lines onto the glass surface. After all, a comparable spirit of indignation at inequity, a “politics of rage,” even, underlies many of Rakowitz’s projects to date, especially those that have the destruction or dismantling of major cultural artifacts as their subject.

In fact, another work by Rakowitz related to the ongoing “great war for civilization” was included in a 2010 exhibition, simply and effectively titled “Über Wut” (On Rage), at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Curator Valerie Smith defined the purpose of the project in the following terms: “to explore how artists challenge and channel instances of adversity, injustice, intolerance, censorship, and totalitarianism . . . and existential modes of expressing discontent.” The visitor entered this show by passing through the archway of Rakowitz’s May the Arrogant Not Prevail, 2010, a paper-covered plywood remake of Babylon’s fabled Ishtar Gate; the first glimpse of the structure revealed only its barebones backside, discarding the scaffolding that supports a brightly colored facade covered with a startling combination of Arabic script and Pepsi-Cola logos. Since the early ’30s, the original gate has been housed in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum—where it continues to stand, as do so many archaeological artifacts scattered in museums across the Western world, as a towering reminder of the violent colonial prehistory of modern cultural institutions.

But the more direct reference in Rakowitz’s Potemkin gateway is to a scaled-down reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate that was built near the ruins of Babylon sometime in the ’50s, as the entrance to an archaeological museum that never materialized. During the Iraq war this monument served as a perennially popular photo backdrop for US soldiers, many of whom, we may assume, had passed through the military base that was controversially built within spitting distance of the ruins of the ancient city of biblical renown. Today, this Babylon is best remembered as the symbol of all worldly evils (as in the “whore of Babylon”). It is remembered, too, as the site of divine retribution—the Babylon spoken of in Revelation 18 that many around the world, and an overwhelming majority in the Middle East in particular, identify with US hegemony and the concomitant culture of global capitalist decadence. Approached from its inglorious rear, Rakowitz’s rickety gateway shrewdly challenges the entwined myths of originary objecthood and imperial permanence: A remake of a remake, it can never return us to the real thing, least of all to the long-lost powers of yesteryear. As such, it is not a portal to the past, but a gateway to the postimperial present. □

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Michael Rakowitz, May the Arrogant Not Prevail, 2010, found packaging and newspapers, glue, cardboard, wood, 19 7/8 x 10 2/3 x 3 1/4. Photo: Thomas Eugster.