

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ: *The Breakup*

January 11 – February 22, 2014

Opening reception:

Saturday, January 11, 2014, 2-5pm



Michael Rakowitz, *The Breakup* (detail), 2012, collage on found Album sleeve, 12 x 12 inches. From *The Breakup*, 2010- ongoing

“The Beatles are not just what Rakowitz thinks about; they’re what he thinks with.” -Sukhdev Sandhu

In *The Breakup*, Michael Rakowitz conflates the break-up of the Beatles with the breakdown of Middle Eastern relations, questioning the essence of human and diplomatic relationships and the possibility of repairing torn connections. The multi-dimensional project evolved from a 10-episode radio program commissioned by the Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, Jerusalem, and broadcast over the Palestinian Radio Amwaj in 2010. Listeners who initially tuned in to the prime-time airing, likely waiting at checkpoints to cross contentious borders on their way home from work, heard Rakowitz dissect the dissolution of the Beatles. Interwoven with historical events, the narrative takes its audience from John Lennon's 1940 birth amid the Blitz to the band's dénouement and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's coincidental death in 1970. Mined from hours of tapes recording the “Fab Four's” conversations during their final days, Rakowitz's archaeological study reveals the band's desperate attempt to reconstruct unity through performing in an exotic location. The come-back concert idea, which sparked Rakowitz's allegory, went as far as the band booking amphitheaters in Tunisia and Libya before it collapsed into a miserly rooftop performance. The account relayed in *The Breakup* addresses much more than a fan's nostalgia for his favorite band; “you know, like when a song about lost love can be about a lost country.”

Rhona Hoffman Gallery's first solo exhibition with the Chicago-based artist marks the third iteration of *The Breakup*, begun with the 2010 radio program and expanded into a 2012 exhibition at Lombard Freid in New York. In the gallery, the project exists as a multimedia presentation with video, drawings, memorabilia, collage, and installation that guide viewers to Rakowitz's frenzied quest for understanding. The radio program broadcasts live; vitrines with found objects and memorabilia physically manifest the connections between players in the collapse of Middle Eastern countries and Beatles characters; and Rakowitz's film *The Breakup* screens in the upstairs gallery. Disseminating the project beyond the exhibition, a re-issued, limited edition vinyl LP record contains Palestinian band SABREEN's cover of five of the Beatles' late songs, selected to form a poetic meditation on collaboration and collapse.

“Get Back,” the last song the Beatles played in their final *Rooftop Concert*, presents the stakes at hand in Rakowitz’s quest, underlined in the radio program when he as narrator repeats a phrase heard in the ’69 tapes: “you mustn’t try and get back what you had.” The artist’s own family migrated to the United States after his grandfather was exiled from Iraq in 1946, and his practice addresses Middle Eastern relations through work that functions beyond the fine art context. Entering the arena of life, politics, and rock & roll, *The Breakup* investigates nostalgia and fanaticism and asks the central question: “Why not? Why must it be so impossible to get back, to get back home?”

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Michael Rakowitz is an Iraqi-American conceptual artist based in Chicago and New York. His work operates in traditional art spaces and beyond them. With his series *paraSITE*, Rakowitz built customized, inflatable shelters for the homeless using a mere per project budget of \$5.00 for plastic bags and waterproof tape, utilizing exterior vents of buildings for heat. In *Return*, produced by Creative Time in 2006, Rakowitz reopened his grandfather’s import and export business, Davison’s & Co., which first operated in Baghdad and then relocated to New York when his family was exiled in 1946. Rakowitz’s resurrected family business offered free shipping to Iraq three months after the U.S. declared stifling trade restrictions on the country, and also imported world renowned Iraqi dates to the U.S. for the first time in over 30 years. The dates’ ill-fated, circuitous journey illustrated the path of Iraqi refugees who underwent the same delays, inspections and refusals as they too sought to leave Iraq. *Spoils* of 2011 provided patrons of Park Avenue—a Manhattan restaurant—with a dish of venison served atop Iraqi date syrup and tahini, served on rare pieces of fine China from Saddam Hussein’s personal collection. More surprising than the sensory tensions experienced by each diner, notably the contrast between the “sweetness of the Iraqi date syrup, and the...bitter provenance of the dishware,” was the dramatic conclusion of the project. A cease-and-desist letter from the State Department calling for the “surrender” of the plates abruptly ended *Spoils*, and resulted in their return to Iraqi territory. A “kind of perfect” ending to the project, according to Rakowitz.

Michael Rakowitz lives and works in Chicago. He is a Professor in the Department of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University. He has had solo exhibitions at the Tate Modern, London (2010); SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal, Canada (2009); and PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York (2000–01). He has been included in group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2013-4); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012); dOCUMENTA 13 (2012); the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago (2012); the 2011 Asian Art Biennale; the 16th Sydney Biennial (2008); and the 10th International Istanbul Biennial (2007). His work is currently featured in *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Next fall Rakowitz will create a new project for "A Proximity of Consciousness," a major exhibition on Chicago's social practice art, organized by the School of the Art Institute. Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen* will also be featured in an accompanying four-volume series on social practice in Chicago since the 1880s, distributed by the University of Chicago Press.