



Flag of Iraq
operated by a cook from Baghdad



Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik | The Edible Text:
Representational Strategies in the Art
of Michael Rakowitz

IN THE WEST, THE DISTANCE OF VISION REGULATES OUR knowledge of Iraq. Over the past twenty years, we in the United States have come to know that country through night-vision goggles and embedded reporters. We see bombings over breakfast and forget them before lunch. But what do we know about Iraq aside from oil and war? Perhaps we remember concepts such as “Mesopotamia” or “cradle of civilization” or even “birthplace of writing,” but this doesn’t tell us much about the culture of Iraq today. When was the last time you enjoyed Iraqi music or savored an Iraqi meal? (*Wait—what do Iraqis even eat?*) Whatever the reason—stringent immigration policies for refugees, geographic and economic roadblocks, or even misrecognition—Iraqis have very little cultural presence in American public life.¹ Project-based artist Michael Rakowitz uses food to spark dialogue about America’s relationship with Iraq and Iraqi identity. In his art, food functions within an edible text—a synthesis of language and embodied experience that is represented through narrative. This strategy engages Americans intellectually, physically, and affectively with the construction of Iraqi identity.

Philosophers and scientists in the West have historically defined the senses associated with eating—such as taste, touch, and smell—at the bottom of a racial hierarchy that privileges vision. But the edible diverges from the visual because it requires proximity, not

distance. Nineteenth-century scholars characterized these senses as neurotic and perverse—descriptors eerily similar to those associated with the primitive body. The noble sense of sight was coupled with the European, as demonstrated in the sensory paradigm established by early nineteenth-century scientist Lorenz Oken, who was the most important German “nature philosopher” of his time:

1. *The skin-man is the black, African*
2. *The tongue-man is the brown, Australian-Malayan*
3. *The nose-man is the red, American*
4. *The ear-man is the yellow, Asiatic-Mongolian*
5. *The eye-man is the white, European*

Oken’s classifications are archaic, yet his spectral hierarchy of races and senses continues to resonate in contemporary culture.²

Rakowitz invites us to disrupt politicized identity categories by offering us the fragrant, nourishing, messy material of food. As an unstable substance, food offers an artistic strategy for representing the politics of highly contested identities. Food is a material that is held in language as well as in hands and mouths. This is to say that the meaning of food is negotiated, contested, and constructed through our words. Like other art materials, food is a marker of difference: it signifies race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, geography, gender, and class. Eating implicates us in a relationship with food’s referent. When Rakowitz offers participants a bite to eat, he mobilizes food as part of a textual strategy that seeks to make Iraq and Iraqi culture real for Americans.

The challenge of writing in absent and contested identities is a personal undertaking. Born in Great Neck, New York, Rakowitz is an Iraqi American Jew—something that may sound like an oxymoron but is quite the opposite: Iraq was once home to one of the oldest

Jewish communities in the world.³ As all of us do, Rakowitz navigates the world with a biography that is simultaneously present and absent.⁴ He has explored our construction of Iraqi identity in a series of ongoing food-based projects including *Enemy Kitchen* (2006–ongoing), *RETURN* (2004–ongoing), and *Spoils* (2011). He noticed the power of meals as a social gesture while passing by a restaurant in New York:

For a while, I had been thinking about how restaurants in certain countries mark or embody the cultural puncture that comes with war, the migration of people during and after periods of conflict. In Paris, for example, one cannot walk too far without coming across a North African market or restaurants, something for me that pushes against the amnesia . . . Shortly after September 11, 2001, I was in the East Village in New York City. On St. Mark’s Place, there was a long line of people, stretching down the block. It turned out they were all waiting to get into Khyber Pass, an Afghani restaurant, to support the owners and staff and to eat there as a gesture of peace. I thought this gesture was beautiful and it was based around the collective consumption of a specific kind of food.⁵

Rakowitz recognized food’s potential as a means by which to create symbolic political alliances.

In *Enemy Kitchen* (fig.1), the artist’s first food-based project, Rakowitz compiled Baghdadi recipes with his Iraqi Jewish mother. Over the many installments of this ongoing project he prepares these dishes with audiences ranging from seventh graders to young professionals and Iraq War veterans. In 2004 he taught these recipes to middle and high school students at the Hudson Guild Community Center. As they gathered to cook and eat, one student complained, “Why are we making this nasty food? They (the Iraqis) blow up our

Figure 1—Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen*, 2004. Michael Rakowitz prepares Baghdadi recipes with students. Presented by More Art, project at Hudson Guild Community Center, New York



soldiers every day and they knocked down the Twin Towers.’ One student corrected her and said, ‘The Iraqis didn’t destroy the Twin Towers, bin Laden did.’ Another said, ‘It wasn’t bin Laden, it was our government.’”⁶ The conversation offered a rare opportunity for the students to openly discuss the war and terrorism. Rakowitz reflected: “The students engaged each other on the topic of the war and drew parallels with their own lives, at times making comparisons with bullies in relation to how they perceive the conflict.”⁷ The process of preparing and sharing food created a space for dialogue about responsibility and power—topics often deemed unsavory in other social spaces. Far from being conversational footnotes of the project, this engagement becomes the art. *Enemy Kitchen* functions as a text by collecting stories as it becomes a story.

In a more recent iteration of *Enemy Kitchen* Rakowitz capitalized on our national obsession with food on wheels by taking Iraqi cuisine to the streets of Chicago. *Enemy Kitchen*—the food truck—was part of the show *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* at the Smart Museum of Art. Here, he turned the culinary spotlight to various regions of Iraq (fig. 2). Working sketches for the project included two flags: one to be raised when the truck was operated by a cook from Baghdad, another when operated by a cook from Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region of Iraq. Members of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) collaborated as sous-chefs and servers. In *Enemy Kitchen*, “eating the enemy” can be read as a cultural dare in which some participants refused to partake. Is the food familiar or strange? These opposing distinctions do not translate to “good” or “bad,” as we often find strange tastes to be pleasing if not exotic. It is not uncommon to see an untouched plate or two at the end of one of Rakowitz’s meals, but there is always dialogue. Rakowitz uses food to talk about its contexts—its provenance and its conflicts.⁸

Figure 2—Michael Rakowitz, working sketch for *Enemy Kitchen (Food Truck)*, a commission for Feast, 2011. Courtesy the artist

Artist and writer Ted Purves draws a useful distinction between food and meals. Food is “a noun, a substance, a thing, a process, [and] a need,” while meals are the social form of food.⁹ The food in *Enemy Kitchen* is a material activated within a social form. Comparing *Enemy Kitchen* to other contemporary practices highlights the ways in which Rakowitz mobilizes food as a material constructed in language. Consider, for example, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s first exhibition, *pad thai*, which took place at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York in 1990. In this now-iconic piece, Tiravanija transformed the gallery space into a makeshift kitchen by inviting visitors to eat Thai food for free. Since then he has performed many untitled meals, primarily in commercial gallery spaces.

Both *pad thai* and *Enemy Kitchen* are described by their creators as social sculptures that involve serving unfamiliar—and possibly exotic—food to diverse audiences. As artist-cooks, Tiravanija and Rakowitz prepare foods contiguous with their own identities. Rirkrit Tiravanija was born in Argentina to a Thai diplomat and a surgeon. He was raised in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada and now resides in New York. For Tiravanija, the project does not depend on the cultural identity of the meal. The food is Thai in the sense that he is the host, and he is Thai, but *pad thai* is not about the food itself being Thai. In contrast, Rakowitz’s meals are about the food as a sensory metonym for Iraqi culture.¹⁰



Figure 3—Michael Rakowitz, *Spoils*, Park Avenue Autumn, New York, 2011. Photograph by Christopher Kissock, Courtesy Creative Time



As edible texts, these projects are political endeavors with entirely different priorities. The notion that “political art” requires an explicit, linear message constituting a one to one correlation of form to content is a fallacy. Much post-conceptual art, including social practice projects, prompts comparison to the comedic “one-liner.” They make a claim—perhaps a striking one—but it ends there. If food is revealed as a socially constructed material through the art, it has the potential to move beyond these limitations. Food places us in proximity with the other. Tiravanija uses food because the distance required for its consumption shifts the politics of the space in which it is eaten. In Rakowitz’s projects, the consumption of food, as an index for Iraq, requires intimacy with a contested identity, and opens dialogue about politics. Tiravanija uses food to unite. Rakowitz uses food to incite. These constitute entirely different objectives. While the presence of Iraqi food in American social spheres can begin to remedy our ignorance about Iraqi culture, Rakowitz is not naive. In his art practice, breaking bread is not a panacea for war wounds.

The most divisive reactions to Rakowitz’s art to date were prompted by *Spoils* (figs. 3 and 4), a project that manifested as a dish created in collaboration with Chef Kevin Lasko and served at the Manhattan restaurant Park Avenue Autumn.¹¹ For a limited time in the fall of 2011, diners were able to enjoy the spoils of war for just thirty-five dollars. The decadent dish featured two venison shanks topped with sliced scallions, pine nuts, and pomegranate seeds. It rested in a two-toned pool of cream sauce on a distinctive black porcelain plate trimmed with a gleaming gold border. These were not just anyone’s ostentatious dishes—they once belonged to dictator Saddam Hussein.

News coverage of *Spoils* in outlets such as the *Huffington Post* included anonymous reader comments that described this dish at Manhattan’s Park Avenue Autumn restaurant as “stupid and sick” and

“depraved and grotesque.” We often speak of creating balance in a dish; we rarely speak of creating opposition. In *Spoils*, the two key ingredients, “American deer” and “Iraqi date syrup,” highlight a conflicted geopolitical relationship (fig. 4). The venison alluded to the American tradition of the deer hunt, the movie *The Deer Hunter*, and the tracking of Saddam Hussein.¹² *Spoils* symbolically presented us with the dictator’s body—chased down and served on the remnants of his own empire. The sauce was *debes wa rashi*, a traditional Iraqi dessert combining sesame paste and dates.¹³ This interplay of sweet and savory combined with the bitter history embodied by the plates is a difficult flavor to reconcile. Rakowitz could not even bring himself to eat off of one of Hussein’s plates.¹⁴

Spoils is more than a thoughtfully composed meal at a Park Avenue restaurant; it is an edible text. Take, for example, the biographies of the two men who supplied Rakowitz with Saddam Hussein’s dinnerware through eBay. One is an Iraqi refugee living in Michigan; the other is an American soldier living in Iraq. The symbolism and irony of their collaboration become part of *Spoils*’s narrative. The project continues long after the meal ends. Yet if it is not possible to know every detail of the piece because it is always still in process, then how do we come to understand it? Rakowitz’s projects leave behind a trail of breadcrumbs in the form of transactions, relationships, and retellings that are difficult to categorize. Sometimes the trail ends, and the system provides a conclusion that even the artist could not have scripted.

Two days before the close of *Spoils*, the State Department issued a cease-and-desist order to Park Avenue Autumn and demanded the surrender of the plates used for the project. Two U.S. marshals appeared at the Creative Time offices to authenticate the plates and repatriate them to Iraq. After they left, Rakowitz hopped in a taxi to follow the dishware to the embassy:

Figure 4—Michael Rakowitz in collaboration with Kevin Lasko, *Spoils*, 2011. Ingredient list as printed in the accompanying booklet titled *Spoils*. Produced by Creative Time

Tahini
Pine nuts
Cardamom
Pomegranate
American deer
Iraqi date syrup
Saddam Hussein’s personal dishware
King Faisal II of Iraq’s personal dishware

Figure 5—Michael Rakowitz, *RETURN*, 2006. Storefront at 529 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn.
Courtesy Creative Time



It was surreal. We walked into the front doors, and there were photographs of all these artifacts from the Iraq Museum, some of which were feared to have gone missing in the aftermath of the looting . . . We walked by, and it was like the perfect scene. The plates are all laid out on the table and in the office there's an Iraqi flag, and the diplomats are all standing around, and the two marshals are standing there, and the marshals turn to us when they saw that we arrived and said, "So you made it."¹⁵

The plates were confiscated the day before the end of the Iraq War was officially announced on December 15, 2011, and presented by President Barack Obama to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malkiki. *Spoils* became an international détente. As a text, it provides parameters but cannot predict its own plot. In Rakowitz's practice, the form is an open system guided by a proposition. Like any plot, this involves a transition from point *a* to point *b*. The process of that movement becomes the art. Food, once operating within this system, is figured as a metaphor. However, the figure does not stand in for the whole. The systems it inhabits (restaurants, businesses) and the systems by which it constitutes viewers and participants participates in the metaphor. What eventually becomes the project cannot be predicted by it. *How do you represent an open system? Tell me about it. No, seriously, tell me a story.* If you want to know about Michael Rakowitz's art, I'll have to tell you about it. Narrative emerges as a powerful, affective strategy for representing complicated, fragmented webs of systems, experiences, and anecdotes.

RETURN (fig. 5), is an ongoing project initiated in 2004 that exists as both business and art. The premise can be summed up as such: in 2006, the artist set out to be the first entity in nearly thirty years to legally import Iraqi dates:

For me, this project really began in late July 2006, when I began corresponding with about a dozen companies in Iraq that responded to my call for a supplier of Iraqi dates willing to ship to the U.S. When I heard back from Bassam, he told me that it was clear to him why I wanted to base my project on Iraqi dates: because it is said that “every Iraqi has a date in their genes.” He explained that it is customary for the parents of a newborn child to place a date in the infant’s mouth immediately after birth, so that its first taste of life will be sweet.¹⁶

In both *Spoils* and *RETURN*, Rakowitz emphasizes the cultural and economic importance of the date as a signifier of Iraqi culture. Before the Iran–Iraq wars, Iraq was the world’s leading exporter of dates. Date palms numbered 32 million before the wars and have dwindled to a mere 2 million outside of Basra, the primary date-growing region.¹⁷ To go about the task of importing this iconic fruit, Rakowitz resurrected his grandfather’s import-export business and opened a storefront on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Rakowitz is fond of saying, “This is bad business, but it’s good art.”¹⁸ Although the storefront window announcing the space proclaimed—in both Arabic and English—“We sell Iraqi dates,” for most of the project’s duration there were no Iraqi dates in sight.¹⁹

Food indexes Iraq not only through what we are told, but also through what we can sense. The dates are a sensory metonym creating a contiguous link between the eater’s body and Iraq. Shamoan Salih—an Iraqi Jew who fled Iraq in 1960—was a repeat visitor to the store who had an intensely personal relationship to their flavor:

Saturday, 11/25/06

“I’d appreciate it if you could just hold on to a handful for me, just a little something for thikra.” Thikra, Shamoan explains, means

memory, nostalgia, a taste of home . . . I ask him more about this word thikra, memory. “It’s for when you are homesick, when you miss your home.” He says there is a Turkish dance called thikra that is all about that missing of home. “When I think of Iraq, I feel I am there emotionally. I left in 1960, but I was defined by the system, the stamina, the discipline. And I look at what is happening there now . . .” His voice trails off. . .

A friendship grew between Salih and Rakowitz as they awaited the arrival of the dried fruit. They discussed their families and whether or not they might be distantly related; they talked about exile and the profound impact of a country that one of them had never traveled to and the other had not set foot in for nearly fifty years. When the few boxes of Iraqi dates finally arrived, Rakowitz called Salih to the store. Salih’s opportunity to experience a taste of home had arrived:

Sunday, 12/10/2006

In the evening, just before the store closes, Shamoan Salih returns for his taste of thikra. He looks at the boxes, smiling slightly and nodding, assessing the four different varieties. He slowly puts his first date in his mouth, closes his eyes, smiles, and softly says, “This is 46 years in the making.”²⁰

For Salih, the flavor of the eagerly anticipated delicacy briefly allowed body and memory to merge.²¹ For Rakowitz, it allowed entry to an unknowable country through the relationships it created. Rakowitz had imported the memory of a man he would never have known if not for this project. Curiously, during the Atlantic Avenue storefront’s final days a reporter noticed that Rakowitz himself wasn’t eating the dates:

“So, the dates are in front of you now, after their long journey, four months in the making. We notice that you haven’t even touched

*the dates, much less tasted one. What's going on?" It's not a bad question. In fact, it's a very good one. My hands are on the table, outstretched. I am leaning over the boxes. I try to speak. My throat shuts and the tears well up. Everyone sees what's going on. I am silent. It is a long pause. I look down, trying to regain my composure. I look up. "I'm sorry," I whisper. Another 30 seconds go by. "They're not for me," I reply in a choked voice.*²²

What does it mean that the person arguably most affected by the dates—Rakowitz—didn't eat them? It was not that the taste was unimportant to him, but rather that it meant too much. Although this project is passed on to us through narration it is not an exclusively a cerebral exercise, for it can also be felt in the body. I first experienced the impact of these dates through their narrative, not on Atlantic Avenue but in a crowded hall of students and academics at Rakowitz's 2010 lecture at the California College of the Arts. By the close of the talk, many in the audience were brought to tears over the fate of a few boxes of fruit. One person said, "by the end of it you were just heartbroken by these dates." This feat of strategic anthropomorphism reflects Rakowitz's ability to realize his art as a web of open systems with real implications, shaped by our ingestion of and participation in the structures he sets forth.

I know Rakowitz's art through its representations. In poring over books and websites, I initially felt disappointed that the radical potential of the sensory in these complicated projects would be reduced back to pictures and words. Was I an armchair advocate for sensory experience? As I tried to understand the ways in which Rakowitz represents his own art, I slowly realized that he was doing something different. As quickly composed snapshots, the photographs representing his projects resist the category of "Art." Rakowitz does not use video

in these projects to create pieces that function diegetically, rendering the sum of their parts as a cohesive whole. The task of inscribing absent identities into the world drives Rakowitz's practice. Yet he does not depend on a univocal voice or testimony. Instead, he produces multivalent systems that require the participation of countless anonymous others. Rakowitz insists that the projects are "out there," in the world. There's always another person and another story. Attention is not given exclusively to the art object but instead directed toward broader social contexts.

In considering Rakowitz's presentation of his own projects, we see that the conventions of artist, title, date, and medium no longer apply. *Artist: Michael Rakowitz*—that much we know. *Date: 2004–on-going*. Because his art practice is project based and site-specific, there is no rehangng or restaging. Every iteration is a chapter within a larger, meandering, unscripted novel that makes up the text of the art: *Location: Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Queens (2004), Longwood Art Center, Bronx (2005), Storefront at 529 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn (produced by Creative Time, 2006), Istanbul Biennial (2007)*. But here the ease of artistic convention comes to an end. In the place of material he begins with the story of his grandfather, Nissim Isaac David, an exile from his home in Iraq.

The edible text implicates the participant's mouth, memory, and organs. As we eat, we enter into a relationship with the object through its consumption. Offering and eating disrupt constructs of power and contribute to the construction of new art forms.²³ As Roland Barthes writes in "From Work to Text," there exists a hierarchical relationship between producers and consumers. Historically, reading and writing functioned as class privileges, until democracy "reversed the word of command."²⁴ The ability to contribute to the text—to participate—is integrated into the very form of Rakowitz's art. Form unravels the

dispersal of power through the particulars of its dissemination. Barthes writes, “the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the art, but by joining them in a single signifying practice.”²⁵ This methodology empowers that which has been overlooked and marginalized—including the lowly senses associated with food. Through their activation in edible texts, the senses are given a place, a voice; these other senses of smell, taste, and touch have a place in political resistance.

Rakowitz’s projects enact a process of figuration and substitution dependent on threads of experience, language, and visuality. The gap between signifier and signified, between a representation and its meaning, provides the platform for participants to produce knowledge. To paraphrase Barthes and add a comparison to food, the edible text is:

1. *Grasped in language, not in the hand*
2. *Not contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres*
3. *Operating in a system with neither close nor center*
4. *Plural, answering not to an interpretation, but dissemination*
5. *Networked like an organism that grows by vital expansion, by ‘development,’*
6. *Activated as play, activity, production, practice, closing the gap between production and consumption*
7. *Pleasurable through consumption²⁶*

Rakowitz’s practice provides examples of these strategies in action. To consume is to participate and contribute to the production of this art. Press, anecdotes, interactions, memories, and state department seizures all contribute to the construction of knowledge that constitutes the art.

The edible text gains political power as it is consumed and shared. This physical and symbolic ingestion evokes the representation of absent bodies—as with Iraqi dates—in a precarious state of disappearance. As post-conceptual art practices shift in accordance with our worlds, representational strategies for politically committed artists focus on the identity of the body in the process of its construction. Participation unfurls as political negotiation. Food, as a material that bridges sense and signification, provides opportunities for the ongoing production of meaning.

Notes

- 1 The few Iraqi restaurants that exist nationwide—there is apparently only one in New York—are often seen as generically Middle Eastern. Oliver Schwaner-Albright, “A Bit of Old Baghdad With a Western Twist,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/23/dining/23kabb.html>.
- 2 Constance Classen, *The Colour of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 67.
- 3 David Van Biema, “The Last Jews of Baghdad,” *Time World*, July 27, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1647740,00.html>.
- 4 While everyone has both identity and politics, only nonnormative peoples are commonly defined by their difference. As Richard Dyer writes in *White*, “There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity.” See Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.
- 5 Harrell Fletcher and Michael Rakowitz, *Between Artists: Harrell Fletcher and Michael Rakowitz*, ed. Alejandro Cesarco (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2008), 61–62.
- 6 Michael Rakowitz, “Enemy Kitchen,” Michael Rakowitz, accessed November 5, 2010, <http://michaelrakowitz.com/projects/enemy-kitchen>.
- 7 Fletcher and Rakowitz, *Between Artists*, 64.
- 8 For additional iterations of *Enemy Kitchen*, see the following articles: Sarah Beth Mendelsohn, “*Enemy Kitchen* at Midway Studios,” *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* blog, accessed November 10, 2011, https://blogs.uchicago.edu/feast/2011/10/enemy_kitchen_at_midway_studio.html ; Steven Winn, “Michael Rakowitz’s ‘Enemy Kitchen’ Breaks Down Cultural Barriers,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 27, 2007, http://articles.sfgate.com/2007-12-27/entertainment/17274415_1_michael-rakowitz-iraqi-flag-kubba.

- 9 Ted Purves, interview by author, San Francisco, CA, October 25, 2011.
- 10 There is another factor to consider—the United States is not at war in Thailand, but it is at war in Iraq. Is it possible for Iraqi food to be consumed in the United States outside of its relationship to war? I also ask if it is possible for Tiravanija's meals to be consumed in gallery spaces outside of the food's relationship to the exotic.
- 11 *Spoils* is the final dish in a year-long series of collaborations between artists and chef Kevin Lasko curated by Meredith Johnson and presented by Creative Time. The other artists were Marina Abramovic (winter), Paul Ramirez Jonas (spring), and Janine Antoni (summer).
- 12 Released in 1978, *The Deer Hunter* is a movie about the disturbing impact of the Vietnam War on three U.S. Veterans.
- 13 As discussed below, the date is a national icon for Iraq.
- 14 Austin Considine, "A Reservation With Reservations," *New York Times Magazine*, November 8, 2011, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/a-reservation-with-reservations/#more-193345>.
- 15 Kyle Chayka, "Artist Michael Rakowitz on How His Saddam Hussein Dinner Party Became an International Incident," Blouin Art Info, accessed January 21, 2011, <http://artinfo.com/news/story/753997/artist-michael-rakowitz-on-how-his-saddam-hussein-dinner-party-became-an-international-incident>.
- 16 Due to security concerns for their families in Iraq, the names of the agents working at the Baghdad-based company from which the dates were ordered have recently requested their real names not be used. Peter Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," *UOVO* magazine, http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/press/uovo_rakowitz_eleey.pdf (accessed September 1, 2011), 16.
- 17 Agence France-Presse, "Iraq Looks to Triple its Palm Trees in Revival of Date Farming," *The National*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/iraq-looks-to-triple-its-palm-trees-in-revival-of-date-farming>.
- 18 Benjamin Tiven, "Art Matters," *The Nation*, September 19, 2007, <http://www.thenation.com/article/art-matters>. Rakowitz notes that the project, which was presented by Creative Time, is only possible with artist grants and other forms of funding.
- 19 Rakowitz recounts the saga of the dates and the dangerous climate in which they grew: "About six weeks into our dealings, and as our communication grew into a real friendship, I learned that Bassam and his family had to leave Baghdad because it was becoming too dangerous. In fact, his wife and kids had witnessed a man being shot right in front of them while they were at a restaurant. They settled in Amman, Jordan. Suddenly, the conversations I was having with Bassam had gone from him being in Baghdad and symbolically welcoming my family and me back to Iraq, to that of a conversation between exiles. Bassam would tell stories of Iraq,

- of what it looked like, what *manna* tastes like, how thick the trunks of the palms would get. He then sighed at one point, realising the way he was speaking. "Do I sound like your grandfather yet?" he asked." The journey of the dates in *RETURN* emerges as a metaphor for the odyssey of the Iraqi refugee; they are submitted to questioning and turned away at the border before a mere ten boxes escape, shipped by air to New York in a last-ditch effort to spare a few of the many. Peter Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," *UOVO* magazine, http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/press/uovo_rakowitz_eleey.pdf (accessed September 1, 2011), 16.
- 20 Michael Rakowitz, "Store Log," Creative Time, pdf available at http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_rakowitz_blog.html (accessed November 5, 2010).
- 21 For further analysis of taste and memory, see Deborah Cherry, "Sweet Memories: Encountering the Candy Spills of Felix González-Torres," <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.g.bal/bestanden/Cherry%20Deborah%20paper%20oencuentro%20READER%20OPMAAK.pdf> (accessed September 1, 2011), 16.
- 22 Michael Rakowitz, "Store Log."
- 23 Food challenges positions of privilege, including the usual sanctity afforded to the art object. Rakowitz's art objects defy uniqueness, but the stories they tell do not.
- 24 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," trans. Stephen Heath, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 1316–19.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 1330.
- 26 Barthes, "From Work to Text," 1326–31.