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## A VIRTUAL OASIS: TRAFALGAR SQUARE'S ARCH OF PALMYRA

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### Abstract

*This paper considers the destruction of the Arch of Palmyra in Syria in 2015 and its temporary reconstruction a year later in London's Trafalgar Square. Attention is paid to an adjacent pedestal known as the Fourth Plinth, with a particular focus on a proposed monument by the Iraqi-American conceptual artist, Michael Rakowitz (born 1973). His works provide the basis for a discussion of public memorials and art's commemorative function; the preservation, destruction and politicisation of heritage; the role of technology for the purposes of documentation and reconstruction; notions of authenticity; ethics and legal issues surrounding the global trade in cultural artefacts.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In April 2016, a Syrian oasis bloomed briefly in the heart of London. That remarkable occurrence is the subject of this paper. It begins by describing the location – Trafalgar Square – focusing on the Fourth Plinth, a formerly empty pedestal that has in recent years hosted a series of specially commissioned artworks by contemporary sculptors, including the Iraqi-American conceptual artist, Michael Rakowitz (born 1973). His work is used to introduce the principal case study: a reduced-scale copy of the Arch of Palmyra, which was erected in Trafalgar Square in April 2016, less than a year after the original had been destroyed during the Syrian Civil War by militants known variously as ISIS, ISIL, *Daesh* or Islamic State. This prompts general reflections on the presence of the past in the present, raising issues that include a discussion of public space and monuments; the preservation, destruction and politicisation of heritage; the role of technology for the purposes of documentation and reconstruction; notions of authenticity; ethics and legal issues surrounding the global trade in cultural artefacts.



Figure 1. Palmyra – Monumental Arch – south side. (Source: Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar, <http://www.manar-al-athar.ox.ac.uk/photos.html>, April 13, 2010).

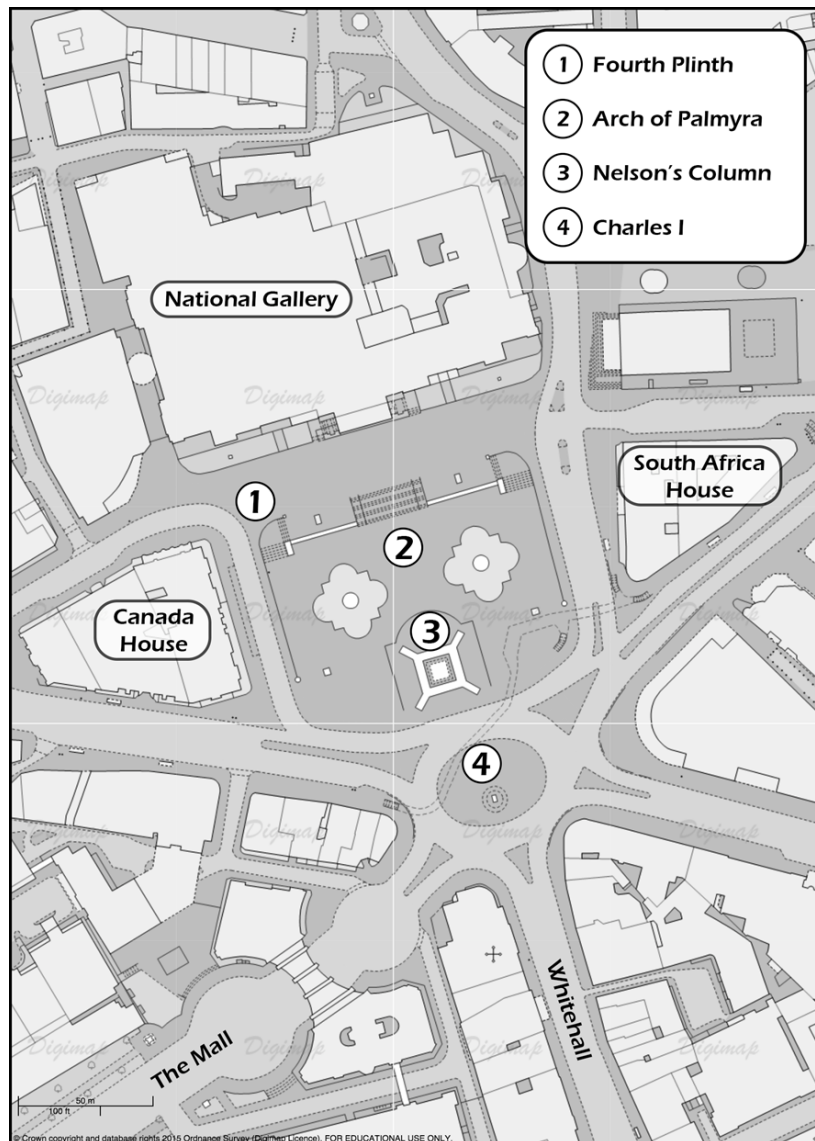


Figure 2. Map of Trafalgar Square and environs (Source: Phillip Pierce, NTU, 2017).

## PLINTHS, EMPTY AND FULL

Formed in the nineteenth century and bordered by grandiose buildings, Trafalgar Square is one of the world's most recognisable urban locations (see Figure 2). Its northern perimeter is formed by the National Gallery, which is flanked on either side by South Africa House and Canada House. This is the literal centre of the nation's capital: distances from London are measured from the spot now occupied by the seventeenth-century equestrian statue of King Charles I. He gazes to the south down a street that has become a metonym for the British establishment: Whitehall, the thoroughfare leading to the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey. This historic landscape is rich in commemorative symbolism. Trafalgar Square features monuments to monarchs and generals as well as naval officers, the most famous being the statue of Vice Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson (1758-1805). It stands atop the

lofty column that dominates a forum named after the victorious naval battle that cost the British hero his life.

Unusually, however, one of Trafalgar Square's pedestals remained empty for 150 years. Many remedies were suggested, but it was not until 1998 that a proposal was made to use it to temporarily support three specially commissioned pieces of contemporary sculpture. The most notable of these was Mark Wallinger's statue of Christ, *Ecce Homo* (1999). Placing a life-size cast of a sacred figure of peace among a secular pantheon of oversized men of war generated much discussion. The perceived success of this initiative has led to the Fourth Plinth Commission, an ongoing scheme carried out under the auspices of the elected Mayor of London. It has to date overseen the commissioning of eight artworks. At the time of writing it is adorned by David Shrigley's *(Everything is) Really Good* (2016), a colossal bronze hand making a thumbs-up gesture. The surreal proportions of the massively extended digit emphasises the artist's hope that his work 'will make the world a better place' and his belief that 'we need positive messages.' In so doing, Shrigley sought to convince a dubious and uneasy public that 'something, somewhere, is really good' (Shrigley, 2016).

That such optimism was felt necessary is indicative of prevalent global insecurities and fears about an uncertain future. These anxieties infused five works shortlisted in January 2017, two of which would be selected to succeed Shrigley's *Really Good*. These were Damián Ortega's *High Way*, a precarious arrangement of oil cans, a scaffold and ladders mounted on a truck; Raqs Media Collective's *The Emperor's Old Clothes*, a bodiless effigy swathed in a copy of the robes worn by a colonial-era statue in Delhi; a brooding, malevolent *Untitled* figure by Huma Bhabha; and Heather Phillipson's *The End*, a Pop Art-inspired composition infested with parasites and monitored by a surveillance drone. Concluding this remarkable line-up is perhaps the most thought provoking and, in the context of this paper, most relevant proposal: *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* by Michael Rakowitz (born 1973), a New York-born, Chicago-based conceptual artist of Iraqi Jewish heritage (see Figure 3).

Rakowitz's proposal for Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth shares its title with a project that has occupied the artist for more than a decade. This involves the recreation of thousands of artefacts looted from Iraq's National Museum following the US-led invasion of 2003. These substitutes are fashioned from food packaging or local newspapers and displayed alongside explanatory labels in both English and Arabic. Whilst the presentation of these bargain-basement treasures mimic museum methods, closer inspection reveals both the mundane materials and unconventional texts. A case in point is a missing fluted beaker made of gold. The replacement consists of strips of metal from date syrup cans and a display card that includes an extract from comments made by Donald Rumsfeld during a news briefing held on April 11, 2003. The United States Secretary of Defense angrily dismissed accusations that he lacked a plan to tackle lawlessness in Iraq and instead sought to deflect criticism by characterising the anarchy and looting that was then taking place as the understandable release of pent-up anger targeted at the deposed regime of Saddam Hussein. Rumsfeld then went on to make a notorious quip that Rakowitz repeated in his museum label:

*The images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over, and it's the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it 20 times, and you think, "My goodness, were there that many vases?" [Laughter.] "Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?" (cited in Mockaitis, 2012: 147).*



Figure 3. Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. (Source: Author, March 21, 2017).

Thanks to Rakowitz, one of those innumerable looted objects lives on, albeit in a new form. His act of reverse alchemy – turning gold into redundant food packaging – provides a precursor to the work he envisages for Trafalgar Square. It metamorphoses a winged bull known as a lamassu, specifically an Assyrian sculpture dating from about 700BC that served as a protective deity at the Nergal Gate leading to the city of Nineveh. In 2015, it fell victim to Islamic State (ISIL or *Daesh*) militants during their occupation of Mosul. They took a drill to the bull's face and bored out its eyes. The Iraqi archaeologist, Lamia al-Gailani found this an especially telling act, paralleling the insult '*gulla abut ainak*', meaning 'I'm going to poke your eyes out' (cited in BBC, 2016). Rakowitz's reference to an unseen foe in *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* is thus particularly apposite. It is also fitting that the dimensions of the Lamassu are commensurate with the Fourth Plinth, which was designed to accommodate an



equestrian statue. Its presence amidst the other monuments has the potential to trigger intriguing parallels. Rakowitz, for example, pointed out that some of the bronze elements of Nelson's Column were cast using metal from cannons salvaged from the wreck of HMS *Royal George* (National Gallery, 2017; cf. Mace, 2005: 97; Ward-Jackson, 2011: 279). This chimed with his own recycling. The London Lamassu would be constructed of empty cans of date syrup, just like the surrogate vase looted from Iraq's National Museum. This was intended as a deliberate reference to a once thriving industry crippled by war and insecurity:

*There used to be 30m date palms in Iraq when it was the leading exporter of dates in the world in the 70s. After the Iran-Iraq war it fell to 16m, and since the 2003 invasion it is less than 3m. The hope is that this project intersects not only the cultural tragedy but the human tragedy and the ecological tragedy, so it becomes an effigy for all those things [that] it haunts. It is supposed to be a ghost more than a reconstruction (Rakowitz cited in Brown, 2017).*

Trafalgar Square is a haunt replete with monumental ghosts of empire. It is thus a conducive milieu for the insertion of a further, intentional apparition.

This is not the first phantasm to have featured in *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. Rakowitz derived this phrase from *Aj-ibur-shapu*, the name of the processional way that passed through the Ishtar Gate. Built in c.575 BC this constituted one of several grand entrances to the ancient city of Babylon in what is today Iraq. An alternative translation of *Aj-ibur-shapu* is *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*. This provides the title of an artwork by Rakowitz first shown in 2010 at the Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt in Berlin (see Figure 4). It referenced the fact that the remains of the actual Ishtar Gate have been reassembled in the German capital's Pergamon Museum. In his multimedia response to this transition, Rakowitz points out that '[m]issing bricks were reconstructed and included among authentic relics, to recreate the grandeur of the original' (Rakowitz, 2007 to date). He also notes that the Pergamon reconstruction is not the only version in existence. In the 1980s the Iraqi authorities built a provisional, three-quarter scale wooden replica near the lost original with the intention of deploying it as the entrance to a never-built museum. Saddam Hussein used it to establish his claim to be the heir to Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. This still stands and came to international attention after US soldiers chose it as a popular site for photographs. This was due to its incorporation into a 300,000 sq m military camp built there for American and Polish regiments – a decision that resulted in extensive archaeological damage (Ruggeri, 2015; British Museum, 2004).





Figure 4. Michael Rakowitz, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* (Source: Michael Rakowitz, 2010).



Rakowitz's own reconstruction of this reconstruction is a precarious m el e of newspaper, adhesive and cardboard around a plywood armature. To recreate the characteristic blue bricks Rakowitz sourced 'colour-correct packaging of Arabic foodstuffs found in Berlin' (Rakowitz, 2010). Now preserved in the collection of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, this composition invites reflections on the fragile and vulnerable state of modern-day Iraq plus the transit of cultural heritage, goods and people. It also places truth claims under scrutiny given that what was built at Berlin's Pergamon Museum 'in the 1920s was not, and still is not, the entire gate' (Ruggeri, 2015). Rakowitz's makeshift version of the same object disturbs notions of authenticity and reveals the mutable nature of heritage. As such it provides an arch precedent for a similar act of architectural reimagining; one that conjured up the ghost of a Syrian oasis in the heart of London.

## COPY THAT

In March 2017 it was announced that Michael Rakowitz's tin can lamassu would be appearing on the Fourth Plinth the following year, to be succeeded by Heather Phillipson's *The End* in 2020. These two works had received the most plaudits, eliciting praise even from art critics who were otherwise sceptical about the whole venture (Jones, 2017). One reviewer extolled Rakowitz's 'rejoinder to iconoclasm', heralding it as an 'abject memorial' to the welter of cultural heritage being lost (Searle, 2017). Sadly, the wilful destruction of objects has a long, ignoble history. Indeed, it is tempting to perceive the epoch in which we live as having been ushered in by a glut of iconoclasm. This is brilliantly visualised in an illustration by J. Otto Seibold first published in *The New Yorker* (see Morgan, 2012: 24-25). In 2002, he was one of nine artists invited to suggest ways of filling the void left following the terrorist demolition of the World Trade Center. Seibold proposed the erection of a pair of gigantic Buddhas in reference to two such statues destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan six months prior to Al-Qaeda's coordinated attacks on the United States. In return, Seibold suggested that the alcoves that once contained the colossal Buddhas could accommodate the rebuilt Twin Towers, and that these should be used to house refugees.

Obviously, this radical idea was not so much a practical solution as a thought experiment. Seibold's insightful and inventive response confirms that conflict can be a catalyst for creativity (Sinclair, 2016). This was confirmed by another instance of iconoclasm that occurred some fifteen years after the events of 9/11. In May 2015, militants loyal to the so-called Islamic State occupied the town of Tador, just over 130 miles north-east of the Syrian capital, Damascus. From there they took control of the archaeological remains at nearby Palmyra, including the ancient Temple of Bel. The most famous structure at this UNESCO World Heritage Site was the 1,800 year-old Arch of Palmyra. Reports that it had been deliberately blown-up triggered a global outcry. In response, the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) moved swiftly to construct a replacement. The IDA's founder and director, Roger L. Michel Jr. indicated that this token of defiance was 'a political statement'; an avowal that every time such a monument was wiped out, another would arise in its place (Gayle, 2015). His ultimate wish was to see this new version assembled near the site of the lost original. The ongoing turmoil in Syria made this impossible, however. Michel therefore sought out an alternative location to place it on a temporary basis. This needed to be as conspicuous as possible in order to highlight the plight of Palmyra whilst also promoting the IDA and the causes it espoused. And so it was that a fragmentary echo from an oasis in the Syrian Desert arose in the shadow of Nelson's Column. Michel explained his choice of Trafalgar Square on the grounds that London's principal forum, with its diverse audiences





from all over the world, is ‘the crossroads of humanity, and that was what Palmyra was’ (cited in Murphy, 2016).



Figure 5. Inauguration of the Institute for Digital Archaeology's Arch of Palmyra (Source: Dr Zena Kamash FSA, April 19, 2016).

Maamoun Abdulkarim, Syria's Director-General for Antiquities and Museums, welcomed the arch's appearance in Trafalgar Square as 'a message of peace against terrorism' and 'a gesture of friendship and solidarity with people in the conflict regions of the Middle East' (Abdulkarim cited in Michel & Karenowska, 2016; see also Turner, 2016). The then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson reaffirmed these sentiments in remarks he made whilst unveiling the arch. He characterised it as a defiant retort to the nihilism and barbarism of those responsible for the demolition of the original as well as other antiquities in Syria and elsewhere. Johnson declared that 'Syria's future depends on the conservation and protection of Syria's past' (cited in Shea, 2016; see also Rielly & Addison, 2016). This, of course, discloses why insurgent groups would seek to target Palmyra. Their repeated iconoclastic attacks represent a concerted effort to 'delete such monuments from our historical record' (Michel cited in Rielly & Addison, 2016).

This explains another of the IDA's initiatives, namely the Million Image Database (MID). Described as a collaboration between UNESCO, the government of the United Arab Emirates and a range of academic partners, it aims to distribute approximately 5,000 3D-cameras to volunteers who would use them to document sites across the conflict zones of the Middle East and North Africa (MID, n.d.). By the summer of 2016 the IDA announced that its database had exceeded 250,000 records (Anon, c. 2016). In 2015 it won *Apollo Magazine's* Digital Innovation award for helping to 'galvanise an international community appalled by [that] year's destruction and uncertain how to respond' (Gray, 2015). Images from the MID collection were used to create a *Digital Rendering of the Triumphal Arch, Palmyra, Syria* (2016, 3D resin print, height 25 cm). This was shown at 'The Missing: Rebuilding the Past', an exhibition showcasing how artists and technologists can unite to thwart those intent on destroying cultural heritage (Jessica Carlisle, 2016).

The aims of the IDA are laudable. Yet it is not impervious to criticism. The wisdom of physically recreating a single architectural motif is open to debate. Unpicking the decision-making process behind this endeavour reveals that the IDA scheme underwent a number of changes in terms of substance, scale, subject and site (Richardson, 2016). It seems clear that the original plan was to replicate the straight arch at the entrance to Palmyra's Temple of Bel. *Apollo Magazine* published an image credited to the IDA showing a 3D-rendering of this structure devoid of other archaeological features and standing isolated in a desert landscape (Gray, 2015). *The Guardian* newspaper showed another IDA-credited image of the same thing from a different angle and set in Trafalgar Square (Gayle, 2015). The tiny proportions of the pedestrians wandering beneath show that this is intended to be a full-size copy. What was eventually built, however, was a two-thirds scale model of the curved Arch of Triumph that formed one end of Palmyra's colonnade. As well as being reduced in size, it is also shorn of the two lesser arches by which it was flanked (see Figure 1). Furthermore, media reports indicate that the IDA originally planned to build *two* replica Palmyra arches and unveil them simultaneously in London and Times Square in New York. The date of their inauguration – April 19, 2016 – was deliberately chosen to coincide with UNESCO World Heritage Week, although it was not officially endorsed by the United Nations agency (Willits, 2016). In the event, however, only the London version was realised. Following its Trafalgar Square appearance it was moved to Oxford, where the IDA is based. It did not get erected in the United States until September, by which time the location had been changed to a site in New York's City Hall Park, where it stayed for a week. The next destination was said to be Dubai (Potenza, 2016). However, before that it appears that it would spend time at the Museum of Archaeology in Arona, Italy (Michel, n.d.).

The sight of this diminutive double traversing the globe polarises opinion. Should it be praised as a serious and welcome endeavour? Is a shrunken arch carved in an Italian quarry any more authentic or highbrow than the specious Sphinx or petite Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas? Indeed, these kitsch examples may be fitting precursors for what can be castigated as an 'expensive publicity stunt' that seeks to grandstand the IDA and its flamboyant leader (Bevan, 2016; cf. Sinclair, 2016). Its fleeting presence in Trafalgar Square was intended to generate a debate about the potential of reproductive techniques. It undoubtedly succeeded in this objective, revealing in the process that the nature and purpose of digital technologies in the field of heritage conservation are deeply contested and fraught with challenges (Bevan, 2016). The most sustained denunciation occurred in a web posting by the Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Conservation. This not-for-profit organisation was founded in Madrid in 2009 and operates together with Factum Arte, a sister company which has since 2001 specialised in the manufacture of facsimiles. One of its productions is of a full-scale version of the burial chamber of Tutankhamun, created because conservation



concerns make the original inaccessible (Sinclair, 2016). This helped it win *Apollo Magazine's* Digital Innovation award, the year before the IDA received the same accolade (Ahmed, 2014).

One might assume a close correlation between the ethos and methods of the Institute for Digital Archaeology and the Factum Foundation. However, closer inspection reveals them to be strongly contrasting organisations fronted by very different personalities. Whereas Roger Michel is the unmistakable face of the IDA, Factum Arte's director, Adam Lowe is keen to stress that 'Factum is not about him' (Sattin, 2015). Neither man is an archaeologist. Lowe is British and a fine art graduate from the Royal College of Art whilst Michel is a practising lawyer from the United States. To his detractors, Michel comes across as a swaggering self-publicist prone to exaggeration and who has used academic credentials to lend credence to his dubious activities (Richardson, 2016; Factum Arte, n.d.). Moreover, an individual such as Michel can be seen as hindering the very causes he champions by perpetuating popular misunderstandings and expectations regarding '3D photography'. Lowe points out that, far from being a panacea, this unhelpful term is used to refer to a variety of techniques that produce very different results (Lowe, 2015).

The Factum Foundation is openly critical of what it sees are the IDA's overstated aims. Its aforementioned web posting collates a series of quotations from Roger Michel and associated media reports to argue that the IDA's claims of crafting a faithful reproduction were disingenuous. Instead, it had merely succeeded in producing 'a reduced size low resolution arch with very little detail' (Factum Arte, n.d.). It went on to point out inconsistencies in terms of the technique used and material. In November 2015, Lowe – in marked contrast to Michel – argued that the imperative was 'to document' and that deciding what to do with the collated information was a question for the future (Sattin, 2015).

So, despite their apparent similarities, Factum Foundation and the IDA differ in significant respects. And they are by no means the only organisations involved in using technology in relation to heritage. This is a congested and rapidly developing field. Lack of coordination risks duplication and the wasting of limited resources at a time of acute crisis (Bevan, 2016).

## WHAT DUST WILL RISE?

It follows, therefore, that the 2016 Arch of Triumph could never offer the final verdict on Palmyra. Nor should it. Whilst it can and should be criticised, the exercise merits praise for raising fundamental concerns regarding how best to respond to the threats facing cultural heritage. These extend far beyond high-profile attacks by so-called religious fundamentalists. For instance, a site such as Nineveh faces longstanding, chronic problems. In 2010 the Global Heritage Fund added it to nearly 200 sites that were on the verge of destruction due to a range of man-made degradations relating to insufficient management and development pressures together with looting (GHF, 2010: 15). War and conflict have undoubtedly exacerbated these phenomena, but they are not the sole cause either here or elsewhere in the region and beyond.

The challenge is, then, to evaluate what steps should be taken to safeguard and utilise vulnerable sites and damaged artefacts. Decisions need to be made regarding whether to stabilise the remaining structure, reconstruct that which has been lost or put something new in its place. These complex choices arise in relation to monuments both ancient and modern, utilitarian and symbolic. Manhattan's Ground Zero, for example, was the subject of heated



argument before the construction of a memorial, museum and skyscraper. Even more contentious is how to respond to the assaults on the Buddhas of Bamiyan. There is an extensive and ongoing discussion regarding whether or not the statues should be rebuilt (Bobin, 2015; Hegarty, 2012). In 2005, the US-based Japanese artist, Hiro Yamagata proposed using a wind and solar-powered laser system to project images into the empty alcoves. This went unrealised, although another similar scheme did briefly take place a decade later (Delman, 2015). Further complicating the matter are the new discoveries made courtesy of the 2001 attacks. These actually enhance our understanding of the dating, construction and polychromy of the figures. Large parts of the sculptures survive, raising the possibility of using this salvage to begin reconstruction through a process known as anastylosis, meaning ‘the reassembling of existing but dismembered parts’ (ICOMOS, 1964: §15). This is the only reconstructive technique that would be acceptable should the site wish to retain its UNESCO World Heritage status (Bevan, 2017; Gall, 2006).

Robert Bevan, an authority on the destruction of monuments and architecture in times of conflict, responded to Trafalgar Square’s Arch of Palmyra by making the provocative point that the decision to rebuild is a form of denial – a disavowal of ‘the ruination that bears witness to traumatic events’ (Bevan, 2016). Whenever stones are reduced to rubble, the question that inevitably follows is: *What Dust Will Rise?* This query provided the title for Michael Rakowitz’s typically inventive contribution to dOCUMENTA (13), an art exhibition held in Kassel in 2012. The venue was Kunsthalle Fridericianum, which was heavily bombed during the Second World War. Rakowitz selected books charred by these attacks and made stone copies using travertine quarried from Bamiyan. These were displayed in vitrines beside shards of the devastated Buddhas and casings from shells that the Taliban used to destroy them. Also included was a fragment of granite from the floor of the World Trade Center. All this is an acknowledgement of the sacred appeal, emotive power and memorial capacity of even the humblest sliver of debris (Harris, 2011).

Rakowitz’s artistic praxis is arguably more effective than high-tech solutions offering the chimera of absolute replication: it is impossible to mistake his sculptures for the ‘real thing’ (Jones, 2017). Rather than harking back to the elusive past, he instead invokes history by offering something new; a legacy that is symptomatic of the present and holding the promise of becoming the heritage of the future. Furthermore, there is a sense that the works he co-produces retain their link to humanity. The roots of Rakowitz’s practice are autobiographical. His grandfather was an Iraqi Jew who went into exile in 1946, moving to the United States where he established a business (Fahim, 2006). Exactly sixty years later, Rakowitz revived this entrepreneurial spirit by starting an import/export company trading in dates. The palms providing these fruits were planted in California, but dates were first cultivated in the area now known as Iraq. Thus, trade relations align with the movement of goods and people. Rakowitz’s decision to use empty date cans to revive ancient sculptures lost in the present imbues them with life, paralleling their trajectory with his own personal story.

Whilst Michael Rakowitz is the named artist of the projects he devises, his work is processual and collaborative (Volk, 2012). *What Dust Will Rise?* involved Rakowitz working alongside Afghan students and local artisans as well as the sculptor and conservator, Bert Praxenthaler. Knowledge retention and the passing on of skills are as important as the production of fresh fine art commodities. Roger Michel of the IDA has similarly acknowledged the need to join forces with indigenous workers (Michel, n.d.). He posits that the scheme to recreate the Arch of Palmyra was all about ‘restoring dignity to people’ (cited in Gayle, 2015). This stance is necessary in order to counter accusations that devoting time and resources on pastiches of totemic artefacts ignores the needs of individuals left injured, displaced and



bereft by war and conflict. In the spring of 2017, throngs of visitors to London's National Gallery were able to admire Rakowitz's Lamassu model. Meanwhile, at the site of the originating monument, hundreds of thousands of besieged Mosul residents were trapped as Iraqi forces began a bloody offensive against Islamic State. This coincided with the publication of two reports exposing the 'grave violations' perpetrated against Syria's children and the 'toxic stress' induced by six years of warfare (UNICEF, 2017; McDonald, 2017). The obscenity of being seen to prioritize inanimate things ahead of humans leads to situations where the well-being of the former takes precedence. At present there exists a sickening disparity between the treatment of Syria's people and its cultural heritage (Willits, 2016). A copy of an arch from that country was welcomed into the United States in September 2016. A few months later, a newly-elected President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13769 implementing an indefinite ban on all Syrian refugees on the grounds that their entry was 'detrimental to the interests of the United States' (E.O., 13769: §5c).

This carries disturbing echoes of a statement cited by Michael Rakowitz in his piece, *What Dust Will Rise?* In 2002, Mullah Omar was asked about the rationale for the Taliban's wanton act of iconoclasm the previous year:

*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 Buddha's destruction (Rediff, 2004).*

Michael Rakowitz's proposition *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* is reasonable. But whose superciliousness deserves to fail?

One thing is clear: human stories and object biographies entwine. Current initiatives that rely on the taking and collecting of vast numbers of digital images are dependent on droves of crowdsourced volunteers (Sinclair, 2016). And, of course, the very existence of such databases is thanks to pioneers such as Bassel Khartabil (or Safadi) (born 1981), founder of the digital archaeology and cultural development project 'New Palmyra' (<http://www.newpalmyra.org/>). In 2013 this Palestinian-born Syrian computer engineer won Index on Censorship's digital freedom award for his promotion of open-source software and web freedom. The previous year he was arrested at the behest of the Syrian government. He remains in detention, although it is possible that he has been executed. Does the existence of the pseudo Arch of Palmyra divert attention away from the grim fate of Khartabil and thousands like him? Indeed, some saw it as helping to consolidate Bashar al-Assad's tenacious grip on power (Willits, 2016). However, it could also be enlisted as a means of alerting the international community to the fact that Syrians have suffered and died at the hands of both ISIS *and* Assad's increasingly violent regime (Taylor, 2016). One name to be found among the statistics of Syria's dead is Khaled al-Asaad (1932-2015). This widely respected archaeologist dedicated his career to researching Palmyra. And it was there that the 81-year old was murdered, reportedly for refusing to tell his Islamic State captors the location of objects that he had taken into safekeeping.

Bassel Khartabil and Khaled al-Asaad are reminders that focusing on heritage does not mean ignoring human suffering. Indeed, an understanding of attitudes towards the former



can help explain the plight of so many people. The iniquities inflicted on the Buddhas of Bamiyan, for example, have been characterised as the result of ‘endless dithering, underhand rivalry, pointless discord and mistakes’ – opprobrium that could equally be levelled at the international community’s shameful treatment of Afghanistan and its inhabitants (Bobin, 2015).

## ARCHES OF TRIUMPH

Roger Michel expressed the ‘hope that visitors to [Trafalgar] Square will consider the role of physical objects in defining history and weigh carefully the question of where precisely heritage resides’ (cited in Michel & Karenowska, 2016). This article is a response to Michel’s invitation. There are no easy answers. Indeed, the most fitting response is to deploy the IDA’s Arch of Palmyra to raise further, equally contentious quandaries. This is exactly what Sam Kriss chose to do in a polemic published in the periodical, *Vice*. He ridiculed the ersatz arch for being ‘smug, hypocritical and tacky’. This argument was based on the contention that London serves as a key conduit for looted artefacts (Kriss, 2016; Willits, 2016). This matters a great deal because, away from the glare of publicity, ISIS have safeguarded and even excavated archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria to provide a lucrative source of income to support their nefarious activities (Chmaytelli, 2017).



Figure 6. London in War Time: Thames Embankment (Cleopatra’s Needle)  
(Source: Author, 1917).

A historical precedent for the trade in antiquities is Cleopatra’s Needle, which Kriss regards as a totem for the misguided tradition of imagining the West as ‘guardians of universal culture’ – a fallacy that he felt was given legitimacy by the arch (Kriss, 2016).

Modern-day London and New York – like Paris – possess ancient Egyptian obelisks. In traversing two of these so-called ‘world cities’, the copy of the Palmyra Arch can be seen as following the trajectory of innumerable dubiously acquired antiquities, many of which now take pride of place in the public and private collections of the rich and powerful. London’s most famous Egyptian trophy was erected beside the River Thames in 1878, and over the intervening years the obelisk has been imbued with new meanings, some of which are recorded on supplementary inscriptions. One such plaque transforms it into an analogue of the column in Trafalgar Square by extolling the virtues of ‘Viscount Nelson of the Nile’ (Ward-Jackson, 2011: 274, 316-320). In addition to conceptual shifts, the obelisk has also physically changed, including the addition of new-fangled bronze sphinxes and a pedestal. These were damaged by German bombs dropped during the First World War. A metal panel emphasises that these scars have been retained to testify to this suffering. The fact that Cleopatra’s Needle and the people of its adopted homeland overcame this onslaught bolstered the obelisk’s status as a British icon (see Figure 6).

It is therefore highly improbable that this antiquity will ever return ‘home’ to Egypt. But if a faithful copy was to be made for this purpose, should it bear witness to its time spent in Britain? To do so would align it with what Robert Bevan terms ‘critical reconstruction’, defined here as occurring ‘where the cracks and fissures and layers of experience are incorporated as memories into the rebuilt fabric of a monument’. Thus an ‘authentic’ version of London’s Cleopatra’s Needle would feature ‘layers of wartime damage’ (Bevan, 2016).

A contrary approach would eschew arresting an artefact at an arbitrary moment in time. Take the Arch of Palmyra, for example. Copious archives of artistic depictions and historical photographs capture it in various states of preservation. Consequently, the object has existed in multiple guises through recorded history. An asynchronous composite reconstruction would retain memories of the life of the monument as opposed to simply how it just happened to have been constituted before its evisceration. Because, perversely, freezing the Arch of Palmyra at the juncture of its destruction risks playing into the hands of its nemesis. It is a crowning irony that a movement seeking to deprive other groups of their monuments should be gifted a memorial to their destructiveness. Seen in this light, the IDA has succeeded in manufacturing a grotesque Duchampian readymade that is the fulfilment of ISIS’s wishes.

Regrettably, such pessimistic interpretations are not restricted to the tangible rendering of the missing monument. This is intimated by an edition of *The Spectator* magazine dated February 18, 2017 (see Figure 7). The cover is devoted to Morten Mørland’s oxymoronic cartoon depiction of a fictitious ISIS statue. This is shown being yanked off its pedestal by a metal chain noosed around its idiotic neck. The masked figure wielding a blood-splattered knife parodies an infamous sculpture of Saddam Hussein that once stood with arm outstretched in Baghdad’s Firdos Square. Its orchestrated toppling by United States Marines on April 9, 2003 was celebrated as an instance of just and legitimate iconoclasm. Nevertheless, this symbolic victory unleashed the above-mentioned lawlessness and looting so heartlessly laughed-off by Donald Rumsfeld. *The Spectator*’s updated cartoon version invoked this debacle in order to caution against a too hasty celebration of ISIS’s imminent demise. Defeat on the battlefield would simply shift the theatre of war to the internet, meaning that the militants’ online propaganda now circulates the web alongside careful 3D renderings of the monuments they destroy. The proclamation of a ‘virtual caliphate’ was announced by ISIS on social media under a rubric that might almost be the title of a Michael Rakowitz artwork: ‘The caliphate will not perish’ (cited in Wood, 2017: 11).





Figure 7. Isis's last stand (Source: Morten Mørland / *The Spectator*, February 18, 2017).

Fortunately, a more positive conclusion is possible. ISIS is definitely not alone in seeking to use ancient symbols as props for modern-day political theatre (Willits, 2016; Taylor, 2016). The meaning of a given monument is contextual. It will have alternative connotations at different times and in changed physical circumstances (Burch, 2016). London's so-called Cleopatra's Needle shows how an Egyptian obelisk has been anglicised courtesy of spatial and temporal shifts. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the IDA's Arch of Palmyra materialised in Trafalgar Square at a time when the United Kingdom had still not ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two protocols. The UK was the exception among active military world powers in failing to do so (Stone, 2016). A legislative bill to remedy this omission was tabled in May 2016 as part of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill (HL, 2016). A briefing paper setting out the ratification plans included a photograph of sunset over Palmyra on its cover (Woodhouse, 2015). This illustrates the extent to which the appearance of the arch in Trafalgar Square served British interests. Its arrival in London presaged a putative shift in policy whilst conveniently giving the impression that Britain had always respected the tenets of the Hague Convention, despite decades of prevarication. This finally came to an end on February 20, 2017 – the day on which the House of Commons passed the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Act. This legislation entered into law three days later when the bill received Royal Assent (Adams, 2017). The sovereign granting her acquiescence was Queen Elizabeth II, a nonagenarian who had recently celebrated her sapphire jubilee – meaning that she is now





the longest reigning monarch in British history. Upon her death the saga of the Fourth Plinth will in all probability draw to a close (Ward-Jackson, 2011: 272). A bronze equestrian statue of the late-lamented horse-loving queen is destined to one day appear on that pedestal. It will gaze down in perpetuity on the spot where a modern copy of an ancient arch once stood. Less than a year after this fleeting cameo appearance, Britain had belatedly ratified the Hague Convention. At long last it is now an offence under UK law 'for a person to deal in unlawfully exported cultural property' (CPACA, 2017: §17.1). In the final analysis, the fact that it played a small part in bringing this about means that, for all its faults, Trafalgar Square's Arch of Palmyra deserves to be remembered and celebrated as a worthwhile endeavour.



Figure 8. Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*  
(Source: Michael Rakowitz, 2016).



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