



AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL RAKOWITZ BY PETER ELEEY

PRODUCTS SOLD AT DAVISONS & CO. MANUFACTURES REPRESENTATIVE IMPORT/EXPORT COMPANY.
OCTOBER 1 – DECEMBER 10, 2006 / 529 ATLANTIC AVENUE BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
PROJECT PRESENTED AND PRODUCED BY CREATIVE TIME, NEW YORK
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LOMBARD-FREID PROJECTS, NEW YORK



WE SELL
IRAQI
DATES







AL FAREZ COMPANY FOR TRADING AND CONTRACTING

Client:

Attn: Michael Daoud Rakowitz
Proprietor, Davisons & Co.

New York-USA

AL FAREZ Co.

P.O. Box 6285
Al Mansour, Baghdad
Iraq

Offer No.: 113A-06N
Compiler: SO
Telephone: 5426432
Mobile: 07901301594
eMail: alfarezco@hotmail.com
Date: 7 / 9 / 2005

Dear Sirs,

No.	Description	Qty	Unit Price USD
1	Khastawee Date from Hella region packing under very good conditions in cartoon box with capacity not less than 5 Kg and completely closed from all sides	1 Ton	3,400.00
2	Shipping from Baghdad to USA by Air Freight		3,000.00
Total Offer Price in US Dollars			6,400.00

Commercial Terms

Please find below our commercial terms and conditions:-

Delivery: 3 Weeks.

Payment method: 30% in advance, 70% prior to shipment

Offer validity: 1 Month.

Origin: Hella / Iraq.

If you have any questions or clarifications, please do not hesitate to contact us.

ALFAREZ Company
Trading and Contracting



Mher Ibrahim
General Manager



P.O. Box 6285 Baghdad, Iraq
Tel.: 5426432 - 5427816
E-mail: alfarezco@hotmail.com

1 / 1

ALFAREZ Co.

P.O. Box 6285 Al-Mansour, Baghdad, Iraq Tel:+964 1 542 6432 Cell:+964 7901 301594
E-mail: alfarezco@hotmail.com URL: www.alfarez.com

In 2006, as part of Creative Time's *Who Cares* initiative, Michael Rakowitz re-opened Davisons & Co., the import-export business operated in Baghdad by his Iraqi-Jewish grandfather. After the family was exiled from Iraq in 1946 and settled in the United States, the business found a new home in New York City. Davisons & Co. closed in 1963.

PETER ELEEY: *Return* is a complicated project to describe, but its story is so wonderful. Can we start at the beginning, whenever that would have been?

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ: There is a Brooklyn store called Sahadi Importing Co. that is one of New York City's most celebrated Middle Eastern and international groceries. They've been around since 1930; Sahadi's was one of the stores my grandparents frequented when they first arrived in New York from Baghdad in the 1940s. During one particular visit, I spotted a can labeled 'Second House Products Date Syrup', listed on the back as 'Product of Lebanon'. I was intrigued by this, as date syrup, or *silan*, features quite prominently in many Iraqi Jewish customs.

My mother told us that my grandfather used to make the *silan* himself, pressing the dates using a type of stone mortar and pestle. He left behind a bit that was refrigerated after he died and once this was finished, my mother would buy whatever was available, usually several brands from Israel. And every year we would hear how it just wasn't as good as my grandfather's.

When I brought the can of date syrup to the cash register, Charlie Sahadi, the owner of the store and a friend, told me, 'Your mother's going to love this. It's from Baghdad'. The date syrup is processed in the Iraqi capital, but driven over the border into Syria, where it gets packed and then driven into Lebanon, where it is labeled and then exported to the rest of the world. From 1990 until May 2003, this was one method that Iraqi companies used in order to circumvent the UN sanctions. When I asked why it was still in practice in August 2004, well over one year since the sanctions were dropped on May 22, 2003, Charlie replied that prohibitive customs inspection charges for any freight bearing the origin of Iraq were to blame, and it was just too much of a risk. Any products coming from Iraq would be designated for what is called 'intensive search', the cost of which is charged to the importer, often in excess of 3,500 USD. And this is before it even reaches the importer's warehouse, where it must then be examined by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) before it can be released.

529

DAVISON'S & CO.
Manufacturers Representatives
Import-Export

دیفیسونز و شرکاؤہ
ممثلو المصنعين
استيراد وتصدير

Monday 10:30 AM - 7 PM
Tuesday 10:30 AM - 7 PM
Wednesday Closed
Thursday 10:30 AM - 7 PM
Friday 10:30 AM - 7 PM
Saturday 10:30 AM - 7 PM
Sunday 10:30 AM - 7 PM

DAV



Michael Kalowicz

منا بيع
تصدير
لغرافي

WE SE
IRAC
DATE

DAVISONSONS & CO.

Manufacturers
Representatives
Import Export

دیفيندنتز وشركاؤه
مصنعي المصنعين
استيراد وتصدير



Portrait of a man in a suit, likely the founder or a representative of Davisonsons & Co.

شحن
مجاناً
إلى العراق

FREE
SHIPPING
TO IRAQ

ATLANTIC GARDENS

After this impromptu first lesson on importing, I decided to investigate further the history of Iraqi exports beyond oil. The date syrup led me to dates, which were legendary in Iraq, renowned as being the best in the world and with a yield of over 600 different varieties. In the 1970s, Iraq was the chief exporter of dates in the world, and it accounted for their second largest economy next to oil. I began trying, unsuccessfully, to import Iraqi dates for the first time in decades. When I contacted the Department of Agriculture and explained that I was new, they laughed and advised that I could be waiting for half a year to get Iraqi dates. 'Maybe bring in a few things from Canada', they said. 'Then, in time, you can bring in stuff from somewhere a little more difficult, like Mexico.' When I asked Charlie Sahadi for help, he told me, 'It's nice what you want to do, but it's really bad business'. To which I replied, 'Yes, I know, but it's really good art'. As an experiment, Sahadi's agreed to support the initial shipment and provided me with access to their customs broker. Al Farez, the company I was dealing with in Baghdad, also regarded the transaction as an experiment, as Bassam, the General Manager, told me he had plenty of experience bringing things into Iraq but had never sent anything out to the US. Al Farez managed to send ten new boxes of dates via DHL. When the dates arrived in the US, they went through numerous delays and holds from US Customs, Homeland Security, USFDA, and USDA. It was quarantined and designated for intensive search. Pat Whelan, the managing director of Sahadi's Fine Foods, couldn't believe it. After everything the shipment went through in the Middle East, I wanted to believe it would be easy once it got to the USA. All along, the project was meant to interrogate the prohibitive laws and agencies that make this type of transaction impossible. But suddenly, I was hoping that I would be proven wrong. No chance. In the end, it took 21 days for the dates to be released. And that was with Pat and his customs broker pulling every string they could along the way. On 5 December 2006, I went to Sahadi's warehouse in Sunset Park to pick up the dates. Pat told me that if this was the initial one-ton shipment, which was 200 boxes, then he and I would be 'in hell, and we're still speaking in February about getting the dates released from the FDA'. That would have been after the dates had spoiled.



PRODUCTS SOLD AT DAVISON'S & CO. MANUFACTURES REPRESENTATIVE IMPORT/EXPORT COMPANY. FROM TOP LEFT TO TOP RIGHT: ZIYAD BROTHERS IMPORTING, LOCATED IN CICERO, ILLINOIS, IMPORTS ITS OWN BRAND OF "IRAQI DATE SYRUP." THE LABEL STATES "PACKED IN LEBANON."

DATE SYRUP FROM SECOND HOUSE PRODUCTS, LOCATED IN ANTELIAS, LEBANON. THIS BRAND HAS BEEN IMPORTED INTO THE UNITED STATES OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS. THE SYRUP IS ACTUALLY MADE IN BAGHDAD.

SULTAN BRAND IS OWNED BY ZIYAD BROTHERS IMPORTING COMPANY, BASED IN CICERO, ILLINOIS. THE MAAMOUL COOKIES ARE MADE IN SAUDI ARABIA BUT ARE BELIEVED TO USE IRAQI DATES FOR THE FILLING EVEN THOUGH IT CLAIMS TO BE MADE "WITH SELECTED SAUDI DATES."

BASRA DATE SYRUP IS PRODUCED IN BASRA, IRAQ AND LISTS THE NETHERLANDS AS THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN. IT IS UNKNOWN WHERE IT IS PACKED AND LABELED.

السمر
العراقي

IRAQI DATES
COMING SOON

Daivsons & Co. is pleased to announce the arrival of one box of Iraqi Dates to be available in the city of New York, starting on October 1st. We received word that we may be back this week, across the border where they will include a delay in shipping to Jordan due to the current situation there ship to JFE International. As a result, we have to ship via Egypt Air. We request the delay to be US Customs and Border Patrol and the Homeland Security, ensuring our product is safe to consume, the dates will be available and we will be able to accommodate shipping procedures and to make and receive a lot.

WE SELL
IRAQI
DATES



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PE: Are there material limits to where the artwork ends? For example, are the DHL boxes in which the dates arrived part of the art? Are the brown bags printed with your logo part of it, or just ephemera?

MR: No, for me there are no material limits. The entire project is framed within a poetic gesture and thus everything contained within it becomes an element of the work. The DHL boxes for me operate on a couple of levels. I am Jewish, and went to Hebrew school in the late 1970s and the 80s. I was learning about biblical stories, and when I saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* it was quite an experience for me: here in the movie was a reconstruction of something that featured so heavily in my religious background: the ark of the covenant. So, when the dates arrived, the DHL boxes – like the ark – had this reverence about them because of what they contained. In fact, I feel the same way about the truck that drove the dates from Baghdad, to the Jordanian border, and into Syria. It seems almost comical, because I remember Pat at Sahadi's telling ABC Television when they wanted to film the dates arriving at his warehouse that, 'This isn't the Ark of the Covenant'. But this is a case where the mundane, like the dates themselves, is raised to the level of the sacred.

PE: As with other pieces of yours, *Return* raises a number of questions that are common to relational projects in which meaning is located around a transaction. How are we to judge the 'success' of this project? How much do the various audiences for the project factor into such an evaluation? Does it matter how many people came to the store, or ordered dates? Is it about the quality of those interactions? Or is it about the quality of the larger transaction between you and Al Farez Co.? Or about everything that happened in between?

MR: Without wanting to sound meaningless, I'll say it's all of those things. The project was formed by and responded to an ever-developing narrative that punctured so many realms: the global, the local and the very personal, all of which was available to the audience. Certainly, the impossibility of the transaction features as a critical moment within the work. If the dates were available and were relatively easy to import, there would be no reason to build a project around their purchase. But the cultural invisibility in the US of all things Iraqi outside the context of war (i.e., there are no Iraqi restaurants in New York City) served as a point of departure for this work. As far as establishing some criteria to judge the success of this project, I don't know how. The project went through several incarnations before it was presented through Creative Time. Both instances, in 2004 and 2005, featured free shipping to Iraq provided to members of the Iraqi diaspora residing in the US.

A handful of people interacted with the work and I felt it was semi-successful. With more involvement and engagement with a larger number of people, the project's meaning would have inevitably become richer. But that's one of the risks in a project that operates as an open system. There are a number of possible outcomes, and silence or an absence of interaction is one of those possibilities. Regarding your question about the quality of the larger transaction with Al Farez Co., it is worth noting that 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 US. 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. It was lovely and poetic.

Many companies asked me what my grandfather's surname was, before he fled Iraq in 1946. I told them it was Daoud. More than one replied, 'Welcome back, Daoud', and many of them referred to me by that name instead of Michael. This project, like my *paraSITE*, cast an extensive web that complicated yet enriched its embodiment. My mother was deeply moved when I read her an e-mail from a man named Moayad, a date seller in Baghdad who wrote, 'It would be our pleasure to do business with the son of our city's daughter'. Items like the aforementioned e-mails I described to you were printed out and were on view (with permission from the correspondents) on the store's countertop, underneath a piece of Plexiglas.

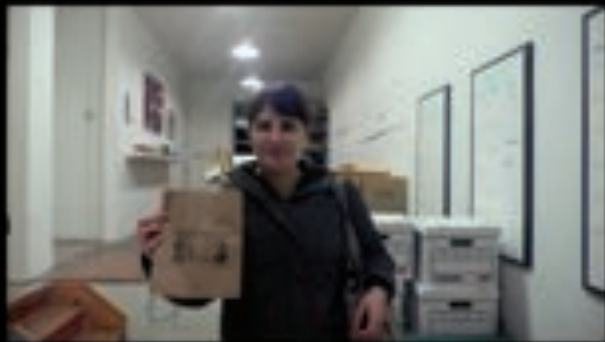
PE: Can you describe the store more generally?

MR: For our project together, *Return* was presented in its most ambitious context to date – a fully functioning storefront amid the commercial strip on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, the heart of New York City's Arab community. The store itself was very carefully designed and appeared as a cross between installation art, a museum devoted to the history of the Iraqi date industry, a neighborhood grocery, and a Fed Ex shipping centre. Like any store, people would walk in, see what was offered, ask questions, linger, etc. 'Free Shipping to Iraq' and 'We Sell Iraqi Dates' were loudly broadcast to the public in the window signage. Like the dates interrogating the governmental bureaucracies that impede their entry to the US, the word 'Iraq' on a commercial establishment instigated a moment of delay for the pedestrian who suddenly would stop and try to figure out why a business would print that word on its masthead. The next step usually involved entering the store and asking what this was all about.

People came in, asked questions, and would hear stories. I kept the shop open four days a week and would engage customers in conversation. They asked questions about my family's history, my grandfather's business in Iraq, the Jewish community in Baghdad, the current war, and why the taste of Iraqi dates was so different from those from other countries. By the time the store opened, there was already a powerful narrative to tell about the dates' travel on the way to the store. The anticipation of their arrival, and the very possible failure of the attempted import, was a huge factor in this project's existence as a time-based work and an affiliated narrative that was important to tell. There was a dark poetry present, and I loved the fact that many of my regular customers (it is worth noting that the bulk of the audience were neighborhood residents, not just a cultural audience) came in for frequent updates, were really affected, and were pulling for the dates to make it through.

PE: What occurred between the packing of the original shipment and the eventual arrival of the smaller shipment in New York?

MR: In the middle of September 2006, 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. In late September, the dates came down off the tree. Al Farez sent me pictures of the harvest, which I displayed in my store. The boxes were packed and ready to ship by truck from Baghdad to Amman by the beginning of October. From Jordan, they were to receive a direct flight to JFK airport. This type of freight would be prohibitively expensive, but I had 'cultural' money to work with – the only way to really make this 'business' transaction possible. The truck traveled along the highway between Baghdad and Amman, which is the most dangerous road in the country. It then waited at the border for four days, as hundreds of thousands of Iraqis tried to flee the worsening sectarian violence. Having finally reached the checkpoint, the Jordanian border guards informed the driver that he needed a Radiation Scan Certificate, declaring the dates free from contamination. This seemed to corroborate a wide-spread belief that depleted uranium was used during the war. In the meantime, the store opened in Brooklyn on October 1, selling four California varieties derived from Iraqi seed.



RETURN (BROOKLYN), 2006
 'PHOTOS OF CUSTOMERS HOLDING UP THEIR BAGS PROUDLY DISPLAYING THE IRAQI DATES THEY PURCHASED. THESE WERE REQUESTED BY AL FAREZ CO. WHEN I TOLD THEM HOW HAPPY CUSTOMERS WERE ABOUT THE DATES AND THE WAY THEY TASTED, BASSAM (AL FAREZ'S REPRESENTATIVE USING A PSEUDONYM IN ALL ARTICLES, FOR SECURITY REASONS) WROTE ASKING IF I COULD SEND PICTURES OF THE PEOPLE BUYING THE DATES. I THOUGHT THIS WAS A LOVELY IDEA AND BOOK-ENDED NICELY WITH THE BEGINNING OF THE TRANSACTION WHEN THE FARMER WAS SENDING ME THE PHOTOS OF THE DATES BEING HARVESTED.'

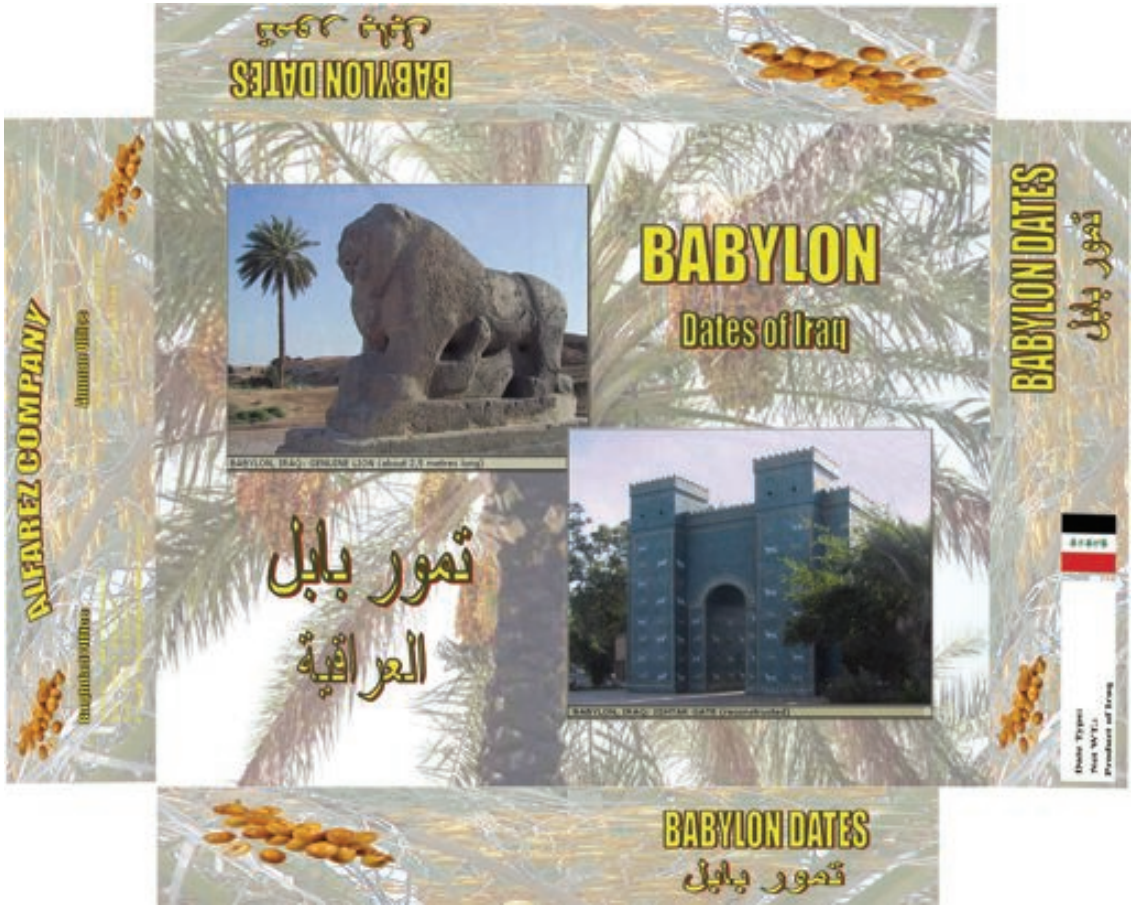
The truck returned to Baghdad, got its radiation certificate, and waited at the border for another few days; this time the Jordanians flatly refused the cargo, stating it was a security concern. The poor truck driver then headed north to Syria, drove right through the border, and dropped off the dates at the airport in Damascus, where the new plan was to get it on a plane to Egypt, then onward to the US. After the truck driver left, Syrian authorities at the airport phoned Al Farez in Amman and explained that the driver had failed to fill out a certain form; it would cost us 1,200 USD to have them process it themselves and release it to the corresponding airline. Bassam refused to pay. 'Eventually', he said, 'these large stacks of boxes of dates will be blocking something they need'. We actually had to wait for our dates to become a physical obstacle.

The shipment was held for a week, and was then discovered to be so blistered from the three hot weeks in the truck that Al Farez deemed it unacceptable for export. So the shipment died in Syria.

After the initial shipment of dates met its untimely end in Damascus, Al Farez remained determined to stock my store. Bassam arranged for ten boxes of dates to be airlifted out of Baghdad direct to New York City via DHL, for a steep price. The dates ended up being released after three weeks, during which time the small parcel underwent inspections from Homeland Security, US Customs and Border Patrol, the USFDA and the USDA. Some US Customs agents briefly and incorrectly decided that the shipment needed to be returned – they believed it was illegal since we were 'at war with Iraq'. Our customs broker, incredulous, explained to them that we were no longer at war with Iraq and were in fact supposed to be rebuilding the country.

We received four different types of dates: Azraq, Ashrase, Ibraheme, and Kheyara, which was voted the best date in all of Iraq in 2005. And I can attest, without any emotional bias, that these dates were the best I had ever tasted in my life.

All along, the story and its daily updates were communicated to customers frequenting the store, asking when the dates would arrive. The dates suddenly became a surrogate, traveling the same path as Iraqi refugees, who are themselves mostly turned away by Jordan, and who then try their luck in Syria in an attempt to get to Egypt. Tragically, many never reach their destination. So, suddenly, a business that was meant to illuminate something very specific on the US side of the transaction was illustrating a story that most people in the States were not hearing, and the store became a place where that crisis and its affiliated narrative was being disseminated – hardly the exchange a customer would expect.



RETURN (BROOKLYN), 2006
 'THE BABYLON DATE BOX ARTWORK WAS DESIGNED BY AL FAREZ. I TOLD THEM THIS WAS THE FIRST PRODUCT IN THREE DECADES THAT WOULD LIST PRODUCT OF IRAQ IN 30 YEARS AND THEY COULD SAY WHATEVER THEY WANTED TO SAY WITH THE PACKAGING. THE RESULT IS AN ART HISTORY LESSON: THE LION OF BABYLON, LISTED AS 'GENUINE LION.' THAT'S STILL THERE, NEAR THE CITY OF HILLA WHERE THE DATES ARE FROM. BELOW, IT SAYS 'ISHTAR GATE: RECONSTRUCTED.' INDEED IT WAS, BY THE GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ IN THE 1950S. THE ORIGINAL WAS TAKEN, BY A FOREIGN POWER. ROBERT KOLDEWEY, A GERMAN ARCHEOLOGIST EXCAVATED THE ORIGINAL GATE AND TRANSPORTED IT BRICK BY BRICK TO BERLIN WHERE IT STANDS INSIDE THE PERGAMON MUSEUM. THE DATES LOUDLY ANNOUNCE THEMSELVES AS PRODUCT OF IRAQ. THEY EVEN PRINT THE FLAG.'

PE: How much did you explain to your partners in Iraq – both the growers and those transporting the dates – about the nature of the project? Did they know it was an artwork, as much as a business effort? If so, did they have any thoughts, feelings or questions about that?

MR: I was very up front and direct with Al Farez Co. and with Sahadi Fine Foods. The first e-mail that I sent to make contact with potential date suppliers made clear that the store was temporary, and that the store existed as a cultural project. I explained to Bassam that I am an artist and that my primary source of income was generated from my position as an Associate Professor at Northwestern University. He remarked that it was yet one more thing we had in common, as he had been a professor at the Technical University of Baghdad before the war started and that he hoped to return one day, though he wasn't optimistic. Davisons & Co. had been legitimately reopened since October 2004, and I explained to all parties that while the store in Brooklyn was temporary, I would continue to work as a Manufacturer's Representative (one of the functions of my grandfather's import-export company) for businesses like Al Farez and attempt to set up future deals with US companies. And I am keen to do that, it's something I have been pursuing all the while, but it is not necessarily part of the art. I think that has more to do with being genuinely interested in seeing a sustainable relationship develop – say between Sahadi's and Al Farez – as a reverberation from this project.

PE: And does that seem feasible?

MR: The framework exists in that companies and consumers are interested in the possibility of future shipments of the Iraqi dates for retail sale in New York and elsewhere. But feasibility is a whole other matter.

The ten boxes were meant to precede another 75 boxes of dates, the amount Al Farez wanted to send over to replace the 200 that never made it out of Syria. Both Pat and I were hopeful this would happen in just a matter of time. It's still a possibility, but Pat and his customs broker are still determining if they can do it. They fully supported the initiative, and were as frustrated as I with the absurd bureaucracy that impedes the presence of a 'product of Iraq'. But they need to determine if a larger shipment would lead to more problems than they can afford to take on. Also, they don't have a large Iraqi clientele, as there are currently less than 1,000 Iraqis in New York City.

PE: Are there other continuing activities for Davisons & Co.?

MR: I am involved in talks about bringing in a second shipment with Ziyad Brothers Importing in Chicago, Illinois, a city where there is a significant Iraqi population. They have responded positively to the samples I have in refrigerated storage, and I am also distributing samples to several suppliers in Dearborn, Michigan, which boasts the largest Iraqi population outside Iraq. This deal will most likely happen in September and October 2007, and will feature as one of my contributions to the Istanbul Biennial, with the dates passing through the Turkish city on their way to the US – a processional.

Furthermore, I continue to get e-mails from people across the country who have found out about the project through the various press items that have turned up on CBSnews.com. Al Farez Co. has also received inquiries from companies and people here in the US. Some are major importers and spice suppliers (I cannot name them yet) who are interested in investing in a second shipment as an act of solidarity in support of the Iraqi people. One woman from Nebraska sent me an e-mail asking if she could purchase an empty box of the dates, even though she knew they were all gone. She loved the artwork on the box and the story of the dates' journey, and wanted to pay the full price, as if the box was full of dates, as an act of support.

PE: Did you ever meet Bassam face-to-face?

MR: I traveled to Amman, Jordan to meet with Bassam and his colleague Sameer to discuss further shipments, and to finally meet in person, as we'd become close through this process. While there, they told me they had seen some of my other projects online that they found interesting. They'd also kept up with the store blog (www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_rakowitz_blog.html), which was updated every week and gave insight into the narrative's development throughout the project's run, and they remarked how amazing the story was to read from start to finish. We were all a part of it, and it was very meaningful to see it operate on these two levels of the artistic and the real.

PE: The store also continued its previous function from its first presentation at the Jamaica Center for the Arts (2004) in which you allowed expatriate Iraqis to send shipments back to Iraq free of charge, employing the exhibition budget to pay the freight costs. Was this advertised to the local Arab community? And how many people ended up using the service?



RETURN (BROOKLYN), 2006

'THIS SHOWS ME IN THE STORE PACKING DATES FOR AN IRAQI-JEWISH MAN NAMED SHAMOON, WEARING A TRENCH COAT AND RAIN-HAT IN THE PICTURE. SHAMOON FLED IRAQ IN 1960 AND DEFINES HIMSELF AS IRAQI. HE IS HEARTBROKEN AND DEVASTATED BY ALL THE LOSS IRAQ HAS ENDURED OVER THE YEARS: THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR, THE 1991 GULF WAR, AND THE 2003 US INVASION, WHICH HE STAUNCHLY OPPOSED. HE REMEMBERS IRAQI DATES TO BE THE BEST IN THE WORLD AND HADN'T HAD ONE SINCE HE LEFT. ON THIS OCCASION, HE PLACED ONE IN HIS MOUTH, CLOSED HIS EYES AND SOFTLY SAID, "THIS IS 46 YEARS IN THE MAKING".'

تاريخ حديث للتمر



MR: It was advertised to the local Arab community in a free Arabic-English newspaper called *Aramica* that is distributed in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. Three people ended up using the service the first time I offered it. One person sent a bootleg CD-rom copy of Microsoft Office 98; another person sent a battery for a Nokia cell phone that was no longer available in Baghdad (he bought it on eBay); and another person sent a paperback novel – all small items, as it was only a drop box, located in a Korean-owned import-export business.

In January, 2005, I continued the project at the Longwood Art Gallery, again using the exhibition budget (this time for a solo show) to provide free shipping. This time there was a much larger space to accommodate the work, and the installation had the feel of a quotidian Iraqi shipping centre. In Brooklyn, for our project, we packed approximately 12 boxes worth of goods to send out, including shipments of medical textbooks, clothing, toys and two strollers.

PE: I had also raised with you the possibility of allowing military families with family members serving in Iraq to mail packages to their bases free of charge. You saw in this the chance for a military family member to interact with an Iraqi in the store, and the complexities of ‘home’ and ‘absence’ inherent in that interaction. But I realised I never asked you – did any military families use the service? And how did they find out about it?

MR: Unfortunately, this never came to fruition. There were a number of reasons. Firstly, I wanted to advertise in the *Military Times* and the *Army Times*, which get wide distribution in the US and at overseas bases. I also wanted to advertise on their website. Their prices were exorbitant and it was just impossible, given the overall budget for the project had to service not only the store’s design and upkeep, but also the shipment of dates and related charges.

Secondly, when I sent an e-mail around to different blogs and sites devoted to military families and also veterans’ associations, I was told that, although they appreciated the gesture, there were already organizations like the USO that were doing this for free.

PE: One of the greatest aspects of the project for me was being able to buy a small bag of dates (actually big, in comparison to what you were allowing customers to purchase, given the quantities you ended up with) as a Christmas present for my cousin, who had just returned from serving a tour in Fallujah as a Navy medic right around the time we got the dates. I don’t think he had any Iraqi food the entire time he was there. He had to come all the way back home to get a taste of Iraq, and I still remember the look on his face when he tasted one.

MR: That's really interesting, and actually echoes a story told to me by one of my repeat customers named Chuck, who had a friend in the Army who was based in Baghdad. He had exchanged correspondence with him and told him about the store and our endeavor to import the dates. His friend replied, saying he knew nothing about Iraqi cuisine or the renowned dates, and that he and his fellow soldiers were pretty much eating only what was available at the canteen: burgers, fried chicken, pizza and pastas. Chuck decided to reserve an entire box to send to his friend so that he could taste Iraqi dates. When the large shipment did not materialize, he ended up buying a bag (I was as generous with him as I was with you) with four Iraqi varieties to send to his friend. It is a nice mirroring of all the absurdities at play in this project that a soldier stationed in Iraq had to have a friend in the US buy these very hard to find Iraqi dates in Brooklyn and send them over there to enjoy. But you'll find that there are a few stories online – some posted by soldiers on various blogs – about the way in which many Iraqi citizens would bring dates for the soldiers to sample. When they saw how much the soldiers enjoyed them, they would go gather more varieties and take pleasure in this sharing of a fruit that holds very important symbolic meaning as a harbinger for good things to come. When you and I first met in December 2005, I told you that there were 450 varieties of Iraqi dates. Last summer, I found out that the number increased to 627, and this was a figure determined by an older US serviceman. He had posted this on a blog about his current activities. In 2005, he was given the opportunity by the commanding authorities to come up with a new job for himself. Being an expert agriculturalist, he decided he wanted to use his expertise to help Iraqi farmers. There are all these great photos of him with date farmers, helping to revive damaged orchards, standing next to new equipment, etc. And while I was in Sharjah, someone who works for the municipality, planting date palms, told me that the current number is actually 629 in Iraq. It's nice to know that something good and sweet might be increasing in numbers over there.

The names of the employees at Al Farez Co. have been changed to ensure their and their family's security.

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ is an artist and Associate Professor in Art Theory and Practice at the Northwestern University, Chicago. His recent shows include *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, Lombard-Freid, New York (2007) and *Return with Creative Time* (2006). He has participated in group shows including *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art*, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (2005) and in the *Sharjah Biennial 8*, UAE (2007).

PETER ELEEY has recently joined the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, as Visual Arts Curator. Between 2002–7, he was Curator and Producer at New York's Creative Time where he organised projects with artists including Cai Guo-Qiang, Jenny Holzer, Paul Chan, Haluk Akakçe, Doug Aitken, and Michael Rakowitz. For this interview, he speaks with Rakowitz about the project the artist realized with Creative Time in Fall 2006.