

## Excerpt from the interview “Q & A WITH MICHAEL RAKOWITZ”

**AC: According to a *Frieze* magazine article, you once did a performance called *The Visionaries* where you walked around the streets of Budapest ‘wearing a mobile architecture studio’ during the time when the city was undergoing a period of urban renewal and asked people to propose ideas for their own version of the dream city. Could you say a bit about this process and your initial motivation for this project?**

MR: When I got to Budapest in 2006 for a residency held in conjunction with an exhibition I was having at Trafo Gallery, the national elections were happening so campaign posters were being plastered all over the city, mounted on these crappy pieces of particleboard amidst the demolition that was happening everywhere – when I first saw them, I was taken at just how *pathetic* these things looked. The inspiration for the mobile architecture studio really came from these makeshift ‘platforms for communication’. At the same time, I was also thinking of street art and the kiosks which were made by Russian Constructivist artists such as Rodchenko and Lissitzky.

During the performance, I walked around the city wearing this heavy sandwich board which I could flip over and turn into a portable drafting ‘studio’ when I stopped to talk to people about the project. We would then sit down and make up plans and drawings for what they thought the city could improve on. The performance was kind of a response to the shitty architectural change that was affecting the city. The whole thing was a stereotypical top-down situation where no one was listened to or even asked their opinion of what they really wanted. Places were subjected to complete gentrification – it had the same story as every city you’ve ever been to. In Budapest, people called demolition sites ‘missing teeth.’ The city was thought of as a ‘smile’ and the sites as holes left after the ‘teeth’ or the buildings had gone. I wanted to view these holes in the city as opportunities – or a kind of tabula rasa to re-imagine how different things could happen. The drawings (from the performance) wound up being exhibited at Trafo, in a room that was set up to mimic the 1958 drawing for *La Ville Spatiale* by Hungarian-born architect Yona Friedman. It was made so that you could feel as though as you were walking into this visionary architectural drawing. Recently, the piece was re-presented in Budapest at the Mucsarnok Kunsthalle.

**AC: From what I’ve read of your work, many of your projects – such as some of your previous works, *paraSITE* (2000) where you created inflatable shelters manned by heating vents for the homeless in NY or *Return* (2006) where you opened a storefront in Brooklyn and recreated your grandfather’s export - import business and offered free shipping to Iraq - deal very much with the reclaiming of not only public but also cultural space. In highlighting the possibilities which are inherent in kind of ‘in-between’ spaces, you are also making political statements about what the notion of nomadism means in contemporary society. How did these concerns originally come about in your work?**

MR: As a student, I was interested in site-specificity. I decided to go to art school and while my parents were completely supportive of my decision to study art, there was this question of how I would make a living as an artist. In the early nineties, going into graphic design was a way of learning an artistic skill which you could find work with later so I ended up choosing that route. Midway through art school though, I decided to get into sculpture and started to make art that I incorporated into the architecture of buildings. I did installations in matchboxes and left them in various places – that’s where I started to become interested in mobility.

As far as the political aspects of my work are concerned, they stem from my interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which is really connected to the story of how my grandfather, an Iraqi-Jew, fled Iraq and came to America in the 1940’s – this story also became a direct point of entry for me when I started work on *Return*, a project I did with the non-profit art organization, Creative Time. The critical point in my practice came when I participated in an architectural residency in 1997 and ended up researching the Bedouin camps near the Dead Sea. There were these tents which were kind of being lifted by the wind with the tent poles set up in such a way that the desert’s wind patterns were being taken into account. I remember the whole thing as being beautiful and poetic and when I got back to New York, the experience came back to me when I noticed a homeless person sleeping near a ventilator to get warm. I started to think about using the exhaust from buildings to create inflatable shelters for homeless people. To me, it was interesting to think of the whole concept as a form of architectural CPR – one structure blowing air into another to give it a function. My idea for *paraSITE* started from there.

**AC: I would be curious to know how members of the public - like the homeless who ended up using the *paraSITE* apparatuses – generally react when you begin to directly involve them in your projects.**

MR: *paraSITE* also really emerged out of a sense of frustration I was having with these architecture workshops I was taking at the time. Architecture students tend to keep their work in the classroom most of the time. I wanted to make things which could live a life in the world. One day, I passed a group of homeless men and decided to talk to them about my ideas for building these inflatable structures. I said to them, “Is this academic bullshit or is this something we can work on together?” That led into this episode which I have come to regard as the ‘conference meeting’ where we all sat together in a place and talked about the project. We discussed how I would go about building these shelters and they made some suggestions to me which were practical to their lifestyle – for example, they objected to me using black plastic bags (for the structures) because not being able to see what was going on outside would affect their sense of security. When I explained that I was an artist, they understood my intentions right away. They said, “ Good, if you are an artist, you aren’t that far away from being like us.”

**AC: Do you see yourself as more of an activist than an artist?**

MR: I would have to say that I am absolutely an artist in these projects. I work in a way that has more to do with dealing with the poetry of a certain environment than the functional parts of it. While a project like *paraSITE* brings attention to the situation of homelessness, it doesn't altogether solve anything. It is simply a document of my own interaction as an artist with the people living on the streets. My politics are clear but true activism involves delving into things on a more bureaucratic and pragmatic level. As an artist, my hope is that a project will have resonance with what is going on in real-life.

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