

STREET
ART

GNAWING TOWARDS COLLECTIVITY

ART



THE PARASITE: COPING AS TROU- BLEMAKING.

Michael Rakowitz is a US American-Iraqi artist who gained recognition for his project “paraSITE” in the early 2000s. The editorial team at Parasite Art reached out to him, as one of the first artists in our knowledge to use the concept of the parasite in his work.

Jakob Wirth (JW): Hello, it’s nice to meet you, even if just online. I would like to talk to you today about your connection to the concept of the parasite. What led you to use it in your work?

Michael Rakowitz (MR): I worked with that idea in the project “paraSITE”, which I continue to do every winter. This work has its roots in Jordan. That was as close as I was getting to Iraq, and I came out with a real self-awareness about my own embodiment as somebody of the second generation of diaspora from people who were forced to leave a place, who became nomads.

In Jordan, I was looking at the tents and the equipment that the Bedouins use to set up each night, according to the wind patterns that move through the desert. So every single night, the shape of the tent was different. And when I came back to the States I saw a homeless person setting up underneath a vent. The warm air that’s leaving the building was keeping this person alive for the night. These nomadic people, by tradition or by consequence, were using air to provide structural and thermal sustenance. So the connection that I did in my mind was, how do you harness that wind as

a structural element? I imagined using inflatables as a way to capture this air. And I heard the word parasite being used to describe unhoused people. And I thought about the prefix “para,” used for rescue or emergency equipment. You have a parachute, which, with the French word “chute”, means to guard against falling. So “para-site” to me meant to guard against becoming a site, to guard against becoming a permanent situation.

And when I think about parasitism, I quote Dr. Kazimir Tarmon in his “Notes on Parasitism”. He describes in this very concise text the way in which a host defends itself against a parasite and then a parasite evolves to then continue to attach itself to the host and survive.

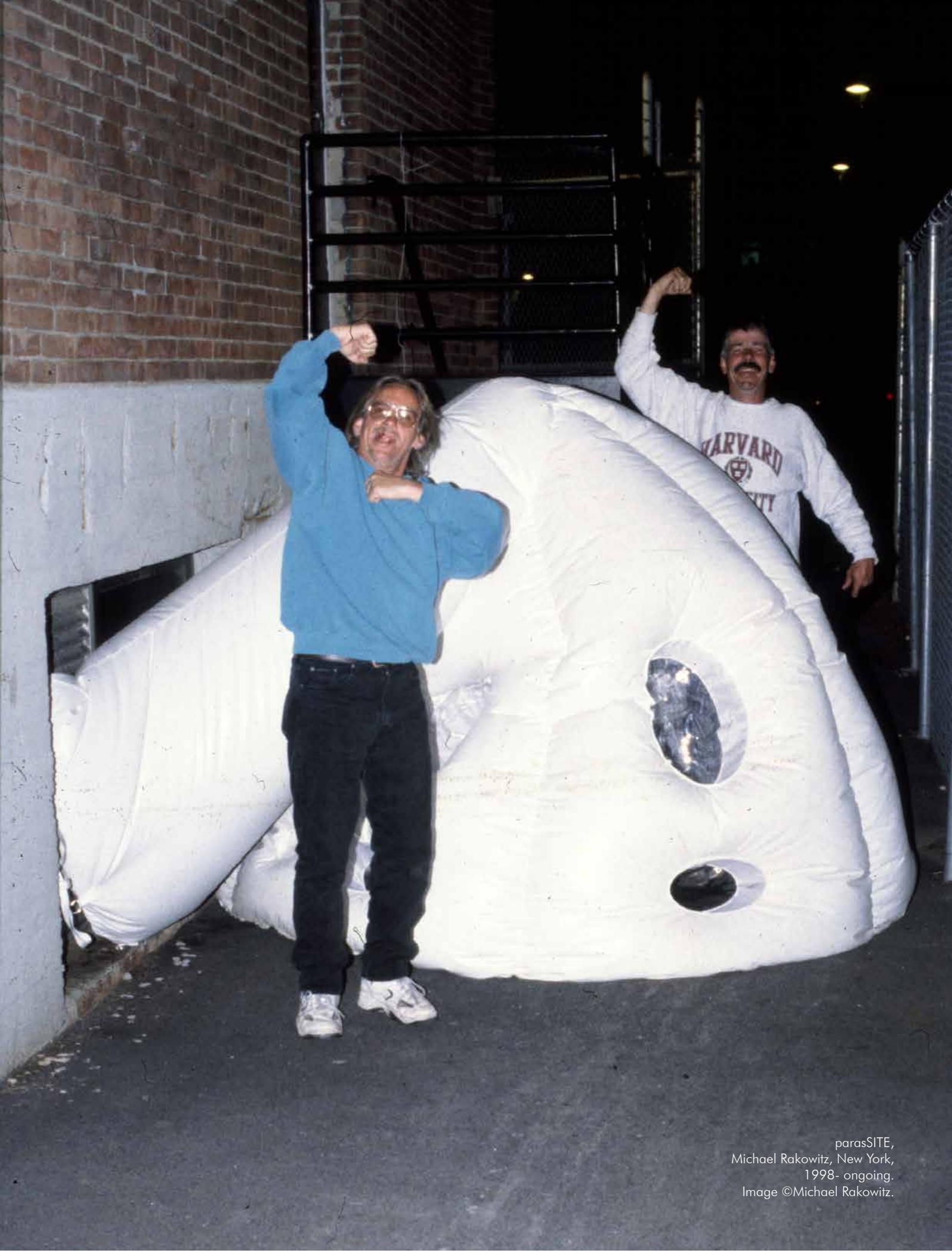
JW: The question of perspective is always present in this kind of engagement. How did you actually work with the unhoused people in the street? As artists, do we use the people in the street for our conceptual work? I sense a lot of sensitivity in your work. But from the outside, you can see it very quickly as abusive, since you can’t see how the relationship is built up, in terms of trust and hierarchy. As artists, do we abuse precarity? This word comes up fast when we use the conceptual framework of the parasite.

MR: From the very beginning, I was always very uncomfortable with this idea. That I would just go and talk about this to somebody that I didn’t know, who lives on the street. Especially considering the ecosystem I was

existing in then, attending grad school at MIT.

One day, when I was developing this work, as I was walking back to my studio from one of those critiques at MIT, I passed by a group of unhoused people that I had become familiar with. I asked them, “Hey, can you look at these drawings and tell me if this is just bullshit?” And they looked at them and said, “OK, this is a really interesting idea. Make a prototype. And we’ll come talk to you about it.” And then I made my prototype and I made it out of black trash bags. They asked “Why did you use black trash bags?” And I say, “well, I figured you’d want privacy,” and he said, “that’s the big thing. We don’t have privacy issues, we have security issues, we want to see people and we want to be seen.” And at this point, I was reading Hannah Arendt, and she’s talking about visibility being on the road to equality. And you’re like, holy shit, these things really do make sense.

There’s familiarity that happens in a city. It’s a very hyperlocal project. It’s always based on consent and codevelopment with the people who use the shelters. This project is introduced as a series of strategies of survival that are actually simultaneously symbolic and useful. It’s a really interesting place to exist, to come up with something that is useful and to deal with potential discomfort. We can say that in an ideal society, people should not have bandages because they should not have wounds. What I am doing is troublemaking. So if we create conditions where the vocabu-



parasITE,
Michael Rakowitz, New York,
1998- ongoing.
Image ©Michael Rakowitz.



(p)LOT: Proposition I
 2004 - ongoing, customized weatherproof auto-
 mobile covers, PVC pipe, tent poles
 Ludwig Museum, Vienna.
 Image ©Michael Rakowitz.



paraSITE
 1998 - ongoing,
 ©Michael Rakowitz.

lary of what it means to be unhoused becomes, in a way, more uncomfortable or more unsettling, that can accelerate conditions where people start to do their own thinking about how to design to solve this problem.

Marina Resende Santos (MRS): Why do you think it is more troubling for you to make a structure that traps heat, than for people to just make their own tents near exhaust vents the way they used to? Do you think that has to do with the fact that it's appropriating heat that was going to be exhausted? I think that's also where the more biological parasitic relationship appears.

MR: Hmm. I hadn't thought about the actual trapping of the air being part of the trouble, but this comes up in the discussion about whether it was public space or actually private space that I was introducing the work into. Suddenly people start to become territorial about the air. But I think that the troublemaking aspect of it happens in a lot of other places. Does it prolong life on the street? Well, in a way it's meant to be more troublesome than people setting up their own living conditions. It's meant to kind of accelerate those moments, because it shows a new strategy, that is not just taking a piece of cardboard here, a piece of wood here, a discarded sleeping bag here; instead it introduces the visual language of actual design, but a design that can actually happen from the same improvisation that allows somebody to come up with a makeshift shelter.

It's meant to raise this possibility: could we one day wake up and find these encampments taking over buildings like ivy? The discomfort about what it means to enlist precarity in an artwork is interesting for me to explore.

So the troublemaking, I think, is the fact that it's disobeying laws. There are all of these murky laws against unhoused people that were implemented in that time in New York City and that are not actually easy to

enforce.

Michael, an unhoused person I was in contact with, actually documented the juridical conditions of these laws and what was allowed and what not. He set up this shelter that I made for him according to his own design. And when the police came and gave him a ticket, he went to court. And they said to him, "what is it? Is it a tent?" And he said, "no, it's an inflatable sleeping bag." And the judge saw the measurement of the shelter and dismissed the case, due to the law which defines tents as higher than one meter. So all of a sudden, you create these agents in the city that have to actually react to this.

JW: Some people in the tiny house movement talk about creating a solution for homeless people. Personally I think it is quite problematic to claim things as a solution. So I really like how your work acts pragmatically. It's really on the ground. You meet the needs of the people and it's not about claiming this way of working with them as a solution, as a way to navigate through a crisis. But still, I am wondering how an object can be a troublemaker, how it can still avoid confirming the current situation and thus accepting the status quo. I think that's always the danger if we work with a problem.

I was wondering how the use of the word "parasite," was received, considering those who call unhoused people parasites. When does it work and does it not work to reframe a term that has such negative connotations?

MR: I think the idea from the radical left that there shouldn't be a coping with a situation like houselessness is a valid form of thinking. But I'm interested as an artist in creating tensions. I'm definitely not interested in the solution. This is not a solution. It is a pragmatic, but also symbolic form of survival that amplifies the tension that exists between people who have homes and those who don't. And home ownership is one of those things that

is constantly threatening to collapse capitalism.

The shelters themselves don't have the title listed on them, it is only called that when I speak about and I have a title for this project. And in fact, there's been a lot of humor around it. The people who get offended by the term parasite are not the people that I'm working with. The people who get the most offended are the people who are in positions of wealth. I find that really interesting from a pathological standpoint.

MRS: I think it almost speaks to a certain respect to the system to think that a parasite is something bad. Because for this person to be abusing a system without working for it, is what's really bad.

JW: I refer a lot to Michel Serres, who defines the term parasite and uses the concept of the niche to describe its habitat. Your one meter tent is a perfect example of finding the niche, the in-between spaces. The parasite opens up a space on the edge, somewhere between legal and illegal, between public and private, between all these dualisms that define what is allowed and what isn't. Michel Serres uses the parasite as a figure for irritation, who points out situations which are full of trouble. I was also wondering if you have a reference to this notion of the parasite? Or do you play more with the negative social connotation of the term?

MR: The point that Marina made really resonates with me. It is about understanding the limitations of our embodiment and moving beyond our own embodiments and imagining others. What does the virus call itself? What does the parasite call itself? Recognizing that these are life forms that exist in their own kind of social order and are looking to survive and reproduce. And about the irritant—absolutely. I want to explore the ways in which this discomfort is felt, to stay with the trouble as Donna Haraway says.

JW: I wanted to bring up the "(p) lot" project, which you realized a couple of years later, where you used a parking space with a car-like tent structure to occupy the space and create a possibility of housing there. I was wondering if you also see or describe it as a parasitic work? Or was it inspired by the other work in any way? As I see it you were also looking for the niche and working with this boundary between legal and illegal, with camouflage, and all these concepts that also use in my work as parasitic strategies.

MR: I am looking at the city and its structures and seeing what can be enlisted to be used in a different way. "paraSITE" has led me to think about the ways in which you have these systems that exist in a city: OK, you pay for parking, but there isn't necessarily a law that says what you can do there. And so I started to do this analysis of what it would mean to continuously pay for parking in midtown Manhattan and set up a space there that one could live in. And it ended up being, you know, ridiculously cheap. So this was a way of thinking about what it means to hold space in the city in a way that is considered legal.

JW: With the magazine, I am also trying to find the common ground of different artists or people who work with the concept of the parasite. For this reason I would like to ask the conceptualizing question: if you think about parasitic strategies or parasitic ways of working, is there something that comes to your mind? Or if you would conceptualize your own strategies within your artwork?

MR: I think what brought me to a kind of parasitic strategy was my interest in being a site specific artist. I was interested in dislocating and presenting in the world, so that things maybe don't so quickly become art. When I think about "parasite" as a word, I think about the definition where "para" means "at" or "to the side of", as in, say, "para-archaeo-

logy"cycle. And parasites add to the side of a site, like that very physical relationship of the shelter next to this building.

Parasitic strategies do a lot to create ways for us to not only understand power, but also to understand how it is that somebody can impact it, even with movements that seem small and somehow decentralized. They don't need to see themselves as powerless in the face of a bigger organism. And I think about a lot of the artists that I love and admire. They intervene in the system and then somewhat detach themselves. You know, you deterritorialize yourself, but the impact is there.

MRS: I've always asked myself, what's the difference between parasite art and interventionist art? Sometimes you can just describe them as interventions, but they do have a certain logic that can be described through the metaphor of the parasite. Maybe there are ways of intervening that don't necessarily have the same relationship to a system, the same relationship of survival where the parasite also sustains itself on the system as it is. That is one of the things that makes it controversial, and that's what makes it successful as well. There's always intentional embrace in the parasitic process, from what I've seen from your work and what we've been talking about today.

JW: Interventionist art is for me a very broad and carved out term. And it doesn't have to have an intentionally irritational moment in it. You can make an intervention totally in cooperation with all the different norms and systems we perceive outside in the street, for example. For me, the concept of intervention doesn't work so much with this kind of friction, or disruption or even with camouflage. Parasite Art, on the other hand, deals with the border position as well. It's not mainstream, it can't be in the focus of the art scene or the public. It has to use the resources of a host and subvert it, and it has to use the

niche - if not it either wouldn't be able to survive, - or it would be able to be called a parasite, but instead a guest or even the host.

MR: I think that there's something wonderfully precise about Parasite Art. I think that it's crucial to be able to say, "OK, we have enough examples of this kind of work that delineates this condition or this relationship, that we should call it that." And I agree with you, I don't know that I'm ready to just call it interventionist art. But as you're talking, I'm actually thinking about something you said, Marina, that the parasite still needs the system that it exists within to survive. That's the paradox, right? And there it is that prefix again, para, you know, from the Greek para, "distinct from" and then doxa, "opinion." These actions are so refreshing when they get to the point where they become contradictory, because it shows some of the things that are just not clean.

MRS: I think what makes the radical left uncomfortable is that it exists in the now of the system, of the mess of layered relationships that are given, instead of pretending that you are already living in the post-revolutionary world where capitalism doesn't exist. That's maybe what you describe as pragmatic. In some ways, you all's works are all like hinging upon and creating dependent structures within a late capitalist, bankrupt world. I think what bothers there is that, when you're challenging social norms with these works, you're not challenging just the big bad mayor, the big corporation or the conservative sector. You're also challenging mores that are shared more widely than that— and those are the ones that might be more important to question. It's more widespread, for example, to protect private property than to be fiscally conservative or believe in meritocracy—even a cool leftie living in Berlin might be uncomfortable with a parasite on their building, and claim, "I pay rent, I have a right to this space and you don't."

paraSITE
1998 - ongoing
Plastic bags, polyethylene tubing, hooks,
tapelimage ©Michael Rakowitz.

