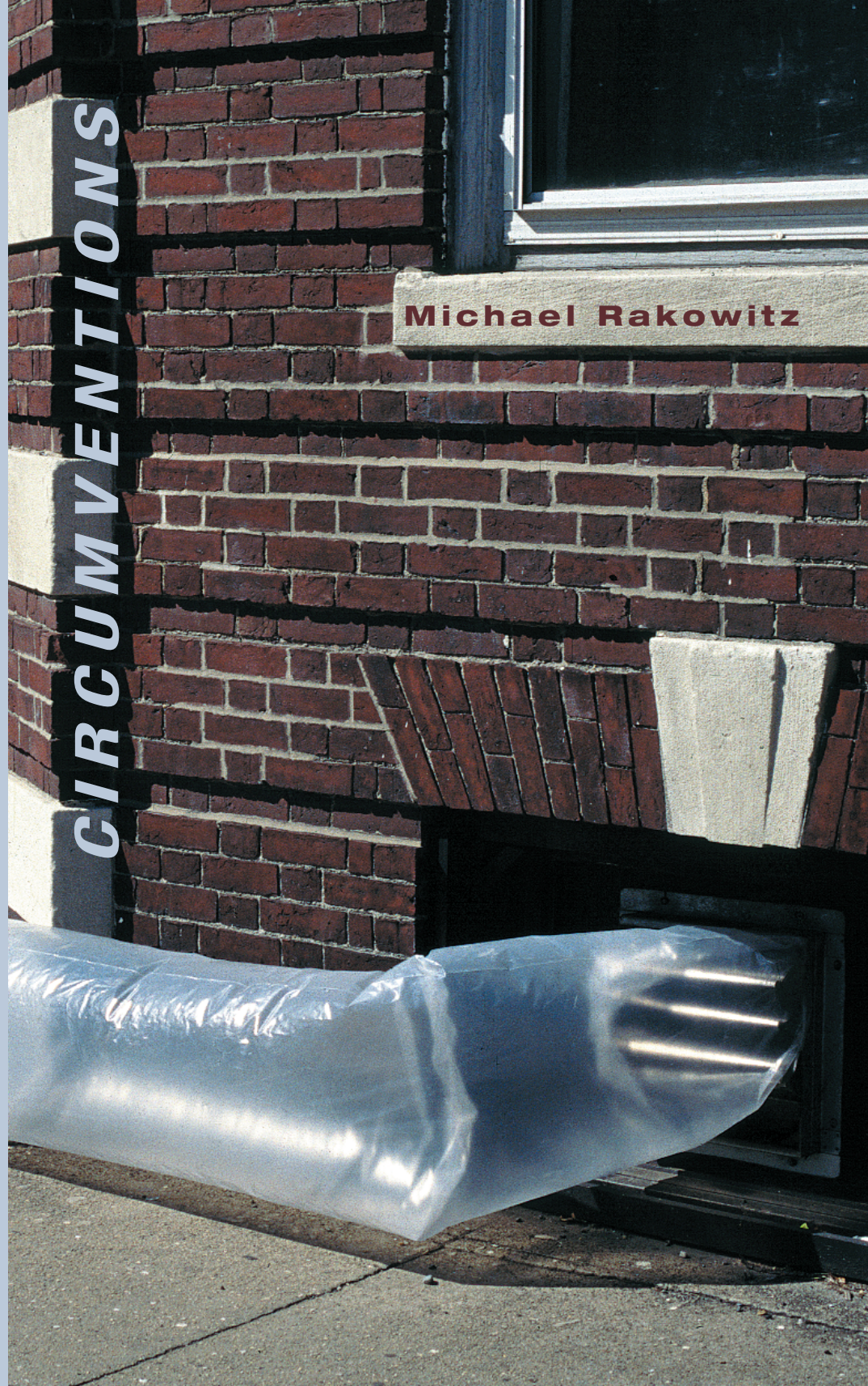




onestar press • dena foundation for contemporary art michael rakowitz circumventions



# CIRCUMVENTIONS

Michael Rakowitz







Michael Rakowitz

*CIRCUMVENTIONS*

With an interview by  
Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Dena Foundation Art Award 2003



Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art  
Paris • New York

onestar press

### ***Dena Foundation Art Award 2003***

Two dramatic cases of blackout occurred this year: the first one in August, on a large scale across the North American countries of the United States and Canada; the second in September on a minor scale in Italy. In New York, the blackout began at the closing of the stock exchange, indicating the tenuous relationship between economy and catastrophe. In both cases of blackout, it was reported that the populations responded with a great degree of responsibility, keeping panic under control and co-operating with authorities. The reports also suggested that people showed gestures of solidarity, a collective responsibility that is a great new hope for the landscape of urban territory.

A crisis situation, like the blackouts and even more so the recent war in Iraq, reveals that to escape fear and anguish, to survive the crisis, requires all of one's mental and physical resources. In the urban territories, survival is the preoccupation of those experiencing the daily crisis of homelessness. This kind of crisis is rarely first on the economic agenda but it is to this situation that Michael Rakowitz's work responds, to the homeless people who hang on to sites where they find a temporary solace. We see these roaming citizens in every town of the world with a very inattentive eye, with a consciousness that is quickly detoured. Rakowitz has been a much more attentive observer and provokes passers-by to consider these forgotten citizens as if for the first time.

Some years ago, Harvard University officials decided to raise bars on many of its buildings grates in order to prevent the homeless from sleeping on them at night for warmth. Rakowitz responded, not as an urban planner, not as a social worker, but as an artist and steward of his community. He was graduating from M.I.T. at that time and decided to realize the project of *paraSITE*, a clear plastic inflatable tent that provides warm night-time shelter for the homeless. Rakowitz listened to the needs of the homeless and was even responsive to their desire for having a personal space where one can store fragments of the past such as pictures or books.

Because of the social relevance of the work of *paraSITE*, the Dena Foundation 2003 Art Award goes to Michael Rakowitz. This honor is dedicated in a year when the most often heard words in the art world were "utopia" and "poetic justice." *paraSITE* indicates how art can respond to the desire for a better world and encourage an increasing responsibility to our existing resources.

The title of this book, *Circumventions*, reminds us how an artist's vision can often circumvent the expected and can express forms that anticipate developments in other disciplines. We are entitled to believe in their vision and to trust their capacity to deliver us from the present.

Giuliana Carusi Setari





## Interview

**Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev:** The first time I heard of you was when I read an article in the Metro Section of *The New York Times*—not the usual place for a young artist to be reviewed. The reviewer didn't really talk about the work as an art project, but more as an intriguing and socially progressive and useful way of helping the homeless in the inner city. How did you decide to do the “shelters” in New York, and can you describe that project?

Michael Rakowitz: *paraSITE* is an ongoing project that consists of the construction and distribution of custom-built inflatable shelters for homeless people that attach to the exterior ventilation ports on buildings. The warm air exhausted from the building's HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) system simultaneously inflates and heats the double membrane structures.

The project was inspired by research I had completed as part of a one-month architectural residency in Jordan, in January 1997. While there, I had focused on the tents and equipment of the Bedouin. As nomadic desert tribes, their shelters take into account the way that the wind moves through the desert via a sort of aerodynamics: the rigid pole networks that anchor and support the fabric skin of the tent are often positioned at specific angles so that the tent does not collapse. Wind is also used as a billowing agent, allowing for air movement through the tents' interiors and cooling during the night.

Arriving back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I was a graduate student, I recognized another instance of nomadism on the streets: urban nomads, or homeless people. But where the Bedouin were nomadic by tradition, the homeless were nomadic by consequence. Walking down Tremont Avenue that winter, I noticed a homeless man sleeping just beneath the street-level



exhaust fan of a building's HVAC system. This was another kind of wind, a wind that was being wasted by the city, a byproduct of a comfort system, recycled.

The first fifteen prototypes were custom-built for a group of homeless men in Boston and Cambridge in 1998. In December 1999, I produced my first prototype in New York as a continuum of the initial group of shelters that I constructed and distributed. Each city provides a different set of circumstances for the homeless, and each homeless person brings different needs and desires to the design of the shelters.

In New York, the project took on new life in conjunction with then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's November 1999 enactment of the city's anti-homeless, anti-tent laws. This was unintentional, as I had been designing and constructing the shelters all along. The article that you refer to in your question had interestingly positioned the project as an agitation targeting Giuliani's policy, while he, perhaps unknowingly, had in the process of enforcing these policies, agitated the city's normally apathetic relationship to homeless people into one of support and solidarity.

**Most people outside of New York will not understand what those anti-homeless laws were. Can you summarize?**

In November 1999, in New York, Nicole Barrett, a twenty-seven-year-old office worker, was attacked by a man wielding a brick. She lay hospitalized for about two weeks, during which time a suspect was apprehended: a homeless man. Reacting to public outrage over this event, Giuliani activated an existing set of laws in the city's charter which states that if a homeless person is found to be sleeping or sitting outside on city property and refuses to be relocated by law enforcement to a municipal shelter, they can be arrested and placed in jail. However, homeless people will often resist being taken to these shelters, as they can be the most dangerous places for them to sleep. Usually staffed by one security guard and one social worker, the shelters house up to eighty-four people per night, and this allows for a higher incidence of attacks on the order of rob-

beries, rapes, and stabbings. For these reasons, many homeless people opt to take their chances, surviving on their own on the city streets. Throughout the winter of 1999-2000, the New York Police Department was ordered to enforce these laws. It became a polarizing factor in the city, pitting advocates for the homeless against the city government, thereby enabling a public discourse around an issue rarely given such a platform.

The anti-tent laws were alluded to by the spokesperson for the New York Police Department, Detective Walter Burnes, in the December 1999 article in *The New York Times*. The law states that any structure, domed or otherwise, standing in excess of 3.5 feet (1 meter) above the ground and capable of housing someone inside, is considered a tent, and use of the structure on city streets is considered illegal camping. Given the incidence of homelessness in New York, these laws are clearly meant to anticipate the possibility of "tent cities" and to prevent an appropriation of "public" space.

In response to the ordinance concerning height, one homeless man, Michael McGee, raised the question of what would happen if his shelter was shorter than the 3.5 foot maximum, thereby challenging the defensive efforts of the city and circumventing the law.

**Someone asked me how you use your shelters in the summer, when the hot air would make them too hot. I said the homeless don't need them in the summer. Do you have another reply?**

It's true, the homeless do not have as many climate-oriented concerns in the summer. The warmer air and agreeable weather signal a change in the types of spaces the homeless appropriate for their own use, such as public parks or waterfronts. *paraSITE* is strictly a cold-weather device. In the winter, the heated ATM booths located in the vestibules of banks, subway cars, subway and train stations, and the indoor arcades of corporate buildings are the preferred spaces. But the severity of the laws instituted in 1999 affected the accessibility of these places: the MTA was ordered to turn off the heat in the subways and stations at 2:00 am.



**How important is the fact that the shelters are custom made for each individual homeless person, catering to specific needs and habits?**

The shelters are produced in a way that draws upon the personal experiences and needs of each homeless user as a way to speak about the very specific circumstances that often remain invisible when designing according to cross-sections or general statistical information.

The issue of homelessness is of global proportions and it is foolish to think that any one proposition will address all the issues associated with this problem. There are many different types of homeless people: the mentally ill, the chemically dependent, those who are unable to afford housing, men, women, families, even those who prefer this way of life. Each group of homeless has subjective needs based on circumstance and location. *paraSITE* does not make reference to handbooks of statistics. Nor should this intervention be associated with the various municipal attempts at solving the homeless issue. This is a project shaped by my interaction as a citizen and artist with individual persons who live on the streets.

When I met with a group of homeless men to show them my first prototype, I was working with black plastic trashbags as the inflatable membrane. While they were in support of the project as an intervention, they made critical observations. Bill Stone noted that homeless people would never want to live in black trash bags because they do not have privacy issues, they have security issues. They want to see potential attackers and they want to be seen. Also, the “homeless are already invisible to the public. This will make us more visible, and visibility is some kind of equality.” As an artist who had never experienced their lifestyle, it was impossible for me to design in any meaningful way without the individual input of their voices. Here, therefore, “the homeless” are no longer a nameless, faceless entity that recedes to the periphery of our vision. Here are Bill, George, Freddy, Joe, Michael, DeRon, Bruce, Monica, et al.

On a more art historical level, *paraSITE* can be considered an extension of portraiture, with each shelter acting as a portrait of its owner/inhabitant. As a function of artistic production, the creation of portraits was largely afforded only by the aristocracy. This project essentially inverts that relationship, allowing for the homeless individual's personal needs and identity to be critical factors in the overall design and appearance of the shelters.

**Your work was in the Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York last year. Is your work art or design? How do you distinguish the two fields—if you do, indeed?**

I have always defined my work as art that utilizes design as a medium. Operating as an artist, I do not have to adopt the responsibilities of the designer as a problem solver. Working site specifically, I regard design as a ready-made site that comes with certain expectations and beliefs about how an object or a system is meant to be used, and how it is supposed to function. When a detour or disturbance occurs in that system, people start to pay attention. In the Triennial, *paraSITE* was framed as a work of art that utilizes air as a charged medium and that interrogates problems by creating further problems or asking questions. The exhibition context is fascinating: how absurd to find this work in a survey that also recognizes the merits of a 14-karat gold Nokia cell phone. Such juxtaposition, however, poses unsettling questions about a practice in which a luxury object is produced while a problem on the level of global crisis remains unsolved.

*paraSITE* does function on a utilitarian level, but it is dangerous to call it acceptable design. It is absolutely unacceptable in that it prolongs life on the streets. Acceptable design would involve a radical reassessment of affordable housing initiatives and the social programs and institutions that are in place to deal with the homeless crisis. But in this way, *paraSITE* highlights unacceptable circumstances that have not received adequate attention from designers.

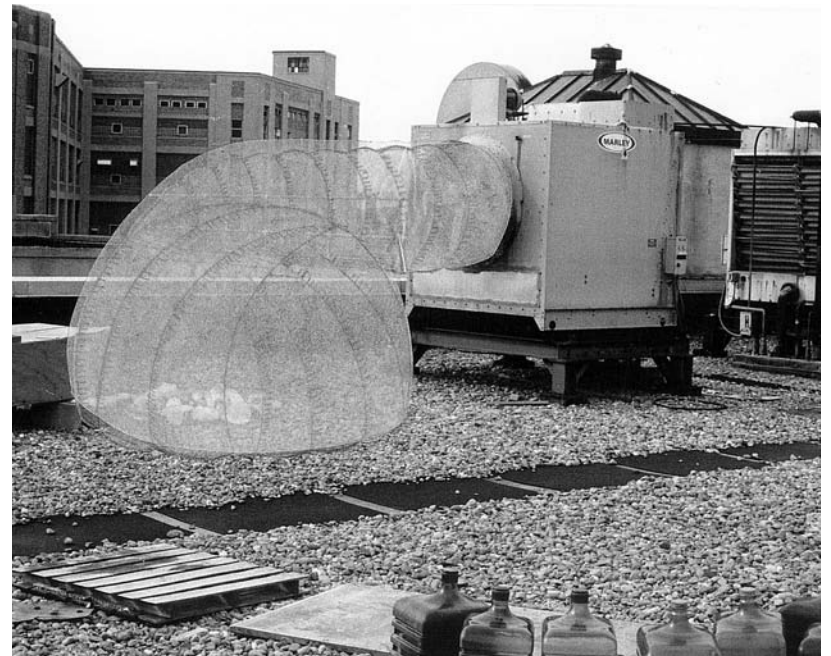




*paraSITE*  
(1998-ongoing)

*paraSITE* proposes the appropriation of the exterior ventilation systems on existing architecture as a means for providing temporary shelter for homeless people.

**Parasitism is described as a relationship in which a parasite temporarily or permanently exploits the energy of a host.**







George Livingston's  
*paraSITE* shelter. Made  
on a budget of \$5.00  
from trash bags, ZipLoc  
bags, and clear water-  
proof packing tape.

*paraSITE* units in their idle state exist as small, collapsible packages with handles for transport by hand or on one's back. In employing this device, the user must locate the outtake ducts of a building's HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) system.

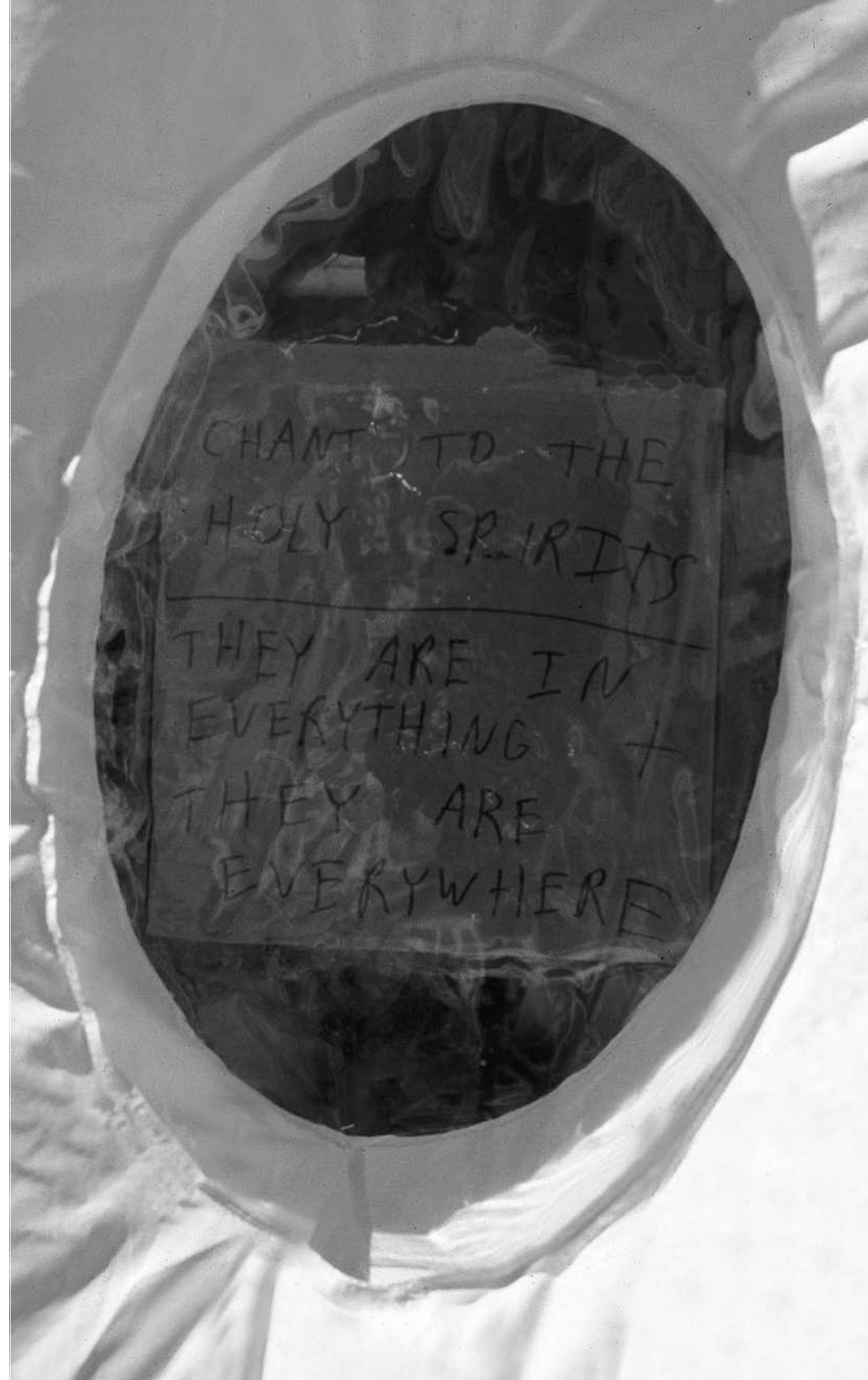
**Parasites live on the outer surface of a host or inside its body in respiratory organs, digestive organs, venous systems, as well as other organs and tissues.**






George requested a system of “ribs” that would be made of semi-translucent trash bags. In between the ribs, he wanted windows to expose the “meat” between the bones. The windows are made of ZipLoc sandwich bags and serve as pockets to display personal items and signage for the public. Privacy and publicity can be regulated by adding or removing objects.

Frequently, a host provides a parasite not only with food, but also with enzymes and oxygen, and offers favorable temperature conditions.







Bill Stone's *paraSITE* shelter. He requested as many windows as possible, because "homeless people don't have privacy issues, but they do have security issues. We want to see potential attackers, we want to be visible to the public." Six windows are placed at eye level for when Bill is seated and six smaller windows for when Bill is reclining.



The intake tube of the collapsed *paraSITE* structure is then attached to the building's vent. The warm air leaving the building simultaneously inflates and heats the double membrane structure.





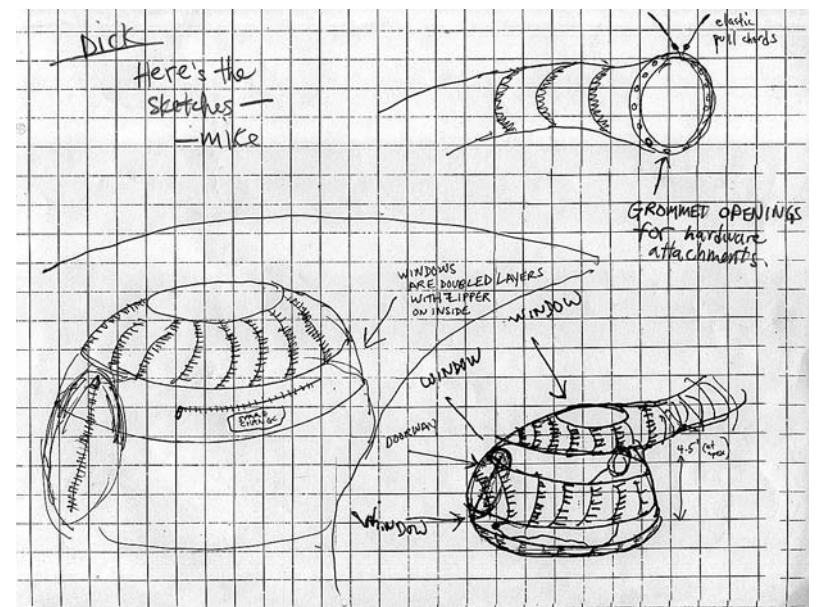
Keith Jackson's *paraSITE* shelter. He requested detachable pocket windows to hold his belongings. During the day, he would wear the pockets like a bandoleer to hold the props he used in street performances.

In April of 1997, I proposed my concept and first prototype to a homeless man named Bill Stone, who regarded the project as a tactical response. At the time, the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts had made a series of vents in Harvard Square "homeless-proof" by tilting the metal grates, making them virtually impossible to sleep on.

**But a host is certainly not inactive against a parasite, and it hinders the development and population growth of parasites with different defense mechanisms, such as the cleaning of skin, peristaltic contraction of the digestive apparatus, and the development of antibodies.**

The system by which the *paraSITE* device attaches or is anchored to a building is designed to allow the structure to be adaptable. The intake tube can be expanded or tightened to fit the aperture of the vent through an adjustable lip made possible by elastic drawstrings. Built-in hooks are attached to the vent's metal louvers for reinforcement.

Parasites respond to this defense by anchoring themselves with hooks and suckers onto skin or digestive mucous membranes, and by developing protective devices and substances which lessen the defensive capabilities of their host.







The connection of the inflatable *paraSITE* structure to the building becomes the critical moment of the project.

**There is “tension” between a host and its parasite, since the host endeavors to get rid of the foreign body, while the parasite employs new ways to maintain the connection with the host.**





Bill Stone, Freddie Flynn, and George Livingston with Freddie's *paraSITE* shelter. An avid science fiction fan, Freddie requested a shelter in the shape of Jabba the Hutt, a character from George Lucas's film *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi*.





Joe Heywood using his *paraSITE* shelter in February 2000. Joe is a homeless man living on the streets near Battery Park City in Manhattan. In the 1970s, he became a contractor and was responsible for building over fifteen buildings in Brooklyn. He was diagnosed with cancer in the 1980s after being exposed to Agent Orange while serving in the Air Force in Vietnam. After forty-seven different operations to treat the cancer, the Veteran's Association of America ceased paying his medical bills and he went bankrupt.





















Michael McGee using his *paraSITE* shelter on 26th Street and 9th Avenue in New York. Michael is a homeless man who works for the United Homeless Organization. He read an article about the *paraSITE* shelters in *The New York Times*. When we met to collaborate on the designs for his shelter, Michael wanted to respond to the anti-tent laws alluded to by Detective Walter Burnes in the article. The law states that any structure qualifying as a tent (a domed or triangulated structure standing at a minimum of 3.5 feet above ground level) set up on city property would be considered illegal camping.

We decided to get rid of the triangulated structure that had been consistent with earlier designs made in both Boston and New York. When we started sketching, Michael indicated he wanted his shelter to be closer to the ground, more like a sleeping bag or some kind of body extension. Thus, if he was questioned, ticketed, or even arrested by the police, he could argue that the anti-tent laws did not apply because the shelter is not, in fact, a tent.

In the following sequence, Michael was confronted by a police officer who measured the shelter. Since it stands less than 3.5 feet off the ground, the officer moved on.







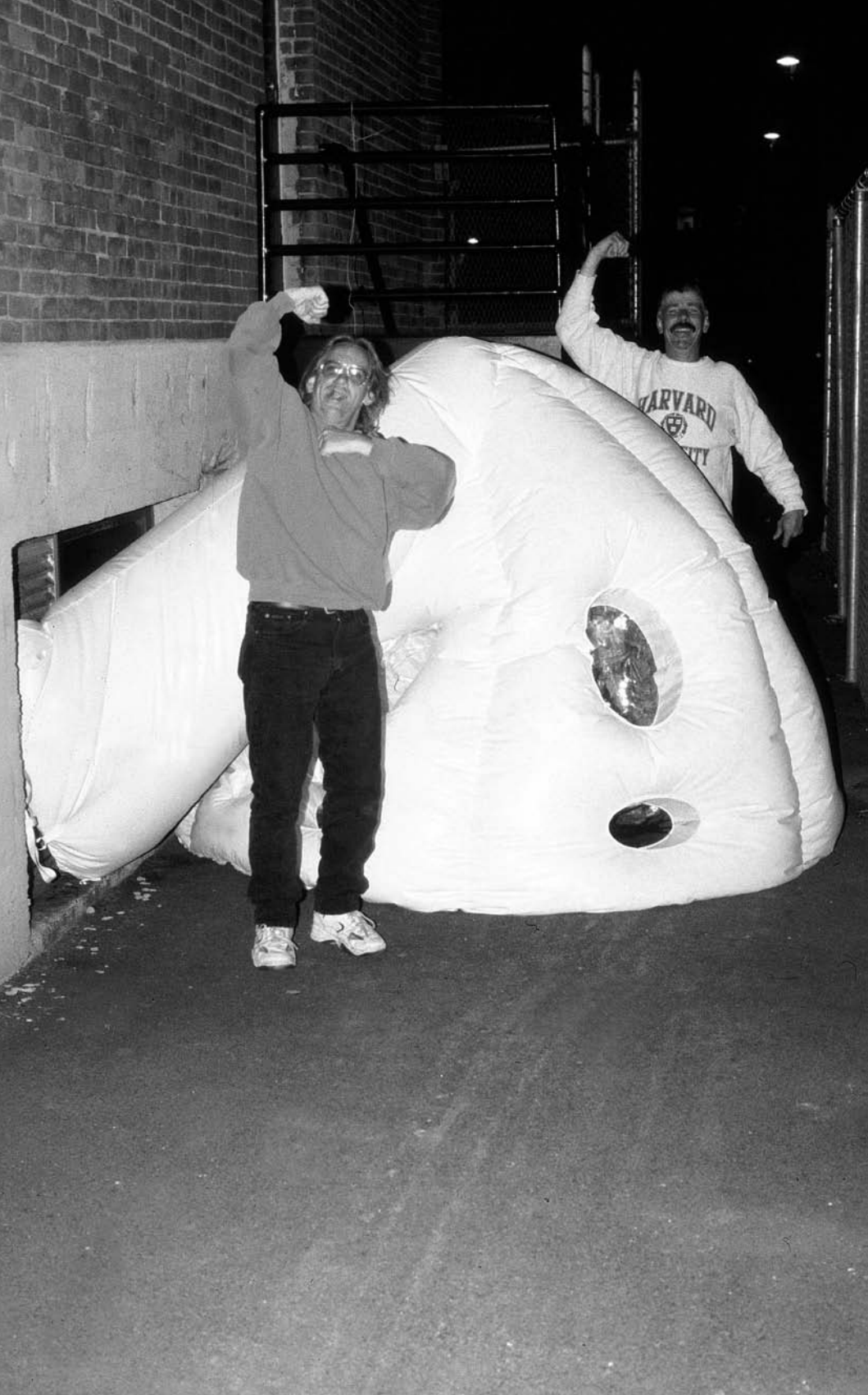










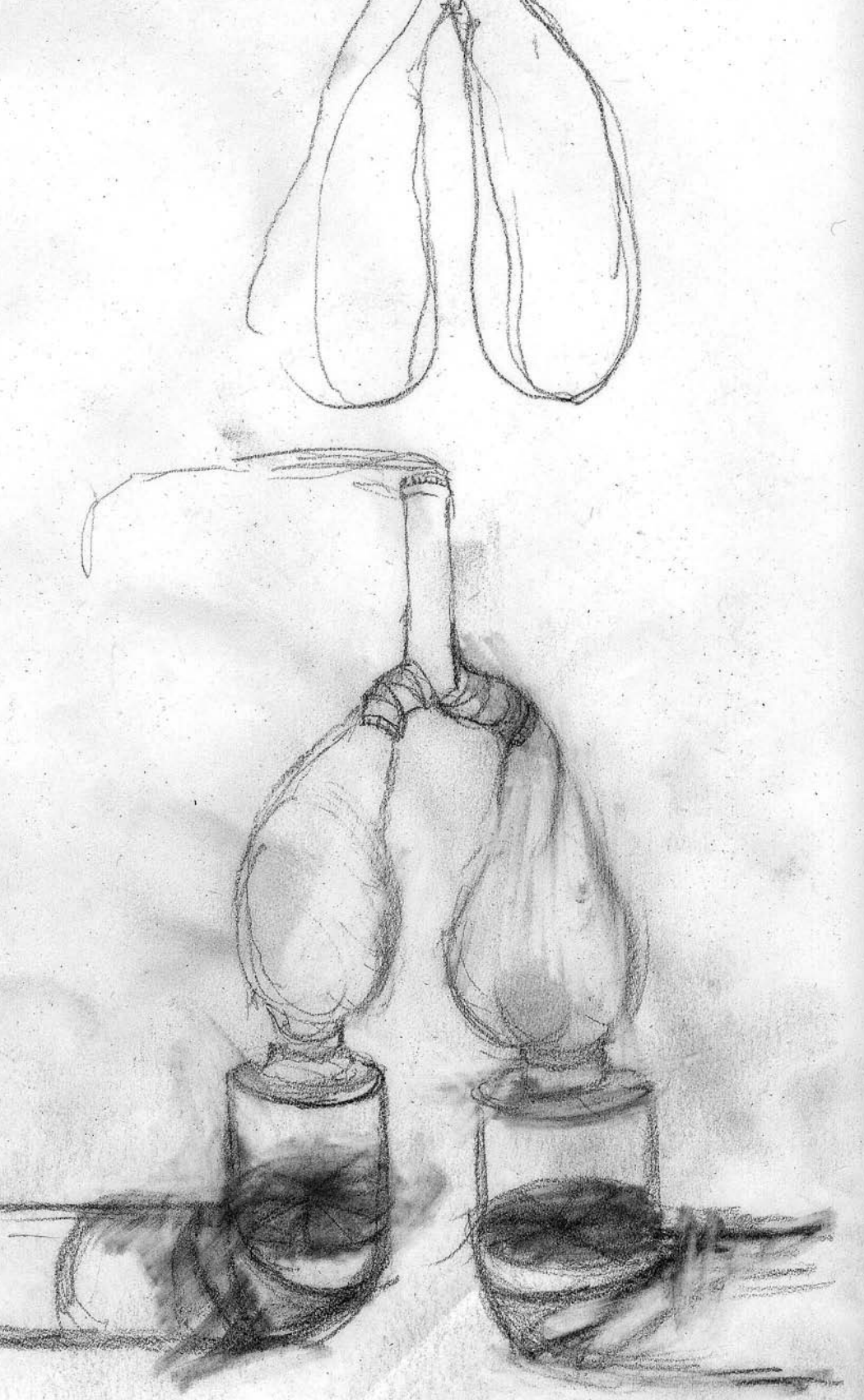


Since February 1998, thirty prototypes of the *paraSITE* shelter have been custom built and distributed to homeless individuals in Cambridge, Boston, New York, and Baltimore. All were built using temporary materials that were readily available on the street, such as plastic bags and tape.





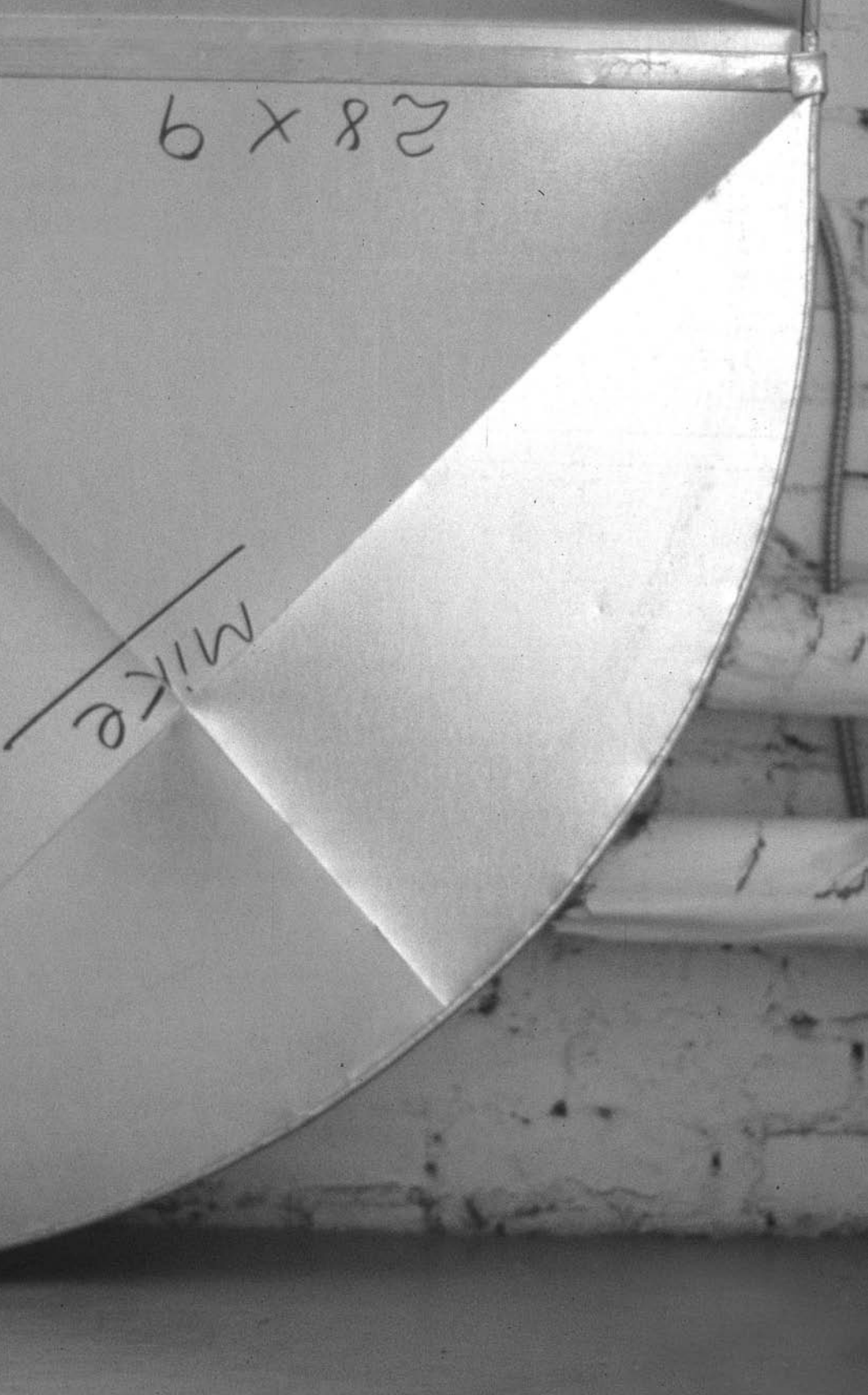
**Climate Control  
(2000-01)**



**When I invited you to P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York to do a special project in 2000, you put *Climate Control* in a particularly run-down gallery. What is the relation between the outdoor *paraSITE* shelters for the homeless and this indoor project? Was it only an ironic move, as if P.S.1 needed a shelter, as a museum, a shelter for artworks it did not have?**

When I was asked to conceive a project for P.S.1, I was interested in some of the formal issues that were the basis for *paraSITE*. While the shelters were a political and, because of their efficacious nature, activist intervention, much of the project's origins were rooted in my fundamental interest in architecture as a platform for my work. I had always worked site specifically, addressing spaces in which I was invited to work. *paraSITE* continued this trend to some degree, as the shelters require a connection to a building and do not exist as autonomous entities. While working on *paraSITE*, I became interested in the circulation systems of architecture, specifically the way in which a building breathes. While researching the HVAC systems of buildings, I found that the conduit through which air travels penetrates most spaces in a building, thereby binding rooms together in a specific sequence depending on where the intake and outtake of the system are located. I planned on proposing a project that would have been integrated into P.S.1's HVAC until my first site visit revealed that there was no ventilation system in the building. Instead, I ended up introducing an ad hoc climate control system that integrated the existing radiator devices into a maze of ductwork.

The museum had at one time functioned as a primary school, and the institution made use of the remaining radiators as a means for climate control in the winter months. Standard temperatures for institutions exhibiting works of art exist within a range of 68°-72° F (20-22° C). Most museums and exhibition institutions are required to have a central climate control system to maintain and regulate ideal temperature and relative humidity (r.h.) readings; this helps preserve the art works on exhibit. P.S.1 lacks such a mechanism and during the winter months turns the radiators up past 90° F



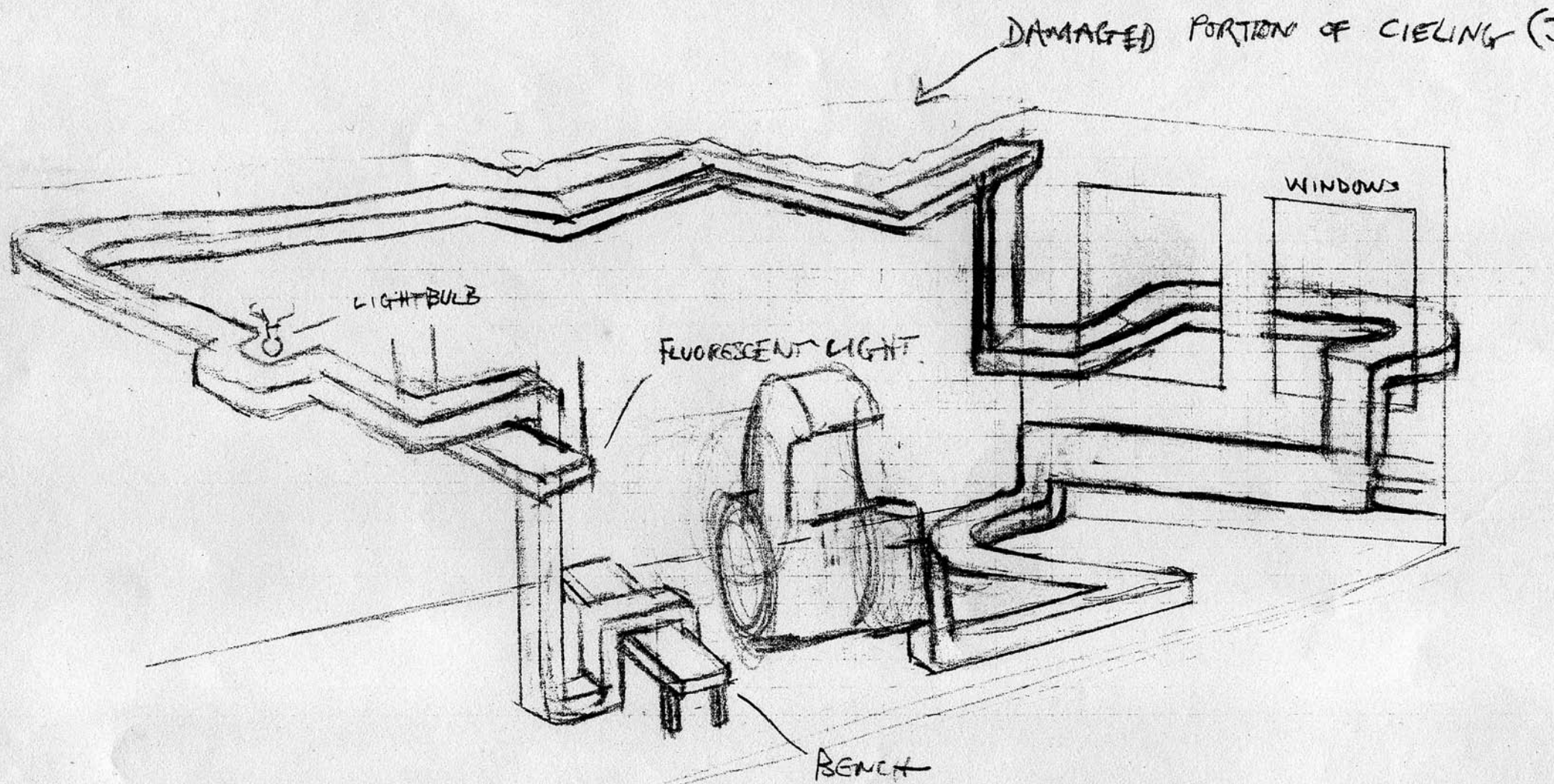
(32° C) in many galleries, clearly ignoring institutional standards. And, due to dry heat created by the radiator system, readings throughout the building indicate a relative humidity of 11%, dangerously below the 40-50% r.h. standard for exhibiting paintings and prints.

In order to lower the temperature of the Special Projects room to which it is confined, *Climate Control*, an apparatus consisting of ductwork and fans, incorporates the existing radiator system on the interior of the building with the cold winter temperature outside. The resulting maze of ductwork, which would normally be integrated into the central HVAC system and hidden beneath floors and above drop ceilings, is exposed here due to Building Code regulations. Its central absurd element—the continuous duct which travels outside the windows and then directly back in—is visible from the street. While the system was adjustable and could maintain a stabilized environment for the exhibition of delicate pieces of artwork, there was no room to exhibit anything else: *Climate Control* engulfed the room. The relative humidity setting was thus regulated to remain at 20%, the ideal standard for maintaining galvanized steel duct, resulting in an absurd machine built to maintain itself.

*Climate Control* and *paraSITE* relate to each other conceptually in that they both provoke the viewer's realization of a societal and/or institutional absence via an attempt to address it through temporary and absurd means. And in each project, the central sculptural element attaches to and appropriates an existing system.







ATT: ORSON  
FROM: MIKE RAKOWICZ 917.692



Upon re-entering the space, the air travels to three different points of discharge around the room.

The air rests here for five seconds while it is cooled to the ideal standard of 68°-72°F through conduction between the galvanized steel duct and the exterior cold temperature.

The air then travels toward the windows, passing through a tower of three dampers, which adjust air flow based on variables (outdoor temperature, shifting radiator temperatures).

An in-line duct fan then moves the air through the cubic duct enclosing the radiator, operating above 90° F, and up into an extension of ductwork that pierces the north window of the gallery.

The system starts in the center of the room, where three intake fans introduce the museum air into the network.















Rise  
(2001)



**Another “indoor” project was the one where you channeled the smell of a Chinese bakery into the gallery space above an adjacent building. Can you describe that project? Why did you bring the smell into the space of the exhibition?**

In August 2001, TriBeach Holdings, LLC, a real estate company, opened floors six through eleven of 129 Lafayette Street in Manhattan's Chinatown as the site for a temporary exhibition. Curators from different galleries and institutions in New York were each given a floor of the building with which to work. The exhibition, titled *GZ:01*, was staged to raise visibility of this vacant building for real estate purposes. Formerly functioning as a large, multi-story community center and business network for the local Chinese community, 129 Lafayette Street was regarded as a prime location to extend SoHo's gallery scene into a new area. I was invited by the Whitney Museum Curatorial Program to produce a site-specific artwork for the ninth floor.

Researching the context of the exhibit, I spent a lot of time walking around the four city blocks the building occupies. I spoke to members of the Chinese community. Most residents had not heard of the planned exhibition and were outraged that the institutions that were once housed inside the building were forced out to make room for galleries that in no way represented their neighborhood or cultural concerns. Mindful of this fissure between the community and the organizers of the exhibition, I wanted to bridge the gallery space with the local community in some way.

Fei Dar Bakery is located on the ground floor of an adjacent building at 191 Center Street. The bakery is one of the most popular Chinese pastry shops and also functions as a meeting place for many young Chinese residents in the neighborhood. Up on the ninth floor gallery space, one could lean out the window and smell the subtle aroma of pastries coming from the oven's exhaust duct, over a hundred feet below.

In *Rise*, I extended the central oven duct of Fei Dar Bakery vertically by 125 feet (38 meters), right up into the ninth floor gallery space of 129 Lafayette Street, thereby filling the gallery with the aroma of Chinese pastries being baked.

















For the opening reception of the exhibition, Fei Dar Bakery provided pastries so gallerygoers could taste what they were smelling. Throughout the duration of the show, Fei Dar received a steady flow of customers who had visited the gallery.



Minaret  
(2001-ongoing)





Minarets are the towers of mosques from which the adhan, the call to prayer, is sung by the muezzin five different times of the day, based on daily time standards configured in Cairo. Such a tower is often connected with a mosque and has one or more balconies or open galleries. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, however, the adhan was simply sung from the nearest roof in the vicinity of the mosque. The earliest minarets were former Greek watchtowers and the towers of Christian churches; eventually, minarets were included in the overall plan of mosques.

Today, the sound of the call is standard in public spaces in the Middle East, North Africa, Indonesia, Pakistan, and India. In Manhattan, where there is a significant Muslim population, there are very few mosques. And, as in many Western cities, the call to prayer, if it is sung publicly at all, is usually broadcast at a low volume, at ground level.

In *Minaret*, access is gained to an architecturally appropriate rooftop at the five designated times of prayer. An alarm clock acquired in Jordan plays the entire adhan from an embedded digital chip, and, with the help of a megaphone for amplification, the call is sounded.



In 2001, *Minaret* was performed on the rooftop of the Clocktower Gallery, a contemporary art institute in lower Manhattan. The building rises high above many surrounding structures and the rooftop features an open balcony topped by a monumental analog clock.

Times of the adhan for February 20, 2001, New York City:

5:15 am  
12:13 pm  
3:30 pm  
5:40 pm  
7:10 pm









In 2003, *Minaret* was performed at the City-Hochhaus, formerly Karl Marx University, in Leipzig.







*Minaret* was also performed at the Monument to the Battle of Nations, in Leipzig.









**By Air, By Sea  
(2002)**



A former WWII air raid bunker in Berlin was recently converted into an art institution. In *By Air, By Sea*, an electronic wildlife caller is positioned atop the entrance tower of the bunker. The caller is preprogrammed to play the territorial calls of certain birds of prey indigenous to Berlin (owls, hawks, falcons) and the distress calls of songbirds who are injured or under attack.

When territorial or distress calls are heard by birds at a considerable distance, non-predator birds (sparrows, robins, finches, blackbirds) send their scout birds to find the sound, commencing an instinctual behavior known as "mobbing." After the scouts have circled the area and located the sound, they cry an alarm call. Groups of songbirds hear this alarm and flock to the area, circling and chirping, trying to drive the predator out of its territory. Different birds in different territories form temporary alliances with one another when threatened by predators, thereby gaining strength in numbers.

Once the predator leaves, the alliance dissolves, and the different groups of birds return to challenging one another for territory.

In *By Air, By Sea*, a live video feed of these ornithological events, incited by the sounds of the electronic wildlife caller, is projected onto the ceiling of the gallery.







## Romanticized All Out of Proportion (2002-03)



The *Panorama of the City of New York*, a main attraction at the Queens Museum of Art, was originally built for the 1964 World's Fair New York Pavilion (now the Queens Museum) and, since then, has been updated several times, most recently in 1997. With every architectural structure in the five boroughs of New York painstakingly recreated at a 1:1200 scale, the model occupies 9,500 square feet (882 square meters). An elevated, encircling walkway offers visitors an aerial view that mimics what might be seen on a helicopter tour of the city.

*Romanticized All Out of Proportion* makes use of seven miniature cameras placed on the *Panorama* that recreate camera angles of specific scenes from movies that take place in New York. While the video cameras operate on a live feed to seven LCD screens mounted along the walkway, the corresponding dialogue and soundtrack excerpts from the original films can be heard.

Film choices were made by visitors to the *Panorama* who responded to a survey that asked them to recall a specific scene from a movie they felt illustrated their experience, attitude, or expectations of New York. The first seven scene selections were presented from August to December 2002, the second seven from January to June 2003.





Michael Rakowitz (b. 1973, Gre  
*Romanticized All Out of Pro*  
Cameras, LCD monitors, CD  
excerpts from Manhattan  
Courtesy of the artist

The project was funded by the Ver  
Boucher, Sunday Engels, Grady C  
Maniaci, and Steve Tomlinson fo

Tiny video surveillance cam  
model project images from  
monitors mounted on the  
the viewer looks at these  
films made in New York  
we see the Unisphere.  
Fair which was include  
voices of the actors fr  
with various other sit  
around the Panoran  
these, elicits aware  
of the city and how

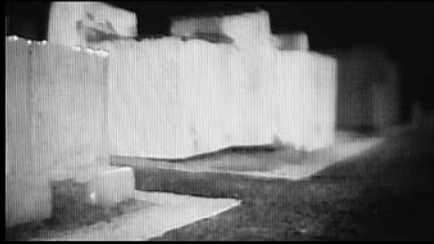




"Chapter One. He adored New York City. He idolized it all out of proportion." Uh, no, make that: "He-he... romanticized it all out of proportion. Now... to him... no matter what the season was, this was still a town that existed in black and white and pulsated to the great tunes of George Gershwin."

—Dialogue from *Manhattan*,  
dir. Woody Allen

*Do the Right Thing*, 1989, dir. Spike Lee, starring Spike Lee and Danny Aiello.

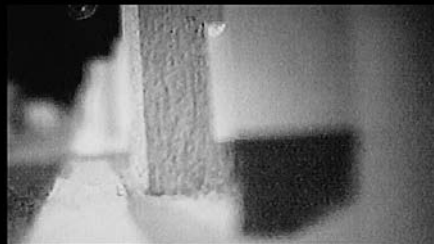


*Men in Black*, 1997, dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, starring Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith.



Opening scene: Tony Manero strutting down Fourth Avenue in Bay Ridge—the excitement of the moment is palpable. Tony's cocksure walk, the hip-shaking beat of the BeeGees' music, the electricity of the street, it all works. The scene shows New York City as gritty, intense, sexy, dirty, and powerful.

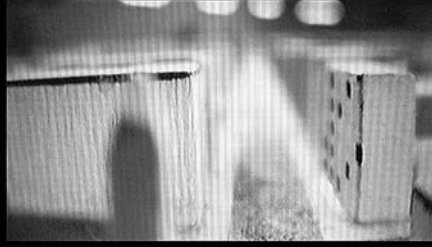
—Nicholas  
from a survey distributed at the Queens Museum of Art



*Saturday Night Fever*, 1977, dir. John Badham, starring John Travolta, Karen Lynn Gorney, and Barry Miller.

*The French Connection*, 1971, dir. William Friedkin, starring Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider.

*A Bronx Tale*, 1993, dir. Robert De Niro, starring Robert De Niro, Chazz Palminteri, and Lillo Brancato



*The Godfather*, 1972, dir. Francis Ford Coppola, starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino.



A specific shot from a film set in New York City that comes to mind is the funeral scene from *The Godfather*. The scene is set in Calvary Cemetery in Queens. The parting shot withdraws, and the camera angle widens dramatically to include a panoramic view over the Brooklyn Bridge [sic] and Queens. I have not seen the film for some time, but I remember that part quite well because it looks as if it was shot from the roof of my old apartment.

—Anton Sinkewich  
from a survey distributed at the Queens Museum of Art



*Spider-Man*, 2002, dir. Sam Raimi, starring Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst.

*Ghostbusters*, 1984, dir. Ivan Reitman, starring Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and Sigourney Weaver.



*Coming to America*, 1988, dir. John Landis, starring Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, and James Earl Jones.



Eddie Murphy's character Akeem has just recently arrived in America and met his soon-to-be bride. As he parades through the decrepit streets in Queens, exclaiming his joy through the song *To Be Loved*, angry neighbors disturbed by the noise shout back, "Fuck you!" much to Akeem's delight and ignorance. He responds with, "Yes, fuck you too!" in a tone suggesting his euphoric pleasure found in the unforgiving but accommodating city of New York. The movie shows both a fascination and fetish of the idea of New York in the late 1980s. I think that, for me, this New York is the idea of a post-civic civilization that we all secretly and not-so-secretly have accepted and embraced. It is a place where a baseline for moral, economic, social, etc. agendas seems to please us over any invented hierarchical one.

—Landon Brown

from a survey distributed at the Queens Museum of Art

*Naked City*, 1948, dir. Jules Dassin, starring Barry Fitzgerald, Howard Duff, Dorothy Hart, Don Taylor.



*An Affair to Remember*, 1957, dir. Leo McCarey, starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr.



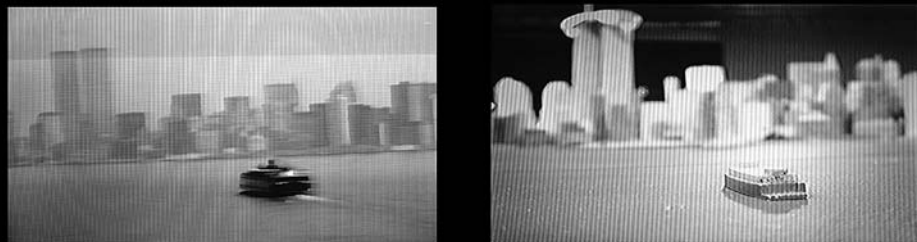
*On the Waterfront*, 1954, dir. Elia Kazan, starring Marlon Brando and Karl Malden.

*Manhattan*, 1979, dir. Woody Allen, starring Woody Allen, Diane Keaton, and Mariel Hemingway.



There is a feeling you get when you step out of an Italian or Dutch gallery into a city that seems the very reflection of the paintings you have just seen, as if the city had just come out of the paintings and not the other way around. An American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inward toward the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outward toward the city.

—Jean Baudrillard



*Working Girl*, 1988, dir. Mike Nichols, starring Melanie Griffith, Sigourney Weaver, and Harrison Ford.

**There is always a level of reality in your projects. What is the relationship between the symbolic and the real in your art? Between metaphor and actuality?**

The symbol exists for me as a way to address the real. Not for the purpose of mere simplification, but as a device for discussing real situations. The complex, multi-layered structure of the metaphor reveals itself in fragments, enabling a discourse on uncomfortable topics that might be rejected by a public if offered literally. Symbols thus act as decoys that enlist and implicate the viewer, circumventing the obstacles that often hinder dialogue.

*By Air, By Sea* explored, through the territorial behavior of birds, the historical function of a Berlin WWII air raid shelter versus its current status as a contemporary art institution. Via its embodiment as a cultural space, memory is suspended and the wartime installation is demilitarized. Seeking a seemingly harmless agent through which to draw upon the history of the building, I investigated aerial events, thus connecting to the function of the shelter as a refuge from airborne attack. My research led me to a series of studies, conducted by the United States Air Force and Great Britain's Royal Air Force in the 1930s, that recorded the flight patterns of birds who are under attack or defending territory. Common symbols of peace or hope, birds had here become unwitting accomplices in destruction.

This discovery in mind, I placed atop the roof of the bunker an electronic wildlife caller that played the territorial calls of birds of prey indigenous to the area and the distress calls of songbirds injured or under attack. This instigated an instinctual behavior called "mobbing," in which scout birds circle the area, locate the sound, and cry an alarm call. Groups of songbirds hear this alarm and flock to its source, circling and chirping, trying to drive the predator out of its territory.

Visitors to the bunker first heard either the territorial call or the distress call, audible throughout the surrounding neighborhood. Curious visitors and local residents entered the exhibition space, where the function of the caller was revealed through a

live camera feed projected on the ceiling. There they watched the various groups of birds flying overhead like bombers, engaged in a campaign to reclaim territory from an intruder.

Adding further to the metaphor was the fact that different birds from different territories form temporary alliances when threatened by predators, thereby gaining strength in numbers. Once the predator leaves, the alliance dissolves, and the groups of birds return to challenging one another for territory.

Another project that deals with a mutation of the real is *Romanticized All Out of Proportion*. I was fascinated with the context, the *Panorama of the City of New York*, a scale model in which every architectural structure in the five boroughs of New York is carefully recreated. The *Panorama* often functions as a site of collective memory for visitors, as families point out where older generations lived, mapping out migrations to where they live now, down to the tiniest detail.

Focusing on the function of collective memory within the mediated space of the model, I became interested in the correlation between the mythologized and the real city. New York has served as a popular backdrop to 20th-century cinematic narrative. The city, as new frontier, is presented as gritty, unforgiving, overcrowded, and seemingly insurmountable; the new urban hero beats the odds, leaves the suburbs or boroughs to excel in business, meets a mate, or simply finds happiness persevering in the unconquerable nature of the metropolis. It is a heroism defined by the everyman/woman and by a common set of goals that continues to motivate migration to the city.

When I was first asked to create a project in the *Panorama*, I was interested in placing small cameras that would provide views of the model that one can never get when visiting. The model essentially recreates the view one would have in a helicopter ride around New York, a privileged, aerial view from which everything looks perfect. But what would it look like if we were actually down there? Are the buildings accurate? Is there dust all over the section where my neighborhood and my



insignificant brownstone are located? Realizing that simply presenting views would be too obscure, cinema became the perfect filter through which to project these ideas. The metaphor was already built in.

Visitors to the model participated by answering surveys which asked them to recall, to the best of their abilities, a scene that reflected their understanding of New York. In certain movies, such as *The Naked City*, the chosen sequence is quite convincingly recreated on the *Panorama*. In stark contrast, the scene selected from *Do the Right Thing*, situated in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, reveals brownstones that in the model exist only as roughly cut pieces of wood, with glue residue running down their sides and dust on the street. Bed-Stuy's real life existence as an economically-challenged neighborhood is mirrored in the model, where it exists on the periphery, judged unimportant in relation to the viewer. Here the macro becomes the micro.

**Why are “origins” and the past important to you? In *Rise*, you refer to the “original” inhabitants of a building. In *Minaret*, you speak of an urban tradition in Islamic countries, of the call to prayer. What act of “resistance” does your art seem to support/mimic/point to, etc.?**

It is not so much “origins” that are important to me, but the use of historical information as a tactic to discuss and illustrate present situations involving absence or exclusion.

*Rise* was built around an exhibition that was staged in a building where the original tenants were essentially evicted by rent increase. The developer's strategy was to convince the remaining galleries and art institutions in SoHo, just west of Chinatown, to move east instead of north to Chelsea, thus creating yet another enclave of high culture and fashion—and in-demand real estate. This act of attempted gentrification serves as a kind of historical editing, wherein the perfectly legal acquisition of a building has deliberate ramifications for the demographic of a neighborhood.



A similar erasure is also central to *Minaret*, where the historical origin of the minaret serves as a platform to discuss the regulation and absence of the adhan, the call to prayer. My mother's family are Jews who were exiled from Baghdad in 1946. Traditionally one of the characteristics of public space in this part of the world, the adhan provides an aural reading of time, regardless of religious affiliation. In Western cities such as Manhattan, the early morning and late night call to prayer fall under "disturbance of the peace" noise pollution ordinances, and mosques are required to comply accordingly.

Early mosque architecture did not include the towers from which the adhan is sung. Rather, upon discovery that many of the faithful did not know when to attend mosque for prayers, a form of public address was initiated. The earliest minarets were former Greek watchtowers and the towers of Christian churches. Eventually, minarets were included in the overall plan of mosques.

Islamic law historically states that a minaret need not be attached to a mosque proper, and that any towering structure complete with open galleries or balconies can serve this function. The Clocktower Gallery in Lower Manhattan served as the perfect context for *Minaret*; the building rises high above many surrounding buildings, and the rooftop features an open balcony. So the historical origin empowers a contemporary initiative to re-introduce a ritual that has been quieted.

**What does "public art" mean to you, and are your "public art" projects different from your other projects?**

For me, "public art" enlists its audience as a vital collaborator in the production of meaning. All my projects engage a public on platforms that differ with each context. Work appearing on the streets, such as *paraSITE* and *Minaret*, deals with a public in a very immediate and specific way, by virtue of its direct visibility. My work in institutions does likewise: both *Climate Control* and *Rise* included moments when their ductwork traveled outside the building, thus exposing itself to a surprised and questioning public. This produced a fenestration or window through which the

work could be understood as one that relied on elements outside the exhibition space to function. Another institutional work, *Romanticized All Out of Proportion*, engages an interesting public by virtue of its location: many viewers were introduced to it by default of having come to see the *Panorama*; still others were just visiting Flushing Corona Park and happened to wander into the Queens Museum.

**How political is your art? Does the creative impulse enhance or inhibit the political one? How do they work together? If there is a politics you want to support in your work, is it a clear and describable politics, or not?**

Hans Haacke, in response to Daniel Buren's 1970 statement, "Art, whatever else it might be, is exclusively political", said that, "Art always is *also* political." I don't frame myself as a political artist, but there is a recognition of politics in my work that comes from working in public space and with certain themes. Furthermore, I reject any absolutes in politics and am more interested in the function of the pieces as visible platforms that enable discourse. The desire to work purely in a formal direction devoid of any overt political message is itself political—a politics of apathy.

In my production, the creative impulse usually comes from an initial response to a given situation, much like most site-specific work. A site is never devoid of politics and it is usually contaminated with some kind of history. To reject this would be irresponsible and simplistic—and it inevitably finds its way into the work, regardless. But my own politics are never a defining factor in the process, even if they are clear in the end. If there is a common denominator in the delivery of my projects, it is the use of agitation as a catalyst for circumventing the expected response. As a tactic, the agitating message may seek a disarming or innocuous vehicle, such as the smell of Chinese pastries baking. Within the aroma, however, hovers an idea more dangerous and threatening: the socially excluded have breached the fortress and circumvented the structures that usually impede their presence.

### **Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art - 2003**

As a non-profit organization, Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art has the mission to promote and distribute visual art in the perspective of international exchange. The Foundation takes part in conferences, events and exhibitions in collaboration with art centers and museums. It also supports artists-in-residence programs that provide studios for emerging artists.

The annual Dena Foundation Art Award – which is the focus of this publication – has been given this year to American artist Michael Rakowitz who was selected by Carolyn Christov Bakargiev, writer and chief curator at the Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Rakowitz' installation *paraSITE* is both a work of art and a personal shelter for the homeless. *paraSITE* was conceived in the context of the artist's graduate project at M.I.T., a response to a decision by Harvard University to alter building grates so to prevent the homeless from lying down on them.

The exhibition *Déplacements* by Laurence Bossé and Hans Ulrich Obrist with Anne Dressen and Vivian Rehberg at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, has reunited a number of artists concerned with geographical and interdisciplinary forms of displacement. The participation of the Italian collective *Multiplicity* and of Luca Vitone was made possible with the support of Dena Foundation. Vitone's project *Nevertheless in Motion*, was inserted in the exhibition catalogue published by onestar press.

Fabien Verschaere's *A Novel for Life* exhibition at Palais de Tokyo was the occasion for renewing the link with both the artist, a former laureate of the Dena Award 2001, and the innovative institution devoted to young creativity. Verschaere's catalogue *A Novel for Life*, with a text by Chiara Parisi and an interview by Jerome Sans, was published by Dena Foundation and Palais de Tokyo.

"The pursuit of happiness" through art seems to be the message of the short movie of the same name by Jimmie Durham with Anri Sala as the protagonist, produced by Zerynthia with the contribution of Dena Foundation and in collaboration with the Musée d'Art

Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The movie was presented at the Mk2 Bibliothèque movie theater in Paris thanks to Nathanael Karnitz and Caroline Bourgeois.

The theme of the 2003 Istanbul Biennial was *Poetic Justice*, curated by Dan Cameron. This theme inspired the Dena Foundation to contribute to the realization of a public project by Bruna Esposito. *Public Compost Toilet* was created by Esposito with assistance from Ecosave in order to encourage a better respect of natural resources. This work was also supported by the Italian Culture Institute and Fondazione Antonio Ratti and permanently installed at the Experimental Science Center in Istanbul.

ArtOmi, Summer Program at Omi, New York, has been once again selected for the scholarship provided by foundation trustee Anna Rosa Cotroneo Bidolli. The Art Omi recipient was Italian artist Nicoletta Agostini, among the artists invited in the recent exhibition "Forse Italia" curated by Eva Vittoz at the Museum SMAK in Ghent. At Art Omi, Agostini was given the opportunity to meet a number of artists of different origins and nationalities in a program organised by specialists from the art world.

Beginning in July of this year, the Centre International d'Accueil et d'Echanges des Récollets opened its doors and allowed the Foundation to initiate the *Artist-in-Residence Program at Recollets*, in collaboration with the Youth and Sport Department of the Municipality of Milan, with the Italian Associations Zerynthia and Volume! and with Il Genio di Palermo. The Centre offers studio-apartments to artists and researchers from different international cultural institutions. Artists are given the opportunity to enlarge their vision through the experience of the Parisian art scene. The Dena Foundation also promotes exchanges between the participating artists and the artistic institutions of Paris. The following are the 2003 artists: Rebecca Agnes, Elisabetta Benassi, Dafni and Papadatos, Amal Saad, Maurizio Savini, Donatella Spaziani. As a result of this program, Rebecca Agnes was invited to participate in the exhibition *L'Invention du Monde*, curated by Florence Morat at the Centre Pompidou.





photo : Jean-Claude Planchet © Centre Pompidou



Michael Rakowitz is an artist who lives in New York. His work has appeared in exhibitions at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, the Queens Museum of Art, the Storefront for Art and Architecture, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, White Columns Gallery, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, all in New York; the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia; Fri-Art in Fribourg, Switzerland; the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania; and ACC Galerie in Weimar, Germany, among others. He is the recipient of the 2002 Design 21 Grand Prix Award, sponsored by UNESCO. He is currently Professor of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is a curator and writer living in Turin and Rome. Currently Chief Curator at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, she recently organized the group exhibition / *Moderni/ The Moderns*. Formerly at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, she curated exhibitions such as *Greater New York, Around 1984: A Look at Art in the Eighties*, *Animations* and *Janet Cardiff*, and initiated a number of smaller-scale special projects, including Michael Rakowitz's *Climate Control*.

**Michael Rakowitz**

## ***CIRCUMVENTIONS***

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