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## Artist's 'blank books' project seeks to restock historic Baghdad library

Marta Bausells



Wafaa Bilal's installation 168:01, which is made up of 1,000 blank, white books. Photograph: Wafaa Bilal

An Iraqi-American artist is using online crowdfunding and performance art to help return books to the shelves of the University of Baghdad's library, which burnt down during the Iraq war.

The library of the university's college of fine arts hosted more than 70,000 titles until looters set fire to the entire collection in 2003. The building has been reconstructed, but very few books were returned.

"This used to be one of best fine art institutions in the Middle East, if not the world," said Wafaa Bilal, a New York-based artist who used to visit the library almost daily when he studied in Baghdad.

Bilal's exhibition at Ontario's Gallery of Windsor, opening on 29 January, will feature a 72ft bookshelf holding 1,000 blank white books. For a \$25 (£17.60) fee on Kickstarter, Bilal will

replace one of the blank books for a real copy, sending the blank book to the donor. At the end, all the real books will be shipped to Baghdad.



Students of the University of Baghdad, which was badly damaged during the Iraq war. Photograph: Hadi Mizban - Pool/Getty Images

Bilal has previously explored the destruction of Iraq through his photography series *Ashes*, for which he built miniature reconstructions of scenes depicted in the press. For his latest work he said wanted to create “a participatory project that had tangible results for both donor and receiver”.

“I’m hoping that by stepping in, it will be a reminder that this community [of artists, students and academics] still exists. I want this project to usher a new era in Iraq, even if just in a symbolic way.”

The title of the installation, *168:01*, refers to the 13th-century destruction of the historic House of Wisdom library – then the largest in the world – at the hands of Mongolians. “Legend has it that they dumped its entire contents into the Tigris river to create a bridge to cross over, and that the pages bled for seven days – 168 hours,” Bilal said. “The extra 1 is that second when I imagine the books turned white and drained of knowledge.”

The project has grown in ways that Bilal did not predict – librarians in the US, for instance, are chipping in to build a digital index that will form a wishlist of sorts for the library.

“People are already talking to each other about the loss and the rebuilding of culture,” said Bilal. “The communication of students and faculty with people outside the country means more to them than is imaginable.”