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HYPERALLERGIC

Help Rebuild the University of Baghdad's Destroyed Art Library, One Book at a Time

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Wafaa Bilal, "The Ashes Series: Al-Mutanabbi Street" (2003–13) (all images courtesy Wafaa Bilal)

In 2003, during the invasion of Iraq, looters set fire to the library of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. Seventy thousand books were reduced to ashes. Thirteen years later, the collection has still not been replenished, and local art students struggle to find books from which to study.

In 168:01, an upcoming installation at Ontario's Art Gallery of Windsor, Iraqi-born, New York-based artist Wafaa Bilal has enlisted the public to help rebuild the College of Fine Arts' library, one book at a time. The installation consists of a library of 1,000 blank white books, "a symbolic monument to the texts that were lost in 2003," Bilal tells Hyperallergic. This 40-foot long, six-foot-high stack of six bookshelves is flanked with Bilal's Ashes Series — photographs of his small-scale recreations of buildings destroyed in the Iraq War, dusted with ashes.

The physical exhibit itself is only half of the project. It's linked to a Kickstarter campaign, and every donation goes towards purchasing educational texts from a wish list compiled by faculty

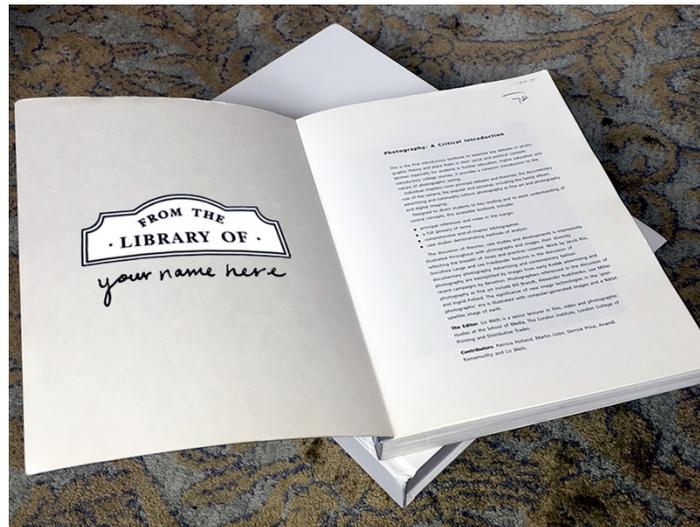
at the College of Fine Arts. When a donor pays for a new art book, it will replace a blank white book on the shelves at the Windsor installation.

“The blank books will transform into colored books. I see this as a visualization of the reversal of destruction,” Bilal says. As the shelves fill up with real books, Kickstarter donors will receive the blank books as rewards, a “small reminder of their contribution.” Bilal’s goal is to replace all 1,000 blank books with much-needed art texts. After the installation is over, the donated books will be shipped to Baghdad.

Called *168:01*, the installation’s title references the destruction of another historic Iraqi library: the Bayt al-Hikma, or House of Wisdom, which was the largest library in the world until the 13th century. “It’s a story I grew up with,” Bilal says. “According to legend, the Mongol army threw the library into the Tigris River to create a bridge of books for them to cross. The pages bled ink into the river for seven days, after which the books were drained of knowledge.”

“That image always stayed in my mind,” Bilal says. Since seven days equals 168 hours, he titled the project *168:01*. “I imagined what happens to these books in the second after that period of being drained of knowledge ended. That second signals the beginning of rebirth and process of moving forward to rebuilding.”

Bilal, who studied geography at the University of Baghdad before becoming an artist, says that before the invasion of Iraq, the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad was “one of the best educational art institutions in the Middle East, if not the world. It was a very vibrant place.” But after 2003, there was a mass exodus of faculty and artists from Baghdad. “It’s not what it used to be,” Bilal says. (He himself left the country in 1991, around the beginning of the Gulf War.) Artists in Iraq “lack support. And any art in general is really a reflection of a nation — it’s what any nation leaves behind, historically. So [Iraqi art students] definitely need this kind of support.”



One Kickstarter reward is the inscription of the donor’s name on the bookplate of an educational text donated to the College of Fine Arts. Other rewards include the blank, limited edition artist books from the *168:01* installation, numbered and signed by the artist.

Bilal knows well that replacing the university’s books is just one tiny step towards rebuilding what’s been lost in the Iraq War. Still, the work “amplifies the need to start to rebuild what’s

been destroyed," he says. "[Sending these donated books is] a simple symbolic act, but I know it will have a huge, powerful impact on the future of so many students. It relieves the isolation of the students and faculty in Baghdad by letting them know there are people connected to them around the world. The students and faculty have been watching the Kickstarter, and it warms their heart."

The project has already taken on a life of its own, expanding in ways Bilal hadn't expected. Librarians have offered to volunteer in creating an index of the donated books. Over the next three months, a registry of the Library's wish list titles will become open to the public, allowing them to purchase and ship the books directly to the museum where they will continuously replace the set of blank books.