Wafaa Bilal
168.01

Wafaa Bilal: 168.01

Curated by Srimoyee Mitra

AGW
Art Gallery of Windsor

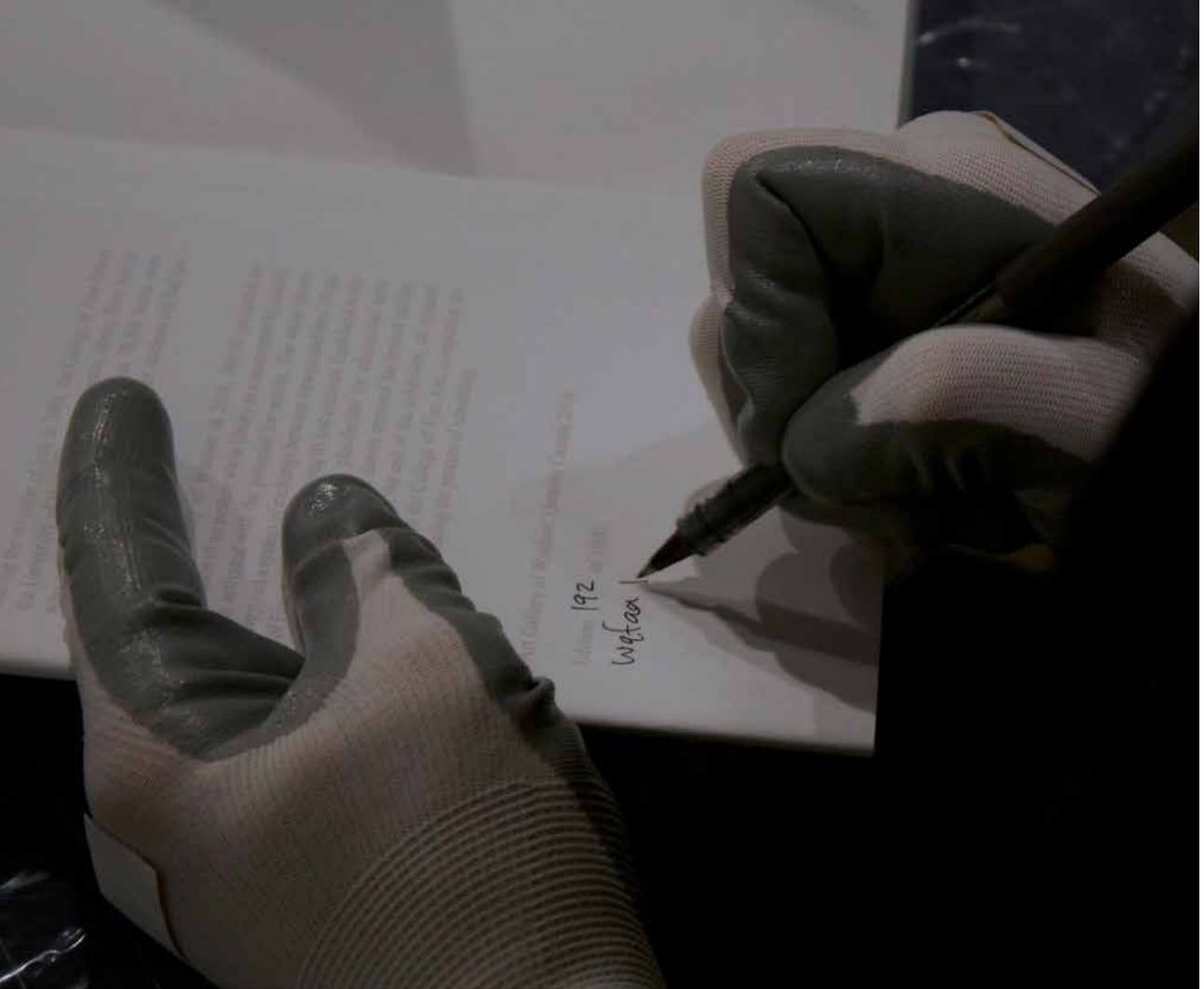


Table of Contents

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

Director's Foreword

It has been a pleasure to witness the creation of the exhibition *Wafaa Bilal: 168.01* over the past two years and to present this accompanying publication. The two activities illustrate how the artist calls to question forms of endemic violence against culture in times of conflict in both historical and contemporary life.

The AGW's Curator of Contemporary Art, Srimoyee Mitra has been at the centre of this project following her first introduction to his social art practice in 2011 and her continued advocacy as she has developed her curatorial practice at the AGW since that time. She has done so with a conviction to the importance of this artist and to the issues arising from his work with the larger goal of exposing important issues of citizenship, visibility and power structures as prevailing global concerns.

The exhibition comprised of two rooms of photographs flanking a central gallery containing a sculptural installation made up of bookshelves totalling some forty feet in length were breathtaking visual experiences. The experience was minimalist in initial impact and haunting on closer inspection as the viewer learned the stories buttressing the artwork — stories of places, objects and people in search of knowledge and a site and its contents destroyed by war and conflict, stories of lives lost including civilians and family members. To appreciate the detail of those contexts mobilizing Bilal's practice, we are as viewers and readers supported by the insightful essays by contributors Gregory Sholette, Ian Alden Russell and Srimoyee Mitra. I thank them for their dedication and participation.

A project of this ambition would not take place without many supporters and partners. The Art Gallery of Windsor is pleased to be partnering with Esker Foundation, Calgary, to realize this project and we thank them for their commitment and dedication to realizing it with us. We are indebted to the ongoing support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for their multi-year program support to assist in bringing this project to fruition. The City of Windsor supports us through our 49-year *gratis* lease agreement wherein *Wafaa Bilal 168.01* took place. The support from these organizations has ensured that we are able to deliver a strong program of contemporary art exhibitions and corresponding publications for our audiences to enjoy. Thanks are extended to the all Gallery staff members who have made so many significant contributions to realizing and presenting the exhibition and publication.

Finally, I would like to recognize the artist for asking viewers to take another look at the pervasive and cyclical role of violence across time. His work reminds that peace continues to be an elusive prospect and that literacy can be unwelcomed in times of conflict. That we would willingly seek to craft such a world on account of cultural and political differences and their concomitant power relations is indeed a traumatic thought.

Catharine Mastin, PhD

Right On the Ash: The Traumatic Palette of Wafaa Bilal

Gregory Sholette

"Take nothing for granted. Not the litter, not the dust, not even the ashes."

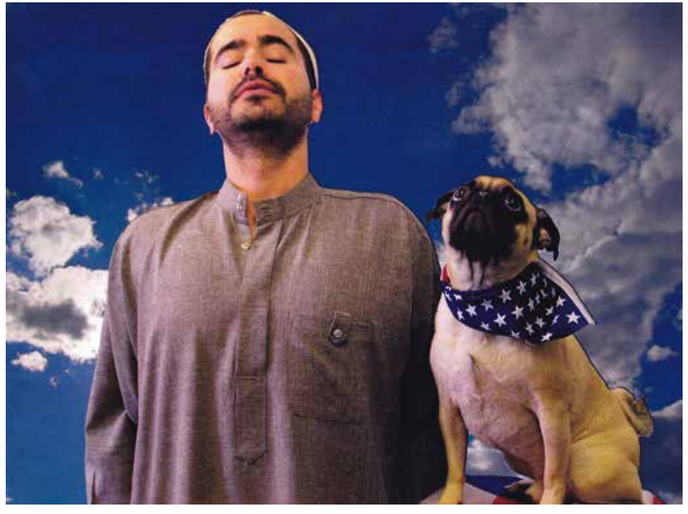
Agata Craftlove, *The Book of Spills, Stains, and Debris.*[1]

We are looking at an image. A broad street is emptied of people. Just ahead sits a low, rectangular building, brightly lit, maybe 30 metres away. The building occupies the centre of the image. Four identical domes or *qubba* sit atop the building's classically ordered structure. Four recessed *iwans* or pointed archways dominate its façade. The domes and archways echo one other. Symmetry rules all. The bright building with the domes and arches is the King's Mosque (*jami' al malakz /* لك ام لآ ع ه اج). Flooded with sunlight, the building is flanked on either side by other, less spectacular structures. Their walls are bleached and off-white, and here and there they are spattered with soot or carbon. The total effect is like a 1920s Precisionist painting or perhaps a photograph by Paul Strand — except for the street itself, as it is anything but bright or neat or orderly. Instead, it is ankle-deep with shredded books, paper, plywood scraps, and pieces of ruptured concrete. Covering everything is a fine grey dust.

Al-Mutanabbi is the street in the photograph. The photograph is a work by Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal. It is one of ten photographs that make up *The Ashes Series*. The dust is human ash. That is unsettling. And something else does not seem right with Bilal's pictures. Perhaps the scale of the buildings, or the camera's depth-of-field is off-kilter? There is something in these images that is difficult to nail down.

Al-Mutanabbi Street is named after a renowned Iraqi poet born 1100 years ago. Lined with booksellers of every description, this remarkable street marks the literary epicentre of Baghdad. On March 5, 2007 a car bomb turned Al-Mutanabbi into cinders. Several dozen people were killed; 100 were injured. Novels, diaries, notebooks, magazines, graphic novels, sketchbooks, pencils and pens and countless printed images all homogenized into carbon and dust. As writer Aditi Sriram explains, "before the bomb, the nooks and crannies of Al-Mutanabbi Street were the classrooms and libraries where enlightenment sparked, master's theses began, doctoral research continued, and publications celebrated."[2] All of which brings us back to Bilal's photograph of Al-Mutanabbi Street. It purports to show the day immediately after the carnage, when in fact the artist reconstructed his version of this crime scene in miniature using online photographs as reference materials. He then re-photographed the scale mockup as if it were the authentic location. Which means the photograph's infidelity is essential to its message, as it is to all of the works in *The Ashes Series*. What do they show? A demolished prison cell, a once-sumptuous room that is still dominated by a miraculously undamaged chandelier, a street of book vendors turned into rubble.

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION



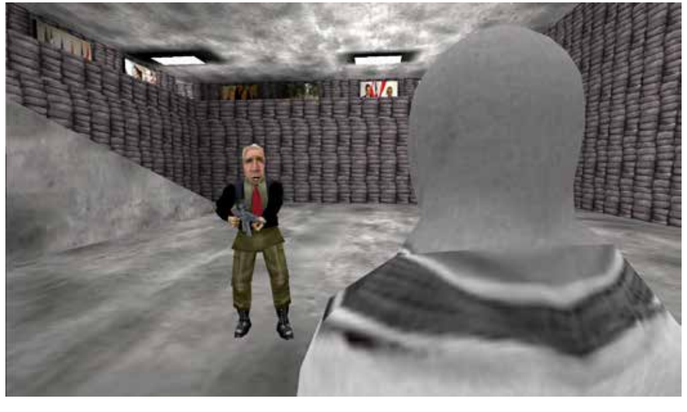


IMAGE CAPTION
IMAGE CAPTION

In 2016 Al-Mutanabbi Street is again a place where booksellers mingle with poets, book lovers and students all surrounded by stacks of printed matter. But I wonder if the street's literal restoration was necessary before Bilal could summon its ash-covered spectre back to haunt us.[3] I also wonder if Al-Mutanabbi, like the other spaces reproduced in *The Ashes Series*, count as those lost yet irreplaceable places that, like the artist, most of us refuse to let go.

It's not just ashes. Archives and memories, books and narratives, photographs and trauma all are elements within Bilal's artistic repertoire. Throughout his expanded practice runs one certain thread: digital media technology, the electronic constant of our age. For example, in order to arrive at a rich set of online resources for fabricating *The Ashes Series*, Bilal first employed a reverse image search. This makes images that seem to be based on the early 19th-century techniques of the diorama and chemical-based photography secretly dependent on an explicit 21st-century technology. Bilal's work has over the past decade consistently made use of such cutting-edge, computer-based software along with video games, online networks, and crowd-sourced data aggregation, though always in combination with something material, most often his own body.

In his 2008 project *The Night of Bush Capturing: Virtual Jihadi*, Bilal hacked an Al-Qaeda video game *Quest for Bush*, a hunt-and-shoot game where the American president was quarry. To create their game, Al-Qaeda had itself hacked a commercial video game entitled *Quest for Saddam*, whose objective is obvious. In 2008 administrators at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute censored Bilal's piece after a group of Republican students described the school's art department that sponsored the work "a safe haven for terrorists."[4] The artist responded by stating that his *Virtual Jihadi* artwork "holds a mirror that reveals our own propensities for violence, racism and propaganda."[5] Elaborating, Bilal explains:

> being in the middle of the war, it's a completely different experience than being in a video game …What the US Army is adopting more and more is that video game mentality — because they wanted that disconnection between reality and the soldiers, to have them disengage.[6]

Bilal's related projects including *Domestic Tension* and *Dog or Iraqi* also used social networks to draw attention to the general obliviousness of American people to the suffering of others, including the capacity to inflict pain from a safely detached distance. And as we know with the secretive US drone program, these distances increase with every technological upgrade.

Domestic Tension (2007) allowed online visitors to hit Bilal with blasts of foul-smelling, yellow dye shot from a remote-controlled paintball gun. The real/virtual interface was made all the more appalling by a live, 24-hour Internet camera that maintained constant watch over Bilal's moves in a small and confined Chicago room where the artist was sequestered and where the action took place. He was, so to speak, reduced to a sitting target for would-be online "assassins." The exact nature of domestic tension that the piece refers to is undoubtedly multilayered. For one thing, when Bilal created this work in 2007 dozens of popular "reality television" programs had already recently been launched. Some of this "Realtertainment"

involved live broadcasting individuals who were living under constant surveillance. Life itself was becoming a video game. But the brutality of *Domestic Tension* is most clearly anchored in one specific and horrific incident drawn from the artist's own life that was anything but a game.

During the second US-led invasion of Iraq in 2004, Bilal's older brother Haji was killed as a result of a direct air-to-ground missile strike launched by an American war jet. Not long afterwards, the artist's grieving father Gize also died. The capacity to eliminate distant targets with programmable "smart" weapons emerged as a signature of 21st-century warfare, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were the proving grounds for this increasingly commonplace technology.7 Meanwhile, *Domestic Tension* went on for 30 days, and some 60,000 shots originating in 128 different international locations were fired at the artist before the ordeal was over.8 As if this self-punishment was not sufficient, Bilal permitted online voters in his next project *Dog or Iraqi* (2008) to select who would be waterboarded: Bosley, a wrinkly-faced pug sporting an American flag bandana, or Bilal. The dog won.

Ever-present in Bilal's work is a fascination with the darker side of technologically enhanced art practices. It is a tendency already prefigured in his Surrealist-inspired photographs of the early 2000s. In one startling image entitled *Ajrass* (Bells), a naked boy shouts at what looks like a mounted loudspeaker improbably jutting up from a barren desert landscape. A dust storm rages behind the boy, about to consume him, but the boy cannot move. He is immobilized, sunk knee-deep in sand. Perhaps the 2002 photograph is making a reference to Operation Desert Storm from a decade earlier when US troops entered Iraq for the first time. This was when Bilal was forced to flee to the West. Born in in Kufa, a predominantly Shiite city just 170 kilometres south of Baghdad, he had studied geography and geology at the University of Baghdad before turning to art. On several occasions, while a student in Baghdad, he was detained on campus by Ba'ath Party security for exhibiting politically dissident artworks openly critical of the tyrannical Saddam Hussein regime. As American coalition forces swept across the country in 1991, Bilal left Iraq, spending two arduous years in a Saudi Arabian refugee camp before finally immigrating to the US, where he became a citizen in April, 2000.

By 2010, Bilal's online waterboarding and his endurance in the yellow room of remote-controlled abuse had helped to establish the artist's reputation within the contemporary art scene. But it seems Bilal's demons were not yet satiated. In his dark-tech piece *3rdi*, a titanium-mounted digital camera was bolted into the back of his scalp.[9] Both the procedure and its aftermath were physically excruciating. Over a two-month period this "third eye" snapped a picture every minute and sent each image to an online website.[10] The result is an archive of everydayness, precisely the sort of uneventful life imagery that most refugees never have access to. The project also generated controversies about the right to privacy for those people Bilal encountered with his new sense organ automatically documenting the space behind him. His employer, New York University, ultimately forced him to cover the device while Bilal was on campus. Responding to these privacy concerns in a *Wall Street*

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

Times interview, the artist pointed out that "there is nothing private, which is ironically the state of the state we are in."[11] On Memorial Day of that same year, he produced another pain-inducing piece, *and Counting…*, which required Bilal to remain still as 105,000 ink dots were tattooed onto his back, permanently marking his body with the number of US and Iraqi war dead together with the names of the cities closest to their final living location. Bilal says:

> The idea of receiving a single dot for each death — yes, I'm carrying that on my back now. But the body has its own language. You feel that pain as much as I feel it. You're kind of putting yourself in my place as well.

Abrupt transition…

Bilal continues to cultivate a sense of solidarity and empathy with his viewers in his most recent installation at the Art Gallery of Windsor entitled *168:01*. At first it seems to represent a definite shift in the artist's tactics. While it does address several of Bilal's primary research interests, including the use of interactive technology and embodied remote action, it does not involve Bilal asking participants to splatter him with paint or to decide if he should be choked with water. It seems that self-induced painful art-making is behind him, at least for the moment. Bilal's body is not even immediately part of the new project. Books are instead. The title of the work stands for the first second that follows upon seven hours of elapsed time, or *168:01*, and once again the artist is making essential use of Internet technology to investigate the frisson generated when a tangible, specifically located physical space becomes entangled with digital communication networks and ethereal cyber-communities. But while *168:01* is less over-the-top theatrical than some of Bilal's past celebrated works, it is no less impassioned. The project's drama plays out within a spacious, rectangular room that resembles a library in all but one crucial detail: as time passes this detail gradually recedes until what remains is an actual library. I will explain.

Some 12 metres of lumber shelving line the walls of large, 8½ x 22-metre space inside the gallery. On these shelves rest approximately one thousand books — or what at first appear to be books. Instead, each 6¼ x 8 x 1¼ volume is blank and inkless from cover to cover, like book spectres or ghost books. At one end of this room filled with generic ghost books is a second book collection that accumulates gradually over the two-month course of the exhibition. These other publications are purchased by visitors to the gallery or by people logging on to a Kickstarter website that allows participants to help rebuild the library at the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad. Participation with *168:01* involves actually replacing thousands of books damaged or stolen during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.[12] Gradually Bilal's spectral book library begins to change. It gains titles, content and colour as the donated books replace each white-on-white stand-in volume with an actually published volume. The artist describes his process this way:

> Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the white books will slowly be replaced with visitor donations from a wish list compiled by The College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad, whose library was looted and destroyed in 2003 … As the

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

shelves are slowly filled, the white books replaced are sent to each donor as a gift. At the end of the exhibition, all the donated books will be sent to the University of Baghdad to help rebuild their library.[13]

Specifically, librarians at the University of Baghdad's College of Fine Arts provided Bilal with an inventory of their losses that amounted in total to some 70,000 works, and this staged library, or library in stages, is simultaneously a site of concrete knowledge and a symbolic medium for generating international goodwill. It is, in other words, an action-object whose agency involves the necessity of recovering from traumatic events that are personal and historical, singular and collective. But why name the project *168:01*, or *One Hundred Sixty-Eight Hours and One Second*? This requires a bit more of a history lesson.

Sumer was one of several ancient civilizations that rose and fell in the region now known today as Iraq. Sumer is also credited with establishing the first systematically organized library near modern-day Mosul in the 7th century BC. From that point onwards, books and learning remained a central feature of Mesopotamia, reaching a crescendo during the Islamic Golden Age (750–1258 CE). The House of Wisdom (بيت الحكمة ; *Bayt al-Hikma*) was one of the most noted of many library collections in and around Baghdad. Then in 1258, Mongol warriors pillaged the region. Bilal recalls stories from his childhood about the seven-day siege in which invading soldiers tossed books into the Tigris River until "the ink from the books flooded into the river with a deep dark blue."[14] *168:01* is of course the second after the submerged libraries were drained of colour.

Indigo waters, bleached books denuded of their inky content, a series of photographs dominated by dusty gray fallout. I arrive at my final thoughts on Wafaa Bilal's artistic practice, thoughts that come unexpectedly out of the blue and pivot on his use of colour. From the sickly bespattered yellow of *Domestic Tension* to the green acid glow of his neon project *Iran/Iraq* (2013), the multi-hued chromatherapy installation *The Things I Could Tell …* (2015), and the silvery grey of *The Ashes Series*, colour remains a significant if overlooked feature of Bilal's artwork. In the most recent project, for example, it is the lack of colour that dominates, thus drawing our attention directly back to colour by way of its very absence in *168:01*. Art-historically speaking, colour has primarily been a concern of muralists and painters, but also the most radical practitioners of the avant-garde — including the Cubists, Futurists, and the artists of the Russian avant-garde — made it central to their work. "I have broken the blue boundary of colour limits, come out into the white; beside me comrade-pilots swim in this infinity," proclaimed Kazimir Malevich. But what about in Bilal's work? Can there be a link between colour and social activism? For example, is Bilal making reference to the so-called "colour revolutions" of the post-Cold War era, including the Blue Revolution of Kuwait, the Green of Iran, the Orange of Ukraine, the Rose of Georgia, or the Yellow Revolution of 1980s People Power in the Philippines? Does colour as an intangible sensory phenomenon help counteract failed states and lift revolutionary hopes when applied to real world politics? Leaving me to ask: is social connectivity itself somehow colourable?

Bilal's artistic palette is thick with motivational hues of solidarity and empathy, as well as heightened expectations and sometimes also a punishing desire to achieve a state of self-overcoming. Abstract and concrete at one and the same time, these affective tints cross-examine colour itself as a concept, much as Ludwig Wittgenstein once pointed out how remarkable it is that we even have a concept of pure colour, given that in reality we are always "surrounded by impure colours."[15] And Bilal's colour appears alongside other formal elements in his work. Never muddied or uncertain, they are determined carriers of meaning, much as actors delivering an author's message also know that they generate meaning through their posture, gaze and tone of voice while on stage. Meanwhile, the white-on-white of *168:01*, and the grey-on-grey of *The Ashes Series* do not signal an absence of this chromatic focus in Bilal's art but rather its emotional intensification by way of a controlled, colourless calm.

Near the conclusion of *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida invokes a mythical place and time where the singular trace from a passing body — a signature or footprint, a voice recording or photograph — is not yet detached from the body itself, and where agency and representation are indivisibly devoted to one another. "He dreams this irreplaceable place, the very ash, where the singular imprint, like a signature, barely distinguishes itself from the impression." But the dull, chalky greyness of the philosopher's *mise en scène* belies the ferocity of the dreamer's desire that burns just below the surface like a hidden ember. Wafaa Bilal's own archival meditations pose questions in the form of counter-tableaus. His palette consists of decolorized books, memories, and human remains. Like a distant, belated reply to Derrida, Bilal seems to ask:

What tint is a raging desert storm?
What colour radiates from liberation?
What shade is the fiery ember just before it cools to cold grey ash?

Gregory Sholette

Special thanks to Jennifer Avril for her assistance preparing this text.

Notes

1. From the last page of Agata Craftlove's booklet stains, spill & debris, http://www.themm.us.

2. Aditi Sriram, "Resurrecting the Book Market of Baghdad," narratively, December 30, 2013, http://narrative.ly/stories/resurrecting-the-book-market-of-baghdad/.

3. Bilal's images are not the only tribute to this haunted place, this street of books, scholars, and cafés. Since the 2007 bombing, dozens of artists have created work — from performances and poetry to videos, printed pieces, and installations — marking the significance of this former book market that was much more than a book market. Along with Jeremy Deller's 2009 project *What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* (in which the British artist put the remains of a crumpled car from the March 5, 2007 car bombing on Al-Mutanabbi Street on a truck and, with support from Creative Time, took the wreckage on tour across the US), the poet and bookseller Beau Beausoleil and scholar Sarah Bodman developed the *Al-Mutanabbi Street Broadside Project* in collaboration with dozens of artist who helped to establish a cultural bridge between San Francisco and Iraq. Beausoleil and Bodman later published a book documenting their memorial project entitled *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* (PM Press, 2012). See http://www.al-mutanabbistreetstartshere-

boston.com/ and https://gerryco23.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/an-inventory-of-al-mutanabbi-street-a-hymn-to-the-book-and-the-word/ and for Deller: http://creativetime.org/projects/it-is-what-it-is-conversations-about-iraq/.

4. See Sholette, Gregory, "Minus 273.15° Celsius: The Temperature at which Thought Freezes Over," *Third Text* 22.4 (2008): 495–99.

5. "Wafaa Bilal's Response to President Jackson Regarding the Closure of his Exhibit," an archived response from the waybackmachine, http://www.wafaabilal.com/statement.html.

6. Lara Pellegrinelli, "Artist Tattoos Indelible Iraq Memorial Into His Skin," National Public Radio, June 3, 2010, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127348258.

7. Ian Sample, "US gambles on a 'smart' war in Iraq," *New Scientist* (March 2013), https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn3518-us-gambles-on-a-smart-war-in-iraq/.

8. Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2008).

9. *3rdi* was commissioned by the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar.

10. See http://www.3rdi.me/.

11. Erica Orden, "His Hindsight is 20-20," December 3, 2010, *The Wall Street Journal*, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703377504575651091530462742.

12. Wafaa Bilal, *One Hundred Sixty-Eight Hours and One Second* on Kickstarter, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/307933775/one-hundred-sixty-eight-hours-and-one-second.

13. Cited in Andrea Alessi, "In New Artwork, Wafaa Bilal Enlists the Public to Rebuild a Destroyed Baghdad Library," ArtSlant, http://www.artslant.com/ew/articles/show/44856?print=1. See also "Participate in rebuilding the library at the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad!" https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/307933775/one-hundred-sixty-eight-hours-and-one-second.

14. Sadly Mosul's central library was again pillaged in 2015, this time by members of Isis. See Muna Fadhil, "Isis destroys thousands of books and manuscripts in Mosul libraries," February 26, 2015, *The Guardian,* http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/26/isis-destroys-thousands-books-libraries.

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, #29.3.60 in *Remarks on Colour* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

Rebuilding Futures, One Book at a Time

Srimoyee Mitra

“At the moment the number of the readers who come to our institution is very limited. Sometimes when the security situation is very bad, we receive just one reader. But even when we have one reader, we open the main reading room. In my view, this is very important, morally and politically; we have to fight.”[1]

These words by Dr. Saad Bashir Eskander, Director-General of the Iraqi National Library and Archive (INLA), Baghdad, have stayed with me for a long time. I had read an interview with Dr. Eskander a few years after the INLA was severely damaged by looting and fires that took place during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. His call “to fight” was a call to resist the violent imperialism that attempted to erase Iraq’s culture and history. In the interview, Dr. Eskander emphasized the psychological and physical resilience required to combat the terror and the traumas of losing loved ones and witnessing the destruction of one’s homeland. I was struck by his determination and vision as he described the process of rebuilding the INLA after it endured unfathomable destruction. He explained his approach:

> I put together a six-month strategy to open the main reading room in the National Library, just to raise the morale of my employees. It was a crazy idea because everything was in bad shape: we didn’t have chairs, equipment, electricity or water. But we started to get some money from the Ministry and from outside Iraq — for example, from the Italians.[2]

Within three years following the devastation, in 2006, 75 to 80 per cent of the INLA’s building had been renovated. They had a website and the book collection was on the Internet. The microfilm and restoration labs were reconstructed. They started to work on the records and files of the Ministry of the Interior, which were classified materials that contained valuable information about different aspects of life in Iraq between 1914 and 1980.[3] I was deeply moved by Eskander’s commitment to reviving the INLA as a beacon of secular, public space in a city where cultural life had been suspended after years of war. The interview opened my eyes to the ongoing civilian efforts to rebuild the cultural institutions in Iraq and other war-torn places in the world.

A similar determination and vision for the future reverberate in the meditative and serene grids of books in Wafaa Bilal’s major installation *168:01*. The objective of this installation was to initiate a process to rebuild the collection of books at the library of the College of Fine Arts, University of Baghdad, which was torched during the Iraq war that began in 2003. The installation is composed of 1,000 white hardcover books, placed equidistantly apart on 40-foot-long bookshelves. The symmetrical pattern of the bookshelf resembles a luxurious domestic trope of Modernist architecture such as a personal library or venetian blinds. Its uniform aesthetic creates a sublime formality that resonates with abstract sculptures. On the other

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

hand, the repetitive intervals at which the white books have been placed on the white shelves embody a sense of austerity and rigidity far removed from a living domestic space. Their stoic forms resemble tombstones commemorating the innumerable lives lost during wartime. Each book, signed and numbered by the artist, symbolizes the thousands of books that were lost when the library of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad was attacked and torched in April 2003. The College of Fine Arts was established in the mid-20th century and has been the alma mater for many generations of artists from Iraq. The library was known for housing the best and largest collection of art books in Iraq — a collection that exceeded 70,000.[4] According to eyewitness accounts, the building and the collection were burned to the ground.[5] Thirteen years later, while the library has been renovated, the breadth of books available to the students remains limited.

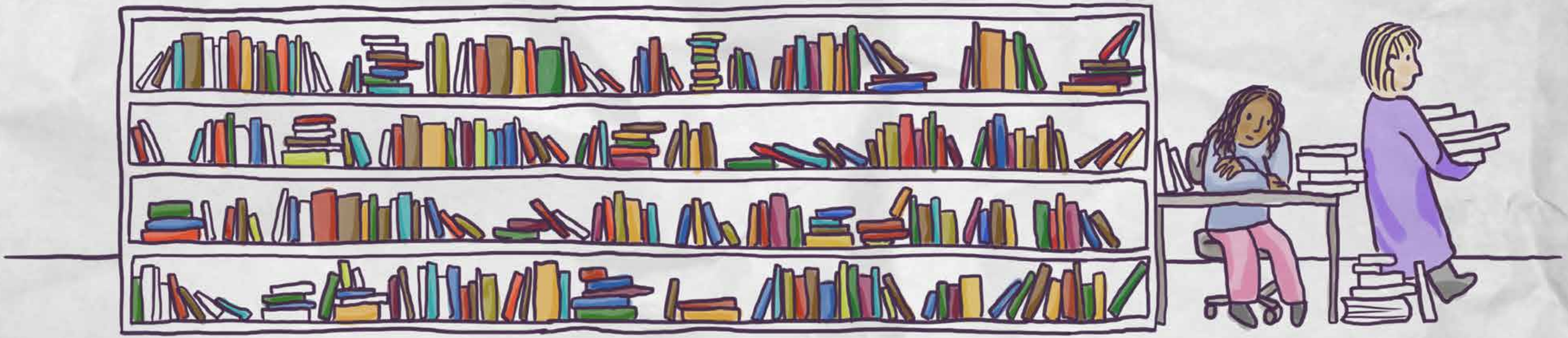
Bilal, who was born and raised in Kufa, Iraq, spent a lot of time at the College of Fine Arts as a young student. In a recent interview, he recalled the library stacked with bookshelves: "these books were windows to the outside world that produced so many amazing artists in Iraq."[6] Bilal's ambitious project *168:01* aimed to rebuild these holdings for future generations of students by mobilizing a book drive and donations among audiences locally and globally. Eventually, these books will be shipped to Baghdad to begin replenishing the library's collection. I met Wafaa at the 2010 Images Festival Congress in Toronto, where he was one of the keynote speakers. In a thoughtful and moving presentation, he described his repertoire of physically and emotionally excruciating endurance performances — *Domestic Tension* (2007), *The Night of Bush Capturing: Virtual Jihadi* (2008), *and Counting…* (2010), and *3rdi* (2010–11) — that dealt with the inhumanity of war and, in particular, the propaganda and racism that justified the American invasion of Iraq. These performances paralleled his personal journey as a young student and emerging artist who arrived in the US as a refugee after the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. Each of the works mobilized new media platforms such as the Internet to facilitate dynamic interactivity and participation from a cross-section of audiences beyond the privileged spaces of an art gallery.[7] The outcomes were equally divergent and even contradictory as multiple narratives and perspectives emerged. They exposed the range of public opinion on the war in Iraq that addressed questions related to drone warfare, migrants, refugees and citizenship in the United States. Simultaneously, these performances fostered a democratizing process as people from all walks of life accessed his work and voiced their opinions. In each of these works, the role of the artist was that of an initiator, a generator of ideas and propositions, who remains incomplete without the audience's participation and activation. His strategy topples the romanticized, linear archetypal role of the "genius male artist" who simply mounts his artworks for passive viewing and consumption. Bilal, on the other hand, fostered a dialogic approach with his audience, who shared the responsibility of determining the work's outcome. In each case, the artwork was reconfigured into an "event site" where one encounters its affective possibilities. It fosters a performative platform that is unpredictable, evolving and immersive. Collapsing the realms of the "real" (experiencing the installation in a white cube gallery space) and the "virtual" (the online blogs and websites connected to each of the projects), Bilal created a framework where multiple divergent narratives from distinct spatial and temporal registers

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

converge and collide to evoke a sense of empathy and "the commons" even though the issues at stake may be unreconciled and contradictory.[8]

In 2011, I moved to Windsor, Ontario, to take the position of Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Windsor (AGW). Located at the southern tip of Canada and across the river from Detroit, Windsor and Detroit are home to one of the largest Middle Eastern communities in North America. While many families established roots in the region generations ago, the 2003 war in Iraq brought new migrants and refugees to Windsor. In a city where notions of home and safety were deeply linked with the military apparatus of the border, I recognized the importance of cultivating respectful and inclusive spaces in our public Gallery, where diverse experiences of personal and cultural loss and fragmented and collective memories could be acknowledged and leveraged to reimagine a shared future. My desire was to shift the focus from the political and economic narratives on the Middle Eastern communities in Windsor to one that is emotional and experiential. An invitation to Wafaa Bilal sparked an ongoing discussion on the importance of libraries and books as repositories of knowledge, language and culture. We discussed the process of reconstruction and recovery that the INLA had embarked on since its destruction and the multiple efforts for rebuilding in Iraq since the war in 2003. Little did I know that Bilal was simultaneously working on *The Ashes Series,* a powerful suite of meditative and highly personal photographs. Produced over a period of 10 years, this series involved Bilal reconstructing journalistic images of the destruction caused by the Iraq War. The photographs were the end result of a long process that first involved recreating miniature installations that mimicked the journalistic images, and then scattering them with 21 grams of human ashes. The ashes took the place of human figures in order to draw attention to the gravity of losses suffered by the Iraqi society. For Bilal, the miniature installations reflected his desire to find the home he had left behind and to rebuild the places where his brother Haji was killed. He noted, "Reconstructing the destructed spaces is a way to exist in them, to share them with an audience, and to provide a layer of distance, as the original photographs are too violent and run the risk of alienating the viewer. It represents an attempt to make sense of the destruction and to preserve the moment of serenity after the dust has settled, to give the ephemeral moment extended life in a mix of beauty and violence."[9] The miniature installations were photographed in medium format. They emanate a sense of slowness, creating an uncanny and intimate space of encounter to deepen the engagement between the viewer and the image. When compared to Bilal's shockingly powerful endurance performances, *The Ashes Series* marks an important transition in Bilal's practice. These works stemmed from the immediacy of the obliteration and devastation caused by the war in Iraq, the loss of thousands of lives that went unreported, and the ongoing erasure of Iraqi culture and history. *The Ashes Series* is quiet and contemplative — producing a space of transition between destruction and reconstruction — a space that appears suspended after violence. A common desire to explore these moments *after* destruction and loss became the starting point of our work together at the Art Gallery of Windsor. This series quickly became the launch pad for developing new work for the exhibition. Bilal's major installation, *168:01*, was inspired by Iraq's history of rebuilding and preserving its cultural heritage despite enduring the wrath of invaders for generations.

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION



(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

"Over and over again," Bilal has written, "Iraqis build, foreign invaders destroy their infrastructure (whether that be cultural or physical), and, as a sign of hope, they rebuild."[10] At the AGW, *168:01* is comprised of a makeshift library filled with blank white books. The white books symbolize the priceless cultural heritage destroyed at Bayt al-Hikma as well as the libraries, archives and museums whose systematic decimation by occupying forces continues to ravage his homeland. The Bayt al-Hikma, also known as the House of Wisdom, was a major academic centre during the Islamic Golden Age where Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars studied the humanities and sciences. By the middle of the 9th century, the Bayt al-Hikma had accumulated the largest library in the world. Three centuries later, during the Siege of Baghdad in 1258, the invading Mongol armies destroyed all the libraries of Baghdad along with the House of Wisdom.[11] According to some accounts, the library was thrown into the Tigris River to create a bridge of books for the Mongol army to cross. The pages bled ink into the river for seven days — or 168 hours, after which the books were drained of knowledge. For Bilal, *168:01* represents the immediate second after the 168 hours, when the water in the river returned to its original colour; it was the moment when the process of rebuilding could begin. Almost eight centuries later, the 2003 war in Iraq led to widespread damage and looting of historical monuments and cultural institutions that echoed the experiences of loss from the past. Among the many libraries were destroyed, the library of the University of Baghdad's College of Fine Arts was reduced to ashes. Its entire collection of books and manuscripts was torched. The streets surrounding the College of Fine Arts were littered with torn pages and books.[12] While the library has been rebuilt, the number of books remains limited. As violence and turmoil continues to ravage the nation, students are left with dwindling access to books and resources for imagination and experimentation.

In an earnest and simple gesture, Bilal devised *168:01* as a public forum that would facilitate a process of exchange and collaboration to rebuild the holdings of the library one book at a time. In order for this to transpire, Bilal leveraged an intricate web of relations through artist friends and organizations such as Sada (for Contemporary Iraqi Art) in Iraq, who put him in touch with current faculty members at the College of Fine Arts. After numerous conversations via Skype and inter-continental phone calls, he built trust with a key faculty member Professor Zaid Lockin, who championed the project with his colleagues at the College. Bilal informed them of his aspirations with *168:01* and invited the faculty members to draft a list of books that they wished their students had access to. Concurrently, Bilal also launched a month-long Kickstarter campaign with the goal of raising USD $9,000 to purchase books from the wish list and garner public support. Audiences were invited to donate modest sums of money (starting at $5 and stretching to $5,000). In exchange they would receive from Bilal an object whose nature — ranging from ephemera such as postcards to artworks — was contingent on the amount pledged. The limited edition artist books that comprised the makeshift library were most popular with donors, who received one upon pledging USD $25. The next stage of the project was to make the wish list compiled by the faculty available online through the AGW and the artist's website. Apart from the monetary donations through Kickstarter, participants could also donate books from their personal libraries, or purchase them from a local bookstore or online through websites such as Amazon. Donated books have been shipped to the AGW, where they are recorded and stored. Through the course of the exhibition, the blank books in the makeshift library are replaced with the donated educational texts. Much to our surprise and wonderment, we raised USD $58,916 through the 30-day Kickstarter campaign. It was a period filled with excitement, optimism and meaningful dialogues with online donors, journalists from the media, and volunteers. One such volunteer is retired librarian Judith Frangos. Frangos worked at the Folsom Library, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York, where she was introduced to Bilal's art practice. In 2008, she attended his artist talk and was inspired by his conviction and artistic strategy to develop ongoing dialogues through his work, no matter how difficult and temporary they may be. In 2016, when Frangos learned about *168:01* through social media, she contacted Bilal and volunteered her knowledge and skills to the project. Frangos brought her friend Jeanne Keefe on board, and together they introduced the idea of cataloguing the donated books using open source software, so that the information on the books can be transferred easily from the US to Baghdad. As a result, when the librarians at the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad receive the shipment, the catalogued database of the books will be ready for implementation. Frangos' involvement in *168:01* has made the project more accessible and effective.

It has been one month since the exhibition opened to the public in Windsor. So far we have received over 400 donated books. Every weekend, two volunteers — Erin Donnelly and Olivia Markou — replace the white notebooks with the donated books. The recurring and uniform pattern of the makeshift library is ruptured. The stern edifices of the monochrome bookshelves are transformed by lively, multi-coloured books of varying shapes and sizes. Their whimsical and rhythmic arrangement offer eclectic and playful patterns that break the monotony of the minimalist makeshift library. The sequential flow of blank books is interrupted by the donated books, which bring diverse knowledge systems, subjectivities and perspectives while simultaneously connecting viewers to the expansive discourses of art and aesthetics. Thus *168:01* opens up portals into other worlds (linking the real with the imagined).[13] Participating audiences move beyond everyday, mundane routines and access a multi-sensorial experience that resonates with the possibilities of rebuilding the library's collection of books for future generations.

Bilal has stated numerous times that his work exists simultaneously in two worlds: his home in the "comfort zone" of the US and the "conflict zone" in Iraq, where members of his family still reside.[14] Consistent with his artistic strategy employed in previous performances, *168:01* facilitated an open forum for contribution and exchange. The success of the project was contingent on the participation and response to the public calls mobilized through the online platforms. For Bilal, these platforms are transitory spaces where concerned participants exist as they collectively activate the project. They connect the two planes of existence between the comfort and conflict zones, expanding awareness and solidarity between faceless strangers. The virtual platforms produce encounters that link the contributors of the project from diverse places and positionalities and produce a sense of commonality and community that also

resonates with the notion of the "global village" in McLuhan's sense. In a deeply personal essay, Bilal has written that due to his formative experiences — growing up under the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and then fleeing to the United States as a refugee — he did not have the privilege of meditating on aesthetics alone. Thus, for the artist, the risk of settling for the diminished collection of books at the library of the College outweighed the risk of failure with this project that relied heavily on goodwill, public trust, and support. Reflecting on his art practice and role as an artist, Bilal observes, "Technology has not only allowed us to democratize access to art but also the very nature of the production of art, turning it into a collaboration between artist and participant that produces not an object but rather an emotional and cognitive experience that is constantly regenerating itself — through an invisible mirror."[15] Similarly, *168:01* continues to galvanize the support from a wide range of participants and build momentum as the artist and the AGW receive inquiries and book donations in an ongoing basis. At the Gallery, we continue the routine of replacing the white library with the donated texts. Harvesting the emancipatory potential of the World Wide Web, in this project, Bilal shares the agency with his participants to collectively reimagine what is possible and dream of building a brighter future for the next generations.

Srimoyee Mitra

Notes

1. Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver, Markus Meissen, eds., With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices and Politics in the Middle East (New York: Bidoun Books), 84.
2. Ibid., 83.
3. Ibid.
4. Sandy English, "Iraq's libraries: what recovery from 'a national disaster beyond imagination'?" World Socialist Website, September 17, 2005, https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/09/libs-s17.html.
5. Nasser A.M Al-Shawi, "Burning Libraries in Baghdad the Unexpected Destruction of Cultural Heritage after the War of 2003" (working paper, Annual Conference of Nordiska Konservator Forbundet Sverige, 2015).
6. Khushbu Shah, "Artist Wafaa Bilal uses blank books to rebuild Baghdad's war-torn library," February 4, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/04/arts/books-for-baghdad-university/.
7. Wafaa Bilal, "Invisible Mirror: Aggression and the Thumb-Generation Response," in *We are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War*, eds. Nadje Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 94–95.
8. Simon O`Sullivan, "Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Beyond Representation," *ANGELAKI, Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 6.3 (December 2001): 127.
9. Wafaa Bilal, Artist Statement and Philosophy, *The Ashes Series* 2003–13.
10. Ibid., Artist Statement, 168:01, November 2015.
11. Subhi Al-Azzawi, "The Abbasids' House of Wisdom in Baghdad," http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/abbasids%E2%80%99-house-wisdom-baghdad.
12. See "Tale of Phoenix," Qasim Sabti — Books Covor [sic], http://www.qasimsabti.com/gallery_books-covor.htm.
13. O'Sullivan, 129.
14. Wafaa Bilal, "Invisible Mirror," 96.
15. Ibid., 102.

The Ashes Series

Ian Alden Russell

A chair stands persistently amidst rubble. A bed remains unmade. A pillow rests on a blanket of dust and debris. These scenes are afterimages of Wafaa Bilal's *The Ashes Series* — ten photographs of model sets constructed by the artist based on mass-syndicated images of the destruction of Iraq in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Removing the human figures from the source images, Bilal scattered 21 grams of human ashes throughout the sets — proverbial dust, suspended mid-air by the camera, that will never settle.

The Ashes Series is the culmination of a decade-long effort by Bilal to counter the desensitization to and decontextualization of mass media images of the devastation from the wars in Iraq. In 2003, only months before Bilal received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the US and UK declared war and invaded Iraq. At the time Bilal was an emerging artist and an adjunct assistant professor of photography. As an Iraqi-American who had been a refugee of the previous war in Iraq (1990–91), he was compelled to reconcile his practice of image-making with the ensuing flood of images of ruins post-invasion. "In studying [these images], I began to rebuild them, as an attempt to bridge the emotional distance and return home when the idea of home and a return to it is no longer possible."[1]

This already emotionally fraught project — sifting through the visual record of the ruination of his homeland — was tragically compounded in 2004. The death of both his father and brother amidst the mounting civilian casualties of the war transformed feelings of displacement into a violently enforced nostalgia. Between 2003 and 2013 *The Ashes Series* became more than a conceptual project or an artwork for Bilal. It was a refuge and meditative space for processing his emotions, grounding the thoughts that percolated and erupted in notably provocative performance and installation works. He confronted viewers pointedly in such pieces as *Domestic Tension* (2007) — a durational performance in which he lived for 30 days in a Chicago gallery with a paintball gun connected to a computer allowing remote viewers to log in and shoot him — to shoot an Iraqi.[2] In *The Night of Bush Capturing: Virtual Jihadi* (2008), Bilal hacked the Global Islamic Media Front's *Quest for Bush* — a modified version of the first-person shooter game *Quest for Saddam*. In *… and Counting* (2010), Bilal had dots tattooed on his back during a 24-hour live performance. Each dot represented a military or civilian casualty of the war in Iraq, forming a borderless map of the conflict permanently archived on his body. Alongside these works, the circulation of images of a war torn Iraq (as well as many other conflicts worldwide) increased. So too did the body of work for *The Ashes Series* — each newly constructed set lending a quiet, sustained intensity and intentionality to his studio practice.

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

The source images Bilal selected as the basis for the model sets of his photographs reveal a deeper concern — the repeated use, reuse, appropriation, and eventual decontextualization of war photography. Photojournalists' work such as *al Salaam Palace, April 9, 2003* by Robert Nickelsberg — which was the source for Bilal's *Chair*, from *The Ashes Series* — display the subjectivity and aesthetic discernment of the embedded war photographer. In Nickelsberg's image, a single, ornate chair stands, nearly entirely intact, amidst a vast and ruinous room, creating a tantalizing dissonance between the refinement of the chair's embellished decoration and the harsh texture of the rubble that sits on its cushion and surrounds its feet. The compositional qualities of images such as this fuel the appreciation of these images on their own aesthetic terms. With the ease by which these images can be appropriated and reused, they become increasingly removed from the pillage — repeated so often that comprehension of the violence that created them is overtaken by the aesthetic appreciation of ruins and the sublime. In the artist's words, "the terrain of my childhood became a sprawling set for the modern aestheticization of warfare."[3] While specific to Iraq in terms of source material, *The Ashes Series* addresses a universal and urgent condition: the numbing effect of mass media and our increasing apathy and desensitization to images of war.

Bilal's intention with *The Ashes Series* was an intervention to slow down the processing and consumption of these media images, decoding and recontextualizing each one anew.

> The sets [for each photograph] take several months to a year to complete, a slow and meditative process in which the history of the original place that the images refer to is recontextualized through the subtle action of a subjective hand.[4]

Committing himself to the perspective of these photojournalists' images, Bilal places himself in the same position as other viewers. Where one might passively consume, Bilal instead grapples with the semiotics of each image, making subtle yet profound shifts in the compositions to remove comfort, distance, or assumed objectivity afforded by the lens. The most discernable alteration is scale. At a glance, the *Piano*, from *The Ashes Series*, appears to be a document of a piano standing amidst the rubbles of a vast hall, but at closer inspection, the image becomes uncanny. The piano feels familiar as a symbol of Western music and cultural imperialism, but it also slowly becomes clear that the scale is not quite right. It transforms into a fixture of a dollhouse drawing room. In trying to reconcile childhood memories of a playful domestic space with the rubble that surrounds the piano, viewers become implicated in the work. The shift in scale positions them as absent actors in not only the production of Bilal's sets but also the underlying situations that brought war to Iraq.

For each source image, Bilal constructed a miniature set, working through the image to reconstruct the conditions of the places and moments when the photographs were taken. The scale of the miniature sets offers Bilal a control over the composition unavailable to the war photographer, and allowing him to explore more fully the aesthetic dimensions and decisions of lighting, framing, texture, colour, and mood. To complete the work, Bilal reverses the shift in scale, photographing the set and blowing up the image as a large-scale print. In his words, Bilal intended to

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

> entice viewers into these images by their alluring beauty and come to mentally occupy its landscape of destruction. Once they are engulfed within the image, a sense of unease triggers a search for answers from among the ashes. … Unlike press photography, the reconstructed set represents an honest arbiter of subjectivity on images of war.[5]

Bilal's project, in many ways, evokes the thought of philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) — a fellow forced exile, refugee, and victim of war and persecution — answering his concerns in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

> Around 1900 technical reproduction … reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also captured a place of its own among artistic processes.[6]

Benjamin maps his concerns about the impact of easily produced replicas and the mass circulation of images of artworks on the authenticity, aura, and meaning of works of art. He also outlines the technical history and craftsmanship that propelled and developed the methods and means of reproduction. Bilal's art is a mindful and critical engagement with technologies of reproducible media, so we might extend Benjamin's thought to consider "the work of the artist in the age of mass-syndication." For Benjamin, the stakes were authenticity and aura. "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[7] Where Benjamin sees a lack, Bilal finds opportunity and, perhaps, obligation. He embraces reproduction, reconstructing a time and space where the intention is not the objective representation of devastation. Rather, Bilal seeks fidelity with the deeper implications of the creation, existence, and circulation of these images.

Benjamin has been an influence in many of Bilal's other works, most notably his project 3rdi (2010–11). For over a year he embedded a digital camera into the back of his head to capture and syndicate images of what was behind him via the Internet. On the surface, the work may appear to be a comment on surveillance. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing McCarthy Era-style suspicion and persecution of Arab-Americans, Bilal's act can appear to be a pointed use of the camera as a method of sousveillance (inverted-surveillance). It is reminiscent of Hasan Elahi's self-surveillance project *Tracking Transience*, surveying the surveillance state (those following him) or laying bare the entirety of his life as an act of defence through complete transparency and radical trust.[8] Beneath these readings is a far simpler and more poignant intention. Having left so much behind after fleeing Iraq in 1991, Bilal wished to capture, collect, and make sense of what he continued to leave behind him. It is an intentionality found in Benjamin's metaphorical reading of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*.

> A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[9]

With *3rdi*, Bilal performatively evoked the angel of history. While the embedding of the camera in his head suggests the work to be provocative and perhaps antagonistic, at its core the work is more passive, poetic, and melancholic. While Bilal exercised agency in the construction of the technical apparatus to capture these images, the ultimate implication of the work is the admission of his inability to "make whole what has been smashed."

The Ashes Series presents an optimistic inversion of Benjamin's angel's agency. Where *3rdi* appears provocative, the still-life photographs of *The Ashes Series* appear quiet, calm, welcoming — their eerie stillness, aesthetic beauty, and enveloping size entreating the viewer into a dialogue where they are welcome to "search for answers from among the ashes." This search is a Faustian bargain, implicating the viewer in the politics of representation. Considering that the source images of the works are mainly from Western

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

photojournalists, embedded with invading or occupying forces and working for or profiting from sales to Western media organizations, Bilal rightly asks, "who has the right to enter a conflict zone and exploit it for its aesthetic content? Who does such an action serve, and to what end?"[10] While exercising his agency as an artist, Bilal does not curtail well-intentioned engagements with these images. Rather, *The Ashes Series* becomes a platform for reconciling ourselves to these images and reckoning with what we intend to do with them. Intervening in the rush of mass-syndicated images, Bilal wishes "to bridge the emotional distance" between the viewer, the work, and the places, people, and situations to which the images refer. By grappling with these images and rendering new images, Bilal makes room for intervention — both by those represented and by those implicated in the politics of their representation.[11] He offers an ongoing renewal of the images of the past invasions and ensuing destruction of Iraq, continuing the work of his fellow-in-struggle Walter Benjamin. "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."[12]

Ian Alden Russell

Notes

1. Letter from Wafaa Bilal to Richard Mosse, June 25, 2014, concerning the use of a photograph by Richard Mosse as a source for constructing the set model for *The Ashes Series: Pool* (2003–13). Facsimile provided by the artist.
2. For more information on this project, see Wafaa Bilal and K. Kydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance under the Gun* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2008).
3. Letter from Wafaa Bilal to Richard Mosse, June 25, 2014.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1955) in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 211–44, 213–14.
7. Ibid., 214.
8. In 2002, prompted by a false tip, Hasan Elahi was intensively interrogated by the FBI over six months through multiple polygraph tests. After his exoneration, Elahi began his project *Tracking Transcience*, a self-surveillance system that broadcasts his location, transactions, and other data in the hope that it may provide a critique of the surveillance state as well as a potential alibi in future. For more information on Elahi's *Tracking Transcience*, see: http://trackingtransience.net.
9. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1955) in *Illuminations*, 245–55, 249.
10. Letter from Wafaa Bilal to Richard Mosse, June 25, 2014.
11. See Edward Said, "In the Shadow of the West" (1990) in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, eds. R. Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press), 93–103.
12. Benjamin, "Theses," 247.

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

IMAGE CAPTION

Wafaa Bilal

Education

2003 MFA, Art and Technology, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
1999 BFA, Summa Cum Laude, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

Appointments

2008 – present Assistant Arts Professor, Photography, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University

Gallery Representation

2013 – present Driscoll Babcock Galleries, New York, NY
2013–16 Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE

Solo Exhibitions

2016 *168:01*, The Esker Foundation, Calgary, Canada
168:01, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Canada
2015 *The things I could tell…*, Artpace, San Antonio, TX
Lovely Pink, Driscoll Babcock Galleries, New York, NY
2014 *The Ashes Series*, Driscoll Babcock Galleries, New York, NY
I Don't Know Their Names, Linfield Gallery, Linfield College, McMinnville, OR
2013 *3rdi*, Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto Scarborough, Toronto, Canada
The Ashes Series, David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence, RI
The Hierarchy of Being, Maraya Art Park, Sharjah, UAE
2012 Aksioma Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, Slovenjia
The Comfort Zone, Lake Forest College, Lake Forest, IL
2010 *WAFAA BILAL: Three Bodies*, Davidson Collage, Davidson, NC
Agent Intellect, Helen Day Art Center, Stowe, VT
2008 *Virtual Jihadi*, The Sanctuary for the Independent Media, Troy, NY
Virtual Jihadi, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY
Virtual I Jihadi, conference of the Birds gallery, Bangkok Thailand
Dog or Iraqi, Troy, NY
2007 *Al dar Al-Iraqi*, The Iraqi House, Montalvo Arts Center, Saratoga, CA
Milwaukee Art Museum, Impressionist Gallery, Milwaukee, WI
Domestic Tension, shoot an Iraqi, FlatFile Galleries, Chicago, IL

Selected Group Exhibitions

2016 *Electronic Superhighway*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK
The Night and the Desert Know Me, Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, Washington, DC
Polychrome, Driscoll Babcock Galleries, New York, NY
2015 *GLOBALE: Infosphere*, ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany
Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East, LA County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Out of the Rubble, Center of Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD
Canto III, The Armory Show 2015, Lawrie Shabibi Booth, New York, NY
Crisis of History Part 2: Fight History, Framer Framed, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2014 *A Room of His Own: Masculinities in Korea and the Middle East*, Artsonje Center, Seoul, Korea
Daegu International Multimedia Art Festival, Daegu, Korea
Miami Project, Driscoll Babcock booth, Miami, FL
Out of the Rubble, Jack Olsen Gallery at Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL
NYU's TSOA Department of Photography and Imaging Faculty & Staff Exhibition, New York, NY
Dead Serious, 47 Internationale Ferienkurse Fur Neue Musik, Darmstadt, Germany
The Other and Me, Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, UAE
Photo-jewelry: Multiple Exposures, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY
Blown Up: Gaming and War, Latitude 53 Gallery, Alberta, Canada
Out of the Rubble, Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA
Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE
PULSE Miami Contemporary Art Fair, Miami, FL
2013 Vienna Art Fair, Vienna, Austria
MENA Viceroy: Exploring Identity and Conflict in a Post-Colonial World, Levantine Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA
An I for an Eye, Austrian Cultural Forum New York, New York, NY
Contained Conflict, Driscoll Babcock Gallery, New York, NY
Technoviking, Annual Rapid Pulse International Performance Festival, Chicago, IL
Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE
The Public Private, The New School, Kellen Gallery, New York, NY
Blown Up: Gaming and War, Gallery 101, Ottawa, Canada
2012 *Blown Up: Gaming and War*, MAI, Montreal, Canada
Impakt: No More Westerns, Utrecht, Netherlands
Abandon Normal Devices, "Technoviking", Manchester, UK
Out of the Rubble, Dorothy Uber Bryan Gallery, Bowling Green, OH
Out of the Rubble, Spaces, Pittsburgh, PA
Subversion of Comedies, Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK
Voyeur, Truman State University Gallery, Kirksville, Missouri
2011 *The Jakarta Biennale #14, Survive or Escape*, Jakarta, Indonesia
What Matters Now: Proposals for a New Front Page, Aperture Foundation, New York, NY
Christie's Dubai Auction to Benefit Echo for Contemporary Iraqi Art, Dubai
Requiem for Innocence, Aaran Art Gallery, Tehran, Iran
A Call, White Box, New York, NY
Out of Rubble, traveling exhibit, SPACE Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
Blown Up: Gaming and War, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Center, Toronto, Canada
Faculty Show Tisch School of the Art, New York, NY
Looking Back, Moving Forward, Richard F. Bush Gallery, Canton, NY
Aspect Volume 14 Middle East, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
Regard Resist React, Visual Arts Gallery, University Parkway, IL
Serious Games, Mathildenhohe Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany
The Relentless Eye: Global Cell Phone Photography, Marshall Fine Arts Center, Harverford, PA
2010 *and Counting…*, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, NY
Told, Untold, Retold, Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar
TIME AFTER TIME: ACTIONS AND INTERACTIONS, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA
The Interrupted Image, Nicholas Robinson Gallery, New York, NY
Faculty Show, Tisch School of the Art, New York, NY
The Technology Show, Gallatin Galleries, NYU, New York, NY
The Armory Show, New York, NY
Virtual Jihadi, Beirut Art Center, Beirut, Lebanon

Curatorial

2014 *Distant Images, Local Positions*, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, NY
2007 *Siggraph*, Juror
Kissy Kissy, Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, WI

Residencies

2015 Civitella Renieri Foundation Fellowship, Umbria, Italy
Artpace, San Antonio, TX
2014 Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, Bellagio, Italy
2012–14 The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, NY
2011–12 Lower Manhattan Culture Center, LMCC, New York, NY

Permanent Collections

The Stamp Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
Shmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar
The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL
The Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI

About the Writers

Srimoyee Mitra is a curator and writer. She worked as an Art Writer for publications in India such as Time Out Mumbai and Art India Magazine. From 2008-2011 she was the Programming Coordinator at SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre), Toronto, where her curatorial projects included *Crossing Lines: An: Intercultural Dialogue*, Glenhyrst Art Gallery, Brantford. In 2011, Mitra was appointed as the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Windsor where she has developed an award-winning contemporary art program.

Ian Alden Russell is an international curator based in Providence, Rhode Island. Currently the Curator of Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, his curatorial work has been hosted by Artpace (San Antonio), Chinese University of Hong Kong, Fire Station Artists' Studios (Dublin), Koç University (Istanbul), Ormston House (Limerick, Ireland), Irish Museum of Modern Art, Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (Hong Kong), the Museum of Innocence (Istanbul), and the National College of Art & Design (Dublin). His writings have been published by Cambridge University Press, Cittadellarte, deCordova Museum & Sculpture Park, Lars Muller Publishers, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Oxford University Press, Springer-Kluwer, and Yapı Kredi Publishers. Born in Richmond, Virginia and educated in Ireland, he holds a Ph.D in History from Trinity College Dublin. **http://ianaldenrussell.com**

Gregory Sholette is a New York-based artist, writer, activist and founding member of Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), REPOhistory, and Gulf Labor Coalition. His publications include *It's The Political Economy, Stupid* co-edited with Oliver Ressler, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture*, both Pluto Press UK. Recent installations include Imaginary Archive at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania and Zeppelin University, Germany, as well as the Precarious Workers Pageant in Venice, Italy. Sholette is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program in Critical Theory, Associate of the Art, Design and the Public Domain program at the Graduate School of Design Harvard University, as well as Associate Professor in the Queens College Art Department, City University of New York where he helped establish the new MFA Concentration SPQ (Social Practice Queens). **https://www.tumblr.com/blog/gregsholette**

(facing page) IMAGE CAPTION

Artist Acknowledgements

This project has been a long time in the making, and it would not have been possible without the help of my good friends, colleagues and supporters.

I would like to thank Srimoyee Mitra for giving me the inspiration for the project and for our continued dialogue over the past 5 years. Most of all, thank you for giving the project the platform and resources it needed to be realized.

A big thank you to my wonderful team of assistants for their important roles in this project, especially to Liz Marano, Judith Frangos, Jeanne Keefe, Sarah Chow, Christine Donley and Judith Shimer.

Thank you to The College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad and their faculty and students, especially to Zaid Lokman and Ali Eyal, without whom this project would not be possible.

Thank you to the staff at the Art Gallery of Windsor; Dr. Catharine Mastin for the support; Ian Alden Russell and Gregory Sholett for their thoughtful catalog essays; Shawn Lawson for his always amazing feedback and friendship; Iraqi artists Nazar Yaha, Raya Ani, and Dr. Hanaa Malallah Jananne al ani; Victoria Rogers and everyone who helped promote 168:01's Kickstarter campaign; and all of the Kickstarter backers, donors and well wishers who contributed their money, books and encouragements along the way.

Wafaa Bilal

Wafaa Bilal: 168:01
DATES + VENUES???

Curator	Srimoyee Mitra
Writers	Srimoyee Mitra, Ian Alden Russell, Gregory Sholette
Editor	Srimoyee Mitra
Copy Editors	?????
Photography	Frank Piccolo, ?????
Design	Otto Buj
Printing	?????

ISBN 978-0-919837-90-4

CIP information

esker FOUNDATION

AGW
Art Gallery of Windsor
401 Riverside Drive West Windsor, Ontario N9A 7J1 Canada
Phone 519-977-0013 **Fax** 519-977-0776 **www.agw.ca**
Supported by its members, donors and sponsors, the AGW is a chartered, non-profit, educational organization operating for the benefit of the public.

AGW Foundation
The Ontario Trillium Foundation / La Fondation Trillium de l'Ontario
Ontario Arts Foundation / Fondation des arts de l'Ontario
Canadian Heritage / Patrimoine canadien
Ontario Arts Council / Conseil des arts de l'Ontario
Canada Council for the Arts / Conseil des Arts du Canada
City of Windsor

AGW
Art Gallery of Windsor