

# An Inventory Of Al-Mutanabbi Street - A Call To Book Artists

*from Beau Beausoleil*

On March 5th 2007, a car bomb was exploded on al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad. Al-Mutanabbi Street is in a mixed Shia-Sunni area. More than 30 people were killed and more than 100 were wounded.

Al-Mutanabbi Street, the historic center of Baghdad bookselling, holds bookstores and outdoor bookstalls, cafes, stationery shops, and even tea and tobacco shops. It has been the heart and soul of the Baghdad literary and intellectual community.



The Al-Mutanabbi Street Broadside Project has completed its call to letterpress printers after reaching a goal of 130 broadsides from 130 individual printers. Now the Al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition is issuing a call to book artists to work on a project to “re-assemble” some of the “inventory” of the reading material that was lost in the car bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street. We are asking book artists to join our project and further enhance the work of the Coalition by honoring al-Mutanabbi Street, by creating work that holds both “memory and future,” exactly what was lost that day.

This project has brought me into contact with many book artists who responded to our call for broadsides by turning to a nearby letterpress to join our project. I have learned much about their thoughtfulness, dedication, patience, and the tenacity they bring to bear on any project they take on. The more I thought about it, the more I have felt that it is impossible to leave book artists out of this visceral response to the bombing of al-Mutanabbi street.



Book artists represent what is intangible between the pages of any book they create, the interior space that they enter, and from which they slowly fashion a book brings to the visible world the myriad emotions of any text, be it their own, or someone else's.

**The coalition asks each Book Artist who joins the project to complete three books** (or other paper material) in the course of a year, books that reflect both the strength and fragility of books, but also show the endurance of the ideas within them. We seek constructions of all the various vessels of the printed word, ones that pay homage to the truth that can rest between any two covers. We are looking for work that reflects both the targeted attack on this “street of the booksellers” as well as the ultimate futility of those who try to erase thought.

**As in our broadside project, we will be donating one complete set of 130 responses to this call to the Iraq National Library in Baghdad.** The other two sets will be used in conjunction with shows of the broadsides as well as in shows of their own. Each book artist will have one year from the date they join the project to complete their three books. The books need not be the same, but can be concurrent reflections of their own thinking on this bombing, including a representation of what books mean, and have always meant, to any people.

The inventory of al-Mutanabbi Street was as diverse as the Iraqi population, including literature of both Iraq and the Middle East, history, political theory, popular novels, scholarly works, religious tracts, technical books, poetry, mysteries; even stationery and blank school notebooks could be purchased on this street, as well as children's books, comics, and magazines. Arabic was of course the predominate language but books in Farsi, French, German, and English were also represented. Because books have their own journeys, ones quite unknown to us, I imagine there were a few books in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Dutch, or Italian, as well as classic Greek and Latin, Hindi, or even Russian. Your own text for this project can reflect the multiplicity of this linguistic crossroads.

This project is both a lament and a commemoration of the singular power of words. We ask that the work move within these parameters. We hope the books created will use al-Mutanabbi and its printers, writers, booksellers, and readers, as a touchstone. We hope that these books will make visible the literary bridge that connects us, made of words and images that move back and forth between the readers in Iraq and ourselves. These books will show the commonality of al-Mutanabbi Street with any street, anywhere, that holds a bookstore or cultural institution.

*And that this attack (part of a long history of attacking the printed word) was an attack on us all.*

*The Al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition is not an anti-war project, nor is it a healing project. The coalition feels that until we truly see what happened on this one winding street of booksellers and readers, on this one day in Baghdad, until we understand all the implications of an attack on the printed word and its writers, printers, booksellers and readers, until we see that this is our street, until then, we cannot truly move forward.*

*Understanding this one day may also help us understand our own role in helping to create the still open wounds that exist on the cultural and literal body of Iraq.*

The Book Artist, Sarah Bodman, has agreed to work on this project as co-curator with me. I could not ask for a more steadfast partner in this project.

*Here are some details from Sarah Bodman for "An inventory of al-Mutanabbi street" call for artists' books contributions:*

Please could you produce your book in an edition of 3, by any means: hand printed, digital, POD etc.

Do feel free to make as many more of the edition as you want to use/sell however you want, we are asking for three copies in total to be donated to the project.

**Any kind of format that would normally be found on a street of booksellers, this is a broad call for any kind of paper-based artist's bookwork for example:**

Pamphlet books

Zines, newspapers

Miniature books

Paperback, hardback, etc.

Folded and sewn or stapled sheets

Altered books, if artists want to make these, they can be 3 different versions or an edition of 3. Please make sure they are robust, not too heavy, and able to close for packing/transport (so that they are no bigger than the size of an average hardback novel when shut).

Please remember that the books will tour for a while, with national and international exhibitions and a complete set will be sent to the Iraq National Library, so please keep them as light as possible to help save postage costs.

If you produce any large newspaper-type bookwork, please allow for it to be rolled for transit.

Also please do not include anything in the books that could hold up their transit through customs such as metal, currency, food, dried plants, dead insects etc. (this may sound strange but has happened with touring book shows before). If you're not sure please ask!

### **An Inventory Of Al-Mutanabbi Street**

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**Contact either one of us, from any other Book Artist worktable around the globe!!**

This call to Book Artists commences on Sept 1st, 2010 and runs until Sept 1st, 2011.

Book Artists will have one year from the date they respond to the call to complete their work.

**Thank you!**