Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here at the Hampshire College Art Gallery is organized by

Beau Beausoleil, founder of the Al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition

Cathy DeForest, ambassador, book artist, and fundraiser for the Al-Mutanabbi Project

Angelina Altobellis
Carolyn Arnold
Jocelyn Edens
Jennifer Gunter King
Bonnie Vigeland

June 17– September 30, 2015

M-F 10:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Sun. 2 – 5 p.m. (Jun 21 – Jul 5; Sept 6 – 27)

Opening event June 18, 5 p.m.
Closing event September 28, 5:30 p.m.

Hampshire College Art Gallery
893 West Street Amherst, MA 01002

A traveling exhibition of artists' books, prints, and broadsides in response to the 2007 bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street, the bookselling district in Baghdad.
Al-Mutanabbi Street is the historic hub of Baghdad’s literary culture, a puzzle of book shops, stationery stores, cafes, and street stalls. It is named for the 10th century classical poet Abu at-Tayyib Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi al-Kindi, who by all reports had a spectacular memory, possessed an unmatched level of arrogance, and was one of the greatest poets writing in the Arabic language. Al-Mutanabbi Street has a reputation as a safe haven for non-sectarian intellectualism—as true during the sanctions of the 90s, when shops sold 20-year-old magazines and dusty used books, as in the violent months following the fall of Saddam’s regime, when no one was buying books.

On March 5, 2007, a car bomb killed 26 people and injured hundreds on al-Mutanabbi Street. Reporting for the Washington Post, Anthony Shadid described the explosion as “a scene that has grown familiar in Baghdad, a collage of chaotic images, disturbing in their brutality, grotesque in their repetition.” The bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street constituted the destruction of a civic site: a piece of the infrastructure of daily life and a symbol for inherited culture.
The artists’ books, prints, and broadsides in the exhibition *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* were commissioned in response to this targeted attack and in solidarity with a global literary culture. The objects here are part of a larger collection of printed matter organized by Beau Beausoleil, founder of the al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition. This exhibition at Hampshire, organized as a broad learning laboratory, includes responses that range from intimately personal to systemic critique, with a diversity of artists’ hometown and place of work, and a variety of media and forms, from the handcrafted to print-on-demand.

What follows is a series of starting points for engaging with the exhibition. It is by no means intended to be exhaustive or definitive.

**Flight**

There are a lot of birds in this exhibition. Birds perching on branches in gardens of knowledge, birds seen flying overhead, birds that turn into books and back again into birds. There are books that can fly and birds that can be read. This menagerie of al-Mutanabbi Street symbolizes hope and liberation: a faith in, or at least gesture toward, the strength and resilience of book culture.

These birds are flying away and flying over. They are border-crossers, stand-ins for something like global solidarity or the capacity of a universal humanism. Compare this symbolic flight to a different kind of border-crossing: according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 2.4 million Iraqi refugees are scattered across the globe; nearly as many people are displaced within Iraq.

To hold at once in one’s mind the hopeful image of a bird and the movements of refugees displaced by violence and corruption demands an ambivalent reading of bodies in flight. How should we approach, for example, a book of pop-up drones that formally mimic the shape and trajectory of a bird while referencing international policies that have a direct impact on the realities of displacement? And how does this book in turn color the reading of objects that include bird’s-eye view maps and photographs: tools of navigation, surveillance, and control that cull power from the privilege of the over-head perspective?

**Translation**

Many of the objects in *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* present a translation, most often from Arabic to English. Every translation, regardless of its method or caliber, produces new publics. To transfer meaning from one language to another, or to wrangle an encounter between two sets of syntax, cadence, and rules, turns the original text into a nomad that can roam more territory.

If translating is a painful process, it’s also not so far away from the behavior of a phoenix (another recurring theme in the exhibition). To pick apart a sentence or a sentiment until it is only so many scattered pieces, and then to give it new life with a different set of readers and kinds of attention.

In this case, the translation of Arabic to English for audiences that, for the most part, cannot read Arabic script, is also a translation of an image—beautiful, abstract, and mute—into textual meaning.

**Memory**

The kinds of objects in this exhibition—the artists’ book, the print, and the broadside—are made up of a convergence of communication media that restructure relationships with the past. The page, even in more sculptural books, becomes an interface for strategies of remembering. These
include: photographs, visual evidence of the way things were and staged fabrications of pasts to be recalled; real or imagined oral histories from victims of the bombing; internet searches that yield names, dates, locations, and patterns of this and other acts of violence; documents that reveal a narrative of the US occupation disseminated by those in power, a false memory ingrained in official histories.

What kind of truths do we expect from these media, sourced from news journalism and traces of personal experience? Details in these memories expand and contract over time as if viewed in the reflection of a funhouse mirror, with different features compressed or expanded over time. This suggests that we find in this media an understanding of how the past impacts the present, rather than remaining an unchanging true memory. A redacted document, for example, makes present a blackened image, patterns of black stripes, a fuzzy or imprecise recollection because of its masked data.

What is said and what is not said has a consequence, affecting the development of a history. This is as true for governments and journalists as it is for artists and curators.

Abstract Representations
There are works in this exhibition that produce meaning through compositions of color, form, and line, working within a tradition of visual abstraction. There are works that include a print of a photograph of a cultural icon, matter in space abstracted to dots of ink on a page. There are works that use the tools of analogy, association, and symbolism to filter individual relationships to a traumatic event and convey a sensation beyond the images depicted. In a sense, the exhibition is a series of visual and cognitive abstractions.

This is arguably a consequence of the task of the commission: to respond to the bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street. A response is a gesture that comes from listening, reading, looking, researching, writing, theorizing, emoting—an output based on a series of inputs. In this case, the inputs spiral from a chaotic and brutal event, disturbingly familiar to many, but out of the realm of experience of most of the commissioned artists in this exhibition. Further, the bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street is not an isolated event but networked to images of cultural violence globally, not to mention 30 years of trauma in Baghdad from sanctions, occupation, corruption, sectarian violence, disintegrated infrastructures, privatization of services, and displacement and loss of home. The call for response to this series of real conditions asks artists to engage in a process of abstraction: to produce sets of objects, texts, and images as information and concept.

The Location of Culture
Broadly speaking, we can describe culture in two ways. It is an agreement among groups of people on a set of shared meanings: values, practices, texts, beliefs. It is also an impulse that changes, disperses, infects, and reacts. This project is primarily committed to the culture located in al-Mutanabbi Street and other streets like it around the world. Culture, then, is located in printed matter, books, and libraries, and the communities and landscapes that coalesce around them. This is a culture of resilience, openness, conviviality, and commerce.

A significant number of artists in the exhibition are interested not only in this global book culture, but also in that which is produced in opposition to and through adversarial cultures. How to respond to an al-Mutanabbi Street that exists in an active
relationship with other sets of values, practices, texts, and beliefs? How does the culture of the street adapt, for example, to the looting of Iraq’s cultural infrastructure which began with the US invasion and continues now with ISIS?

There is a third way to describe culture: the objects, sites, memories, and imaginings that hold a sense of who we are. This is, perhaps, why art and architecture are dangerous to new cultures of power, and can be wielded as a tool for control. This is how we know that there is power in text and images.

The Magic Board, Hampshire’s projection gallery located in the thoroughfare between the Harold F. Johnson Library and the Airport Lounge, will host a related program of digital exhibitions during the run of Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here.

The first of these is a re-siting of the archives of Border to Baghdad, an exchange between emerging artists in El Paso, USA and Baghdad, Iraq that took place over Skype and social media in October, 2013. The project developed around “scores,” or sets of instructions for making artwork, the results of which were then shared online. The exchange provides a snapshot of emerging artists working in two distant, urban deserts. Border to Baghdad was facilitated by Szu-Han Ho and Rijin Sahakian.

Later exhibitions on the Magic Board will be developed by students working with Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here through the Institute for Curatorial Practice Paid Internship Program.