

A bridge to Baghdad

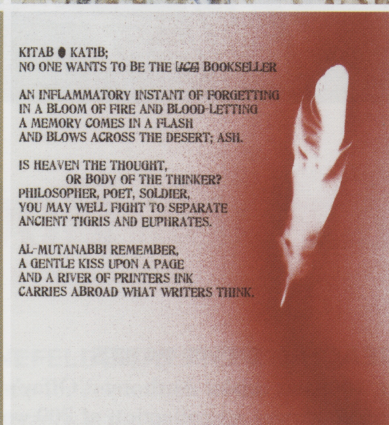
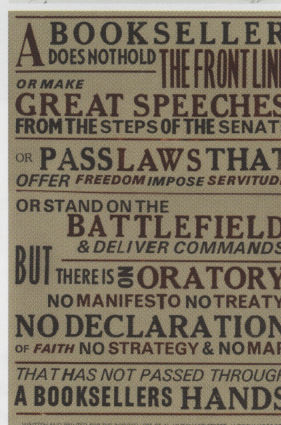
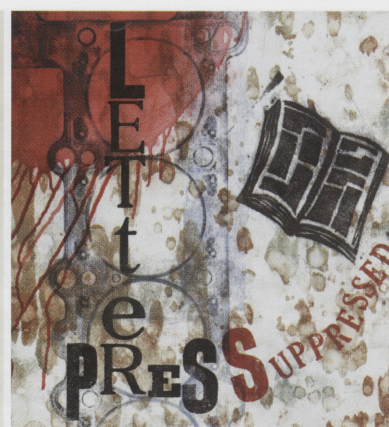
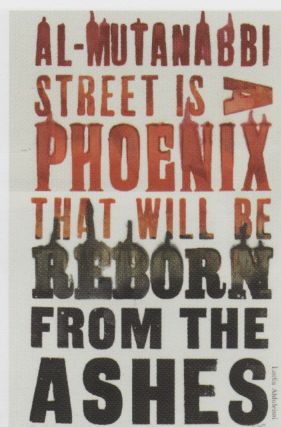
ARTISTS' BOOKS Sarah Bodman describes how one US-based bookseller has proved an inspiration to Iraqi artists and to the global artists' book community

In 2008 I received an email from Beau Beausoleil, a poet and bookseller in San Francisco, telling me about a letterpress broadsides project he had been organizing since April 2007, when he founded the Al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition. Beausoleil asked if I could gather some European artists to complete his required total of 130 printers by November 2009. Now that the Al-Mutanabbi Street Broadside Project has completed its goal of 130 broadsides, each printed in an edition of 15 by 130 letterpress printers, the artworks are touring venues for exhibition alongside readings and auctions of the prints to raise funds for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). This amazing project that Beausoleil is overseeing, with all monies going to MSF, is running until the end of 2011. The 130 broadsides have now been digitized by Seth Thompson and John Cutrone for viewing on the website of the Jaffe Center for Book Arts at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, USA¹. One complete set of 130 prints is winging its way to the collection of the Iraq National Library in Baghdad.

Beausoleil is driven to keep the project going and, not content with finding 130 letterpress printers for the broadsides tour, he has announced a new call to book artists to join the coalition and create an edition of three books each for an exhibition tour of 130 artists' books, which will launch on 1 September 2011. A complete set of 130 books will also be donated to the Iraq National Library and the rest will be auctioned to raise more funds for MSF.

The Al-Mutanabbi Street Coalition was formed in memory of Baghdad's literary and intellectual community in the street of booksellers: Al-Mutanabbi Street. On 5 March 2007, a car bomb exploded in this mixed Shia-Sunni area, killing more than 30 people and wounding over 100 in a busy area of bookstores, bookstalls, cafés and stationery shops. The coalition was founded by Beausoleil to organize a response to this from printers, artists, poets, writers and readers around the world. As a bookseller himself, he explains: '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 and understand all the implications of an attack on the printed word and its writers, printers, booksellers and readers, and see this as our street, we cannot truly move forward.'

Beausoleil realized that many of the poets and printers producing broadsides were book artists; he was impressed by their thoughtful responses. As he says: '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.' He is asking artists around the world to create an edition that holds both 'memory and future', exactly what he feels was lost that day; works that reflect both the strength and fragility of books but also show the endurance of the ideas within



them. The books will also exemplify the diversity of materials found on Al-Mutanabbi street: anything from pamphlet books, zines, newspapers, miniature books, paperbacks, hardbacks, folded, hand-sewn or stapled, produced with or without text and in any language – in essence, they will represent the multiplicity of subjects, formats and languages found on a busy street full of printed matter. '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.'

Book artists worldwide have responded to the new call and will be working on their editions over the next two years. As this global community grows ever larger, it will be a treat to see the range of works that will join the next tour. And of course, if readers would like to contribute, I am sure Beausoleil will be delighted to hear from them!

Some of the broadsides (illustrated here) were created for the first project's exhibition tour, which runs throughout 2011. A show of selected broadsides is at Inkspot Press, Brighton, UK, www.inkspotpress.co.uk until the end of January. In February, all 130 broadsides will be shown at the Yavapai College Art Gallery, Prescott, Arizona.

Notes

¹ www.library.fau.edu/depts/spc/jaffeCenter/jaffemutanabbistreetstartshere.htm

Contact

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Images, clockwise from top left

Phoenix 2009 by Nick Smart

Letterpress Suppressed (detail) 2009 by reassemble – John Say & Sheena Valley

Al-Mutanabbi (detail) 2009 by David Kirby

A Bookseller... 2009 by Andrew Morrison, Two Wood Press

All letterpress broadsides, 305 x 230 mm