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ASHES TO PAPER

The Defiance of Remembering

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Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here

An Exhibition of Artist Books and Broadsides

The Center for Book Arts, New York City, in collaboration with Poets House, New York City, July 10–September 14, 2013 (following its presentation in three parts at the Cambridge, Massachusetts Arts Council Gallery)

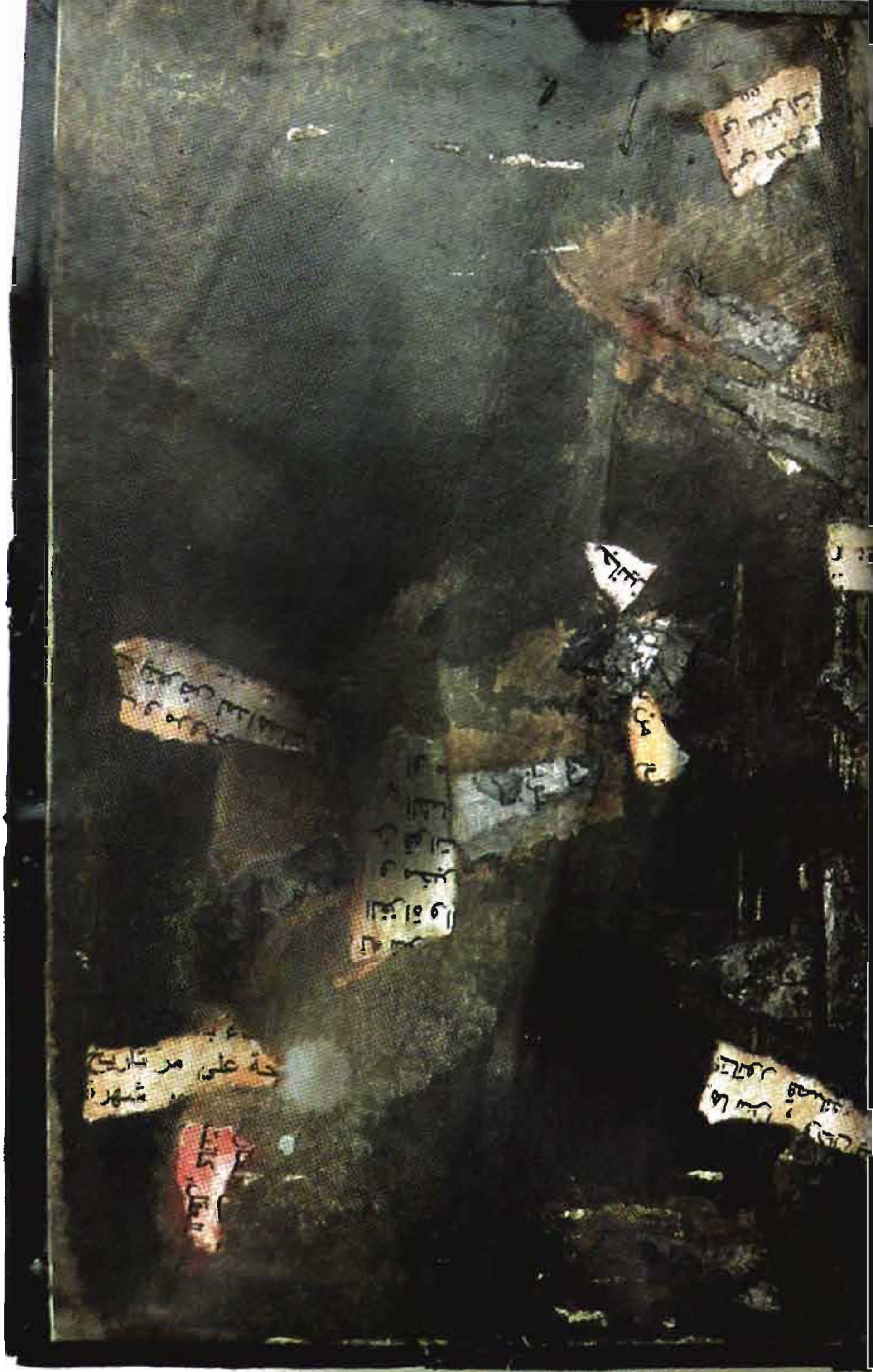
BOOKS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO BURN. Many of them did in March of 2007 when a bomb exploded on al-Mutanabbi Street in the booksellers' quarter of Baghdad. Terror goes to the places that are thought most safe because they appear to be protected by a sense that they hold something valued in common. And the point that these sanctuaries are at risk was made not only on the bodies of the killed and injured, but on the books that they were buying and selling.

The Iraqi people have known the reality of terrorism for longer than we in this country care to admit. The second Iraq war, which lasted for eight years on our country's calendar, still is not over for the Iraqi people, and bombs like the one that went off among the booksellers still are exploding in Iraqi cities. But the history of fear also includes the twelve years of economic embargo that directly led to what even the most conservative estimates put at the deaths of 100,000 children. Even those mathematics do not begin to measure the abiding sense of powerlessness that accompanied the daily dying. But as one Iraqi commented of the community of booksellers, "During sanctions this street was our survival."

It can be both too simple and too difficult to evoke this broken place and what happened there, but the writers and artists and printers who built this artists' book project work to avoid the predictable in their responses. They are largely successful in this, inventing unexpected

ways of measuring out the loss and the outrage. In one case, a small list of errata is a darkly comic evocation of lost words and letters, turned into mistakes by the fires. In another, Julie Chen fashions an obituary for words in the form of a deceptively charming diary. There is a collection of booksellers' inventories in which the particular losses stand in for the whole, even while the items in question might be trash novels or outdated textbooks.

There is an irony in that many of the books (though not all) are not permitted to be handled by the exhibition visitor, while the booksellers' stocks were not. But they matter, even if they cannot be read in full. Their reality stands over and against the shattered book stalls in that Baghdad street. We are all surrounded by books we will never read, but





whose simple existence makes our world full of meaning. In her accordion book included in this collection, Bettina Pauly quotes from a documentary film in which an Iraqi standing in front of an al-Mutanabbi Street café gutted by fire says simply, "There is still a sun that rises."

The project that has brought together this collection of 225 books (expected to total 260 by the end of this year) plus 130 broadsides from artists and writers and printers in more than 20 countries is largely that of Beau Beausoleil, a San Francisco poet and bookseller. When the news of the al-Mutanabbi bombing was reported, Beausoleil assumed that outrage would be widespread. When no such thing occurred, he recognized his own obligation to demand it. In a recent conversation, he recalled that he was initially "ignored, insulted, patronized." This is usual in a

society that is pleased with the lies which absolve it of any moral responsibility toward the violence of our time. But then, a number of local letterpresses began producing broadsides, and representatives of the San Francisco Center for the Book offered their help.

For Beausoleil, there was no question but that the international community of artists and poets had a share in that Baghdad street. "I wanted this project not to go away," he says, although he didn't have any illusions about the work that would be involved or what the results might be. He was clear that

whatever emerged, it would not be an art exhibition in some dismissive sense of a gathering of objects as an occasion for self-gratifying pity. There "has to be some friction" in whatever work is contributed, Beausoleil says. But he is equally clear about what the undertaking would not be. First, it is not an antiwar project, a claim that is to a degree disingenuous, but is understandable in light of not wanting it to be reduced to a partisan political statement. It also is "not a healing project," especially since it would take "years and years to understand the wounds."

Instead, it is a demand for memory; an act of witnessing. As Beausoleil says, "I'm going to make sure people remember." Since late 2011, in a series of constantly expanding traveling exhibitions of contributed work, that is what he has accomplished. This puts him in the

company of Carolyn Forché and her anthology of verse *Against Forgetting*, the title of which defines what is historically for her the central vocation of poetry. Or, as the challenge is described by Anita Barrows, in her *Poem in Time of War*, printed in a book for this exhibition by Mary Risala Laird, "When the war is over that is when the real war will begin. When everyone else has forgotten there was a war..."

Of course, there can be an agony to memory when it asks us to hear the words of a Julie Bruck poem printed by Carol Todaro as they repeat an Iraqi father's anguish over and over:

*This is your shoe he yelled to the pale blue sky.
My son, I bought it for you.*

A child who had been looking to buy a notebook was simply erased by the smoking air, and all that those blank pages might have held of him vanished in advance of being written. And while a street of books requires directions, Christine Kenmaire's *Memory of al-Mutanabbi Street* contains a foldout map of the dead, marked by the names of each of those killed in the bombing.

If we all share that street, as Beausoleil resolutely believes, how do we, living in a culture from which the physical reality of books is fast disappearing, find a fit comparison for the loss of the al-Mutanabbi bookstores? The answer for Beausoleil is that the threat is not just to print-

ed literature, but to any cultural center of expression that rejects terrorism.

Four hundred civilians were killed in the American bombing of the Amiriyah shelter in Baghdad, another forgotten reality that occurred during the first Gulf War in 1991. When asked how this event compares with the destruction of al-Mutanabbi as a case for remembering, Beausoleil replies that the crucial act is to choose something. "You can't be paralyzed" by the profusion of horrors, he says; it is possible to find the whole story in any one of its individual moments. He wanted only a personal response from contributors to whom he was offering the "opportunity to do something really meaningful." Although their words are incorporated into a number of pieces, no Iraqi artists were directly invited to participate, because Beausoleil didn't want the project "to become one more moment of looking at the Other" from a safe distance. The point of all the work was to be the shared experience and values outside the boundaries of one particular geography of destruction. The project of al-Mutanabbi Street was meant to become very long indeed.

There is an inevitable paradox to all this, perhaps best exemplified by Goya's response to a pageant of 19th-century horrors in his etchings collected as *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (*The Disasters of War*). What does it mean to create beauty out of destruction, even when it is

intended as an act of defiance? A book must be made precious in order for its loss to seem considerable. Stephanie Sauer's contribution to the exhibition, *I Dare You*, contains instructions on how the book she has fashioned can be deliberately destroyed, accompanied by the confident assurance that its destruction will never be final.

The exhibition constantly reminds us of what was the essential fragility on this street of words. A complete set of broadsides from it have been donated to the National Library in Baghdad, the same library that was set afire soon after the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003. There is in this collection a moving desperation to have kept the record of what was, to have known the pain of its loss, and to have, above all, not been indifferent to it. The book by Beau Beausoleil and Andrea Hassiba, like one of those medieval containers fashioned to hold martyrs' bones in ornate security, is a reliquary of poems. Even a book's ashes have something holy about them. And although this artists' book project may not be enough to keep the world from burning, its failure still consoles us with the wonders that survive. ■

Stephen Vincent Kobasa is a writer, curator and contributing editor to *Art New England*. His work has been published in the *New Haven Independent*, *Big, Red and Shiny*, *Artes*, and the *Hartford Advocate*.



Previous spread: Beau Beausoleil and Andrea Hassiba, *Until it is in Flame*, 2012, mixed media, paint, papier-mâché, bronze Milagros, schoolbook strap, and paper, 8 1/4 x 5 3/4"; width variable. Courtesy of the Cambridge Arts Council Gallery. Right: Amanda Williams, *Altered book for Al Mutanabbi St.*, 2012, Western Australia. Middle: Helga Butzer Felleisen, *My Poem Becomes Theirs*, 2011. Left: Al-Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad, March 2007. Photo: Raya Asee. Courtesy of the artist.

