

What is *168:01*?

During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the College of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad lost their entire library due to looters who set fire to the collection. More than 70,000 books were destroyed. Over thirteen years later, students at the college still have few remnants from which to study.

168:01, an installation of an austere white library at Esker Foundation, serves as both a monument to the staggering cultural losses endured throughout Iraq's history as well as a platform for its potential rebirth. Comprised of a series of white shelves filled with blank tomes, the library doubles as a system of exchange connecting its physical and virtual visitors in Canada (and beyond) to the College of Fine Arts in Iraq. Aimed at restoring its lost archives, *168:01* positions viewers as potential donors whose contributions fund the purchase of educational texts from a list compiled by faculty members. As the installation accrues donations, the blank books in the white library will be replaced with real art books from the faculty wishlist. The first 200 people to donate \$25 or more in person at Esker Foundation will receive a white book signed by Wafaa Bilal following the close of the exhibition in return for their contribution. At the end of the exhibition, all donated books will be shipped to the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad, beginning the process of rebuilding.

Iraq has a long history of such cultural destruction. During the Islamic Golden Age in the 13th century, an invading Mongol army set fire to all the libraries of Baghdad, including the famed House of Wisdom, or *Bayt al-Hikma*. Legend describes the invaders throwing the *Bayt al-Hikma's* entire library into the Tigris River to create a bridge of books for their army to cross. The pages bled ink into the river for seven days, at the end of which the books were drained of knowledge. The first minute after grief becomes the starting point from which *168:01* takes its name—it signals the struggle to move forward and the beginning of a cross-cultural encounter between individuals which will contribute to a globally distributed effort to rebuild anew.

Wafaa Bilal: 168:01 is curated by Srimoyee Mitra, Curator of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of Windsor. This exhibition is organized and circulated by the Art Gallery of Windsor, Canada.