

A.1 - THE LIBRARY AND THE ARCHIVE

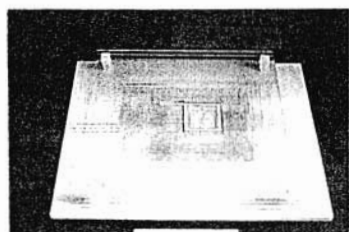
Where is the Archive? Where will the Big Archives be in the future?

The end of the Big Archives will come like the end of the dinosaurs. Then, it will be the end of memory.

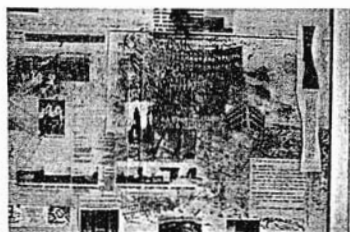
The artist in the archive:

In my studio there is a large box full of papers on which images are printed, some in black and white and some in colour; a smaller one containing postcards only, each a “key to Babel”; several sketchbooks and notebooks, and folders containing even more pictures, photographs, newspapers articles, quotations, and a few books. One day I decided to open up the boxes, the folders, in short, the archives and set up the installation *Reconstructing Babel*, at the Centre For Contemporary Art in Preston (an archive itself).

I arranged the images and parts of text on the walls, constructing a new story of Babel based on material I had collected, while at the same time eliminating obsolete material and developing the book's conceptual form. While working ‘in the archive’ she drew the maps with the thesis scheme based on the Harris Museum plans (Table 1; fig. 3-5).



3



4



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Views from the installation at the Centre For Contemporary Art, Preston, 2002

I would call this installation a ‘visualization of a text through images in space,’ by extending the idea of a book into tri-dimensions. It is as if the page were *too small* to illustrate the various elements in all their complexity, and to be submitted to a series of ‘tests’ and trials to verify the righteousness of a certain configuration. Working on the wall, taking up as much space as my arms allow me, moving from one part to the other of the big, continuous ‘page’ I could stay more in touch with the process and, moreover, I could build a text in the same way I paint: by superimposition, layers, transparencies and cross-references.

Two years backwards, in the same space, I arranged ‘Babel’s Library’. It was made of a series of - cubicles, each containing a set of items. The cubicles were divided horizontally in five levels¹, corresponding to a series of symbolic meanings:

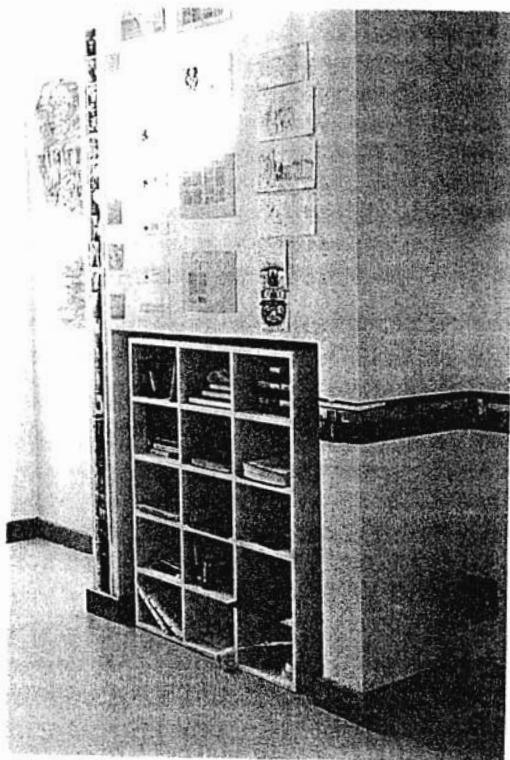
¹ Although the similarity is striking, at the time I was not planning an analogy with the structure of the Harris Museum.

- ATTIC	<i>future</i>	realization
- 2 ND FLOOR	<i>present</i>	organization
- 1 ST FLOOR	<i>past</i>	discovery
- GROUND FLOOR	<i>city doors</i>	journey
- BASEMENT	<i>foundations</i>	origins

They included:

- notebooks
- slides
- sketchbooks
- photo archive
- paper
- writings
- guide books
- pictures
- plans
- images (general)
- languages
- tools
- paintings
- maps

- 6 *Babel's Library*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Preston, 2000
Part of the installation: *A Roman souvenir and other work –in-progress*



The making of one's archive puts forward a series of problems, such as *where* to locate one item in the catalogue, that is, to which aspect of it one should give priority over many others; within a series of possibilities?

I had to deal with this basic issue while writing the text: for instance, "Babel's Library" has been located here since it relates directly to the Archive, but it will appear again in the "Museum" section, with the installation of which it is part (*A Roman Souvenir and other work in progress*, see M. 3b).

It is a problem widely explored by Leibniz², whose philosophy could be defined as the "search for the unity within the multiplicity". As a theologian he was looking for the minimum basis of doctrinary agreement among the Christian Churches; as a historian he searched among comparative linguistics for a method to locate the origin of various peoples. Through the invention of a system of 'monads' or spiritual centres, a multiplicity of immaterial substances that constitute reality, each of which encloses the universe from a unique point of view³, Leibniz expressed his faith in a world open to invention and possibility, in antithesis to a closed and geometric one.

² Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (Leipzig 1646-Hannover 1716). German philosopher and mathematician. The information in the text are taken from: *Dizionario di Filosofia* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1988), pp. 249-250.

³ There is an analogy with Jorge Luis Borges' "Aleph," the unique point from which the whole universe could be seen in *all* its aspects and perspectives: "There are two remarks I wish to add, one about the nature of the aleph, the other about its name. As we know, this is the first letter of the alphabet of the holy language. In the Kabbalah, this letter represents the En Soph, the infinite and pure godhead. It has also been said that the aleph has the form of a human being pointing to heaven and to earth to indicate that the lower world is a mirror image and cartographic representation of the upper world. In set theory, it is a symbol for transfinite numbers in which the whole does not exceed the size of any of its parts." Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*.

Leibniz regarded the library as a storehouse of knowledge (*magasin de science*) whose painted equivalent would be his encyclopaedia. No matter how sophisticated the catalogues and indices, the spatiality of real books arranged linearly on shelves was a limitation which was contrary to logic; "It is usually found that one and the same truth may be put in different places according to the terms it contains, and also according to the mediate terms or causes upon which it depends, and according to the inferences and results it may have. A simple categoric proposition has only two terms; but a hypothetic proposition may have four, not to speak of complex statements." (Leib. 1896:623)

The perennial problem with which all systems before and after Leibniz have struggled: where, in space, to locate all the books dealing with a single subject or by a single author.⁴

The archive is created out of the need to locate items and subjects in a space: it contains the initial information and the basic material on which this book and the artwork is built. It is symbolically placed in the "basement", that is, on the lowest level of the imaginary tower/book in order to evoke the figure of the foundation stone on which a new city is built (**Appendix**, pp. 10-13). In this sense, it is the heart of the building. By entering from the basement the visitor encounters a primeval space, and assumes an understated position (s/he is located '*au plus bas*' – at the lowest point).

As Franco La Cecla, analysing the concept of 'global space' – 'flexible space' – 'excited space' (**Appendix**, pp. 3-5), said:

The mental map of an installation is an inter-subjective experience (the spatial "point of view" whose organ is the whole body in movement, individual body and social body); not only the "where am I?" question, but also the "who am I in respect to whom?"

For instance, when a Nias enters in the chief of the village's house, he must pass to the level of the foundations through a low door; the entrance is there, in contrast to what happens with ordinary houses. The action of entering by the foundations, a generally "discarded" place, and to lower oneself, makes the one who enters experience the impression of passing through a place usually reserved for the pigs.⁵

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, refers to the cellar (the basement) as the "dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces". And in developing his 'topoanalysis' on the house he writes:

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs of illusions of stability. [...] To bring order into these images, I believe that we should consider two principal connecting themes: 1) A house is imagined as a *vertical being*. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality. It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality. 2) A house is imagined as a *concentrated being*. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality. [...]

Verticality is ensured by the polarity of *cellar* and *attic*, the marks of which are so deep that, in a way, they open up two very different perspectives for a phenomenology of the imagination. Indeed, it is possible, almost without commentary, to oppose the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar. A roof tells its *raison d'être* right away: it gives mankind shelter from the rain and sun he fears. Geographers are constantly reminding us that, in every country, the slope of the roof is one of the surest indications of the climate. We "understand" the slant of a roof. Even a dreamer dreams rationally: for him, a pointed roof averts rain clouds. Up near the roof all our thoughts are clear. In the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework. Here we participate in the carpenter's solid geometry.⁶

⁴ Thomas A. Markus, *Buildings of Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* (London-New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 174.

⁵ Franco La Cecla, *Mente Locale* (Milano: Elèuthera, 1993), p. 34. My translation.

⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 – 1st ed. 1969), pp.17-18. Or. ed. *La poétique de l'espace* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1957).

And he quotes the Jungian theory of the house as a “*tool for analysis of the human soul*”:

We have to describe and to explain a building the upper story of which was erected in the nineteenth century; the ground-floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was constructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found and remnants of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure.⁷

I used this metaphor in my work *A Roman Tower*, in which I created a character, the archaeologist Prof. Zilt, who discovers traces of a Tower of Babel that was supposed to be built on top of the Colosseum in Rome. Such a Tower would be composed of different kinds of buildings and architectural styles, from the most ancient at the bottom to the most contemporary at the top. A similar idea is also present in *The Cleft* painting (M.5c).

The creation of systematic buildings as a method for activating the imagination was well known in the Renaissance as the “art of memory” or mnemonic theatres, to which Giordano Bruno and Robert Fludd among others give evidence in their writings⁸. Particularly interesting is the theory of the “Ars Rotunda” and “Ars Quadrata” by Robert Fludd, where the former comprehends the world of *ideas* (represented by round, abstract forms), the latter the world of *material things* (humans, objects; represented by the images of buildings and statues). The former is associated to *natural places*, the latter uses *artificial places* to activate images.

I call theatre [a place in which] every action of words, thoughts and details of a discourse or topics are represented like in a public theatre, where tragedies and comedies are represented.⁹

Let us draw a comparison by associating the “Ars Rotunda” with abstract concepts linked to the Tower (metaphysical and symbolical meanings), and the “Ars Quadrata” with concrete elements of the narrative (the building, the city, the people); that is, with the concepts related to my work (critical/poetic writings: L) and the physical elements of my art (the actual paintings, drawings etc.: M).

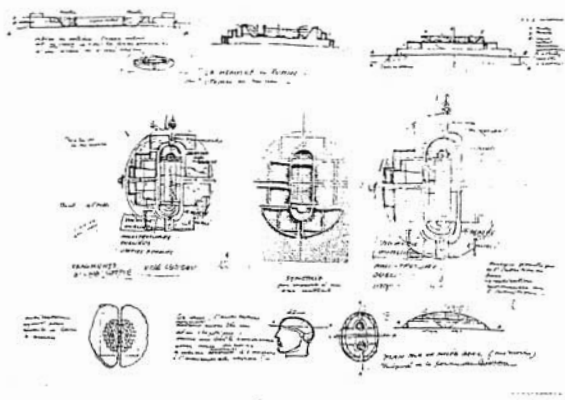
From the “art of memory” I borrowed the use of *real places* and *fictitious places* to activate my imagination in relation to the Tower of Babel. By real places I mean also real buildings used to form *loci* in the mnemotechnique style (such as the Colosseum, the house in Via Tiburtina or the Harris Museum – **Appendix**, pp. 38-39), while by fictitious places I mean imaginary buildings or sites that are invented to integrate real places or to substitute for them (e.g. imaginary cities, labyrinths etc. – cf. M.1, M.4a, M.5a).

Among the contemporary artists who are working extensively with mnemonic systems and the idea of archival recollection I would mention Anne and Patrick Poirier, both architects and visual artists, whose models and architectural reconstructions have relevance to me, and Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, particularly with the installation *The Big Archives* (1993) and the *Palace of Projects* (1998; see M.1).

⁷ C.G. Jung, “Mind and the Earth”, in *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), pp.118-119. Quoted in Bachelard, op.cit., p. xxxvii.

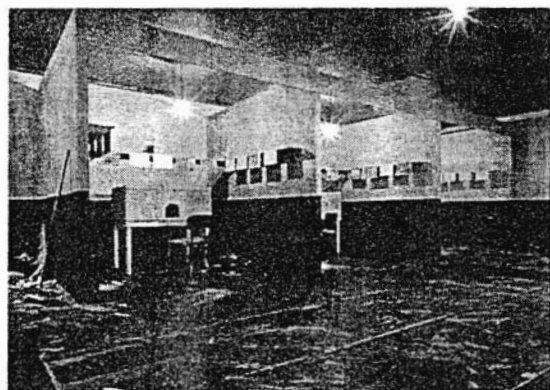
⁸ Cf. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966 – 1st). The text I consulted is the Italian trans. by Albano Biondi, *L'arte della memoria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993).

⁹ Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi Historia II*, 2, p. 55. Quoted in Yates, op. cit., It. ed. p. 306. My translation.



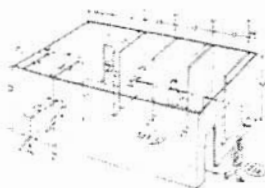
7 Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Mnemosyne: Les Archives de l'architecte*, drawing, 1991

Kabakov's installation *The Big Archive* (fig. 8) is a reflection on the relationship of the study and the finished piece, and on the shift of interest from the latter to the former in contemporary art. Up until the nineteenth century, the most finished project was a painting (or sculpture, or print). Sketches, studies etc. would normally not be shown and would form an 'artist's archive'. Only in the twentieth century would the archive of an artist be considered as important as the finished artwork itself. The idea of the *unfinished* became even more relevant and central than the finished piece, and nowadays sketches and drawings are matter-of-factly shown. Significantly, the idea of 'unfinishedness' is one of the main characteristics of the Tower of Babel and a constant element in my work (L3o).



In *Les archives de l'architecte* (The archives of the architect, fig. 7), 1991 and *Mnemosyne – les archives de l'archéologue* (Mnemosyne – the archives of the archaeologist), 1992, Anne and Patrick Poirier explore the morphology of classical architecture in relation to the structure of the brain, drawing a parallel between real buildings (Roman arenas, such as the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum) or *loci*, human anatomy and abstract mnemonic systems, by means of architectural models, drawings and large scale installations.

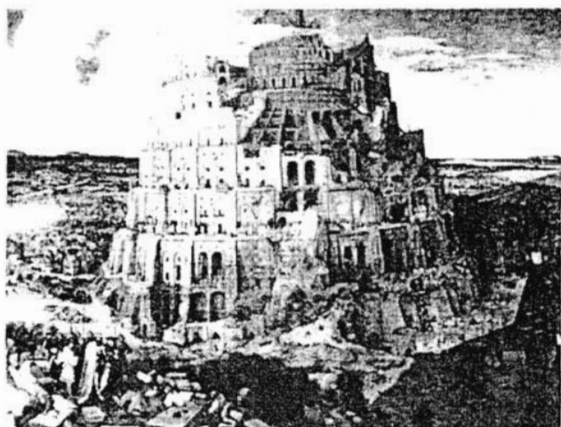
The dreamer constructs and reconstructs the upper stories and the attic until they are well constructed. And [...] when we dream of the heights we are in the rational zone of intellectualized projects. But for the cellar, the impassioned inhabitant digs and re-digs, making its very depth active. The fact is not enough, the dream is at work. When it comes to excavated grounds, dreams have no limit.¹⁰



8 Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Big Archives*, 1993, installation view at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

¹⁰ Bachelard, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

A.2 – THE ARTIST’S ARCHIVE: ON REFERENCES



Let us begin with the image of the Tower of Babel painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, probably the most famous of all Babel representations before our time. He painted two versions of the same subject: one named “The Small Tower,” the other one known as the “Tower of Babel” (Fig. 9-10).

Bruegel visited Rome around 1563 and based his Tower of Babel on the Colosseum. He painted it as an immense structure occupying almost the entire picture space, with tiny figures rendered in perfect detail, working on the yard. André Parrot¹¹ reports that more than seven thousand people are represented on the 75x60 cm. panel (30x24 inches) of the second painting. On the same scale as those figures, he points out, “the Tower must have risen to a height of some 300 yards!”

9 Pieter Bruegel The Elder,
Small Tower, 1554-1563, Rotterdam
60x74.5 cm

10 Pieter Bruegel The Elder,
Tower of Babel, 1563, Vienna
114x155

Bruegel belonged to a time during which the painter’s vision shifts to a more anecdotal rendering (what we may call ‘poetical perception’) of the event. In the centuries before, the Tower was seldom represented, and more often suggested by the depiction of the building yard, building implements and so on. We have already mentioned in the introduction how the ambiguity and the ‘unrepresentability’ of the main themes connected with the myth (ambition, confusion of languages, dispersion, etc.) has made it particularly difficult for artists to express in visual terms the various aspects of the story. As Paul Zumthor aptly put, “Babel is a myth whose essence is to be not a particular subject, but pure object, real and abstract at the same time, hardly definable within the universal change.”¹²

¹¹ André Parrot, *The Tower of Babel*, trans. Edwin Hudson (London: SCM Press, 1955). Or. ed. *La Tour de Babel* (Delachaux et Niestlé, 1954).

¹² Paul Zumthor, *Babele o dell’incompiutezza* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1999), p. 103. Or. ed. *Babel ou l’inachèvement* (Paris: Seuil, 1997). My translation.



11 Anon. (Neapolitaner painter), 17th century
Oil on canvas, Barockmuseum, Salzburg

Thus, painters would focus on the 'visible' aspects of the Tower, such as the builders at work (often showing marks of their different social status or race, to suggest the multiplicity of populations working on the yard), the scaffolding, the building in progress, the city around it; or the immediate consequences of divine punishment, often symbolised by thunderstorms, natural cataclysms, the crumbling or devastated building. This 'representation of disaster' became especially popular in the seventeenth century, with the development of the Baroque taste for the extraordinary. The work by Desiderio Monsù is situated in this context, as his highly elaborated gothic *Tower of Babel* (fig. 44) and his eerie vision of *Exploding Church* (fig. 43) demonstrate.

This particular taste would then flow into the eighteenth century cult for ruins and the idea of the Picturesque and the Sublime, but at this point the representations of the Tower of Babel progressively decrease, perhaps in favour of more secular subject matters. Only with Gustave Doré at the end of the nineteenth century will the Tower of Babel find again an epic dimension in the figurative arts. It is true though that in the period known as the 'Enlightenment' we have powerful statements by architects such as Boullée and Ledoux among others, and representations of places that in more than one aspect resemble Babelian interiors, such as Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Prisons). And it is precisely from here that most of my references come from; I am primarily interested in finding the image of the Tower of Babel in a secular context rather than in a religious one, which returns us to the distinction between the illustration of an idea and the recognition of that same idea in work of a different nature and scope. We could therefore distinguish two kinds of references: what I shall call 'direct reference' (e.g., Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*), and what I shall name 'indirect reference' (e.g., Schwitters's *Merzbau*). The former indicates artworks that specifically address the Tower of Babel, adopting it as a theme or subject; the latter describes a connection with some aspects of the Tower of Babel story. The way these connections are drawn is of course entirely subjective, unless there is evidence that the artist actually wanted to refer to the myth; in other words, I am presenting a personal reading of the work of these artists or architects that could be confuted by other interpretations and that in no way aims to be exhaustive or definitive.

It does not come as a surprise that most of the references to the art of the twentieth and twenty-first century are indirect; the works I have been looking at reflect issues as broad and diversified as the idea of Utopia, building and rebuilding, language and cultural diversity, and socio-political dynamics in contemporary society. These are naturally the kind of references that I find more relevant to my work, in their openness and the non-obvious character of their proposal. Within the limits of the present chapter, I shall therefore focus first on some direct references that exemplify the way the Babelian myth has been

interpreted by contemporary artists, and second on the much more solid group of works that for different reasons have inspired or show some affinities with my own work and with ideas related to the Tower of Babel. I shall restrict my choice to modern and contemporary works, as I have already discussed in other parts of this book historic figures from earlier ages.

Further on, a link shall be established between the image of the Tower and the concept of the 'Total work of art,' with reference to Kurt Schwitter's art project *Merz* and the idea of the city as the space for utopian visions.

A.2a - Babel as a subject

"Babel: contemporary art and the journeys of communication" is the title of an exhibition that featured work by Fiona Banner, Simon Biggs and Stuart Jones, Xu Bing, Andreas Gedin, Simryn Gill, Kenneth Goldsmith, Joseph Grigely, Tony Kemplen, Ruark Lewis and Paul Carter, Kum Lum, and Wong Hoy Cheong. It took place at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham between September and November 1999, and was curated by Claire Doherty. The main accent of the exhibition is put on language: "Whilst for visual artists, the structure of language and its infinite possibilities as a graphic bearer of meaning have long been key areas of interest, this exhibition brings together thirteen artists for whom language is more than a conceptual conundrum. It is evidence of our contemporary being. These works are investigations into the intimacies of exchange, the processes of recognition and the politics of language acquisition and translation. Birmingham, with its fifteen official languages, is a unique, primary context for such an exhibition."¹³

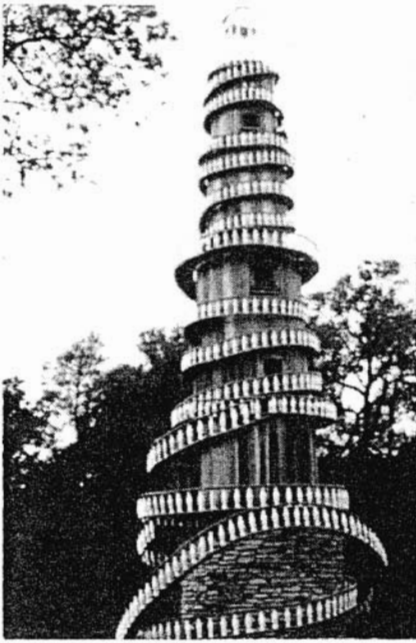


12 Simryn Gill, *Forest*, 1996/98
Black and white photograph, 95x120 cm

Most of the work displayed is therefore of a conceptual kind; I shall point out *Forest*, a photograph showing small towers made from text strips rolled in a spiral and set on the ground by Singaporean artist Simryn Gill and *Washed Up*, colourful fragments of glass with inscribed text by the same author. And I find inspiring the prints by Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong, in which archival figures are mixed and superimposed with English text utilizing Asian and gothic characters.

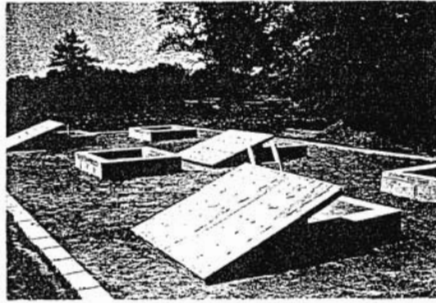
Other artists using Babel as a metaphor for language are Elsa Marley and Mitra Ghaffari. They have worked in collaboration on *Tower of Babel* (1998), in which references are made to Chinese traditional scrolls and materials based on the mystical poetry and script of Persia. The living calligraphic language is at the core of their investigation.

¹³ Claire Doherty, from the presentation of the exhibition catalogue *Babel: contemporary art and the journeys of communication* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1999), p. 9.



Alice Aycock is a New York artist who created a three-dimensional Tower of Babel by wrapping a wooden tower in a forest with a row of Madonnas (the kind that are sold as souvenirs) ascending in spirals to the top where a small model of a Greek temple was placed¹⁴ (fig. 13). Aycock also designed site-based interventions such as *A Simple Network Of Underground Wells And Tunnels* (fig. 14), “a series of six concrete block wells, connected by tunnels, built in an excavated area,”¹⁵ into which visitors could enter and descend by ladders, becoming disoriented among the dark, maze-like, underground tunnels. “Aycock referred to her archaeological-architectural structures as ‘psycho-architecture,’” drawing “experiences from her past, combining architectural history with personal memories and dreams.”¹⁶

13 Alice Aycock, *The Tower of Babel*, 1986

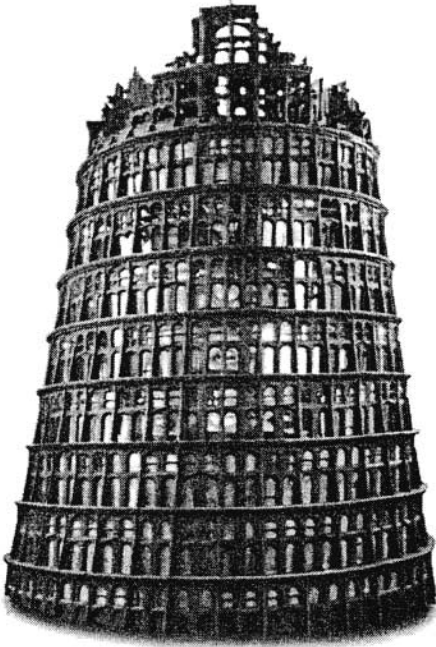


14 Alice Aycock, *A simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels*, 1975
Earth, concrete, timber
Wall: 30x900x1500 cm, Underground excavation: 600x1200 cm
Merriewold West, Far Hills, New Jersey

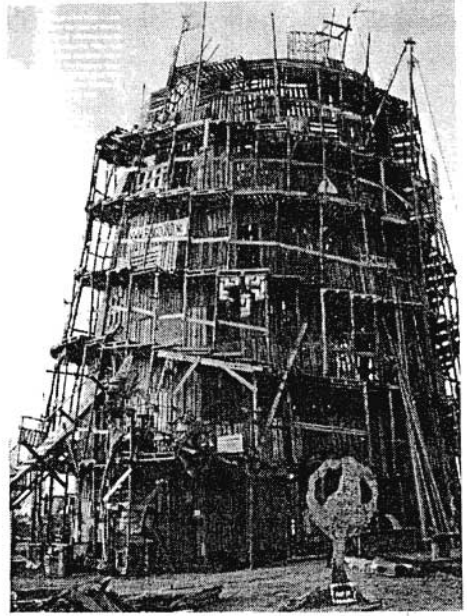
Patrick Mimran gained a remarkable acclaim with his recent installation *Babel.TV* (fig. 15) shown for the first time at the Orangerie de Bagatelle in Paris in 2001. Paris born Mimran, who currently resides in Switzerland and the United States, has developed a highly sophisticated technique of encaustic painting, which he combines with metal leaves in various colours that are then coated with another thin layer of wax, obtaining seductive, translucent surfaces decorated with geometric shapes, linear elements and cross-hatching. His Tower of Babel is taken directly from the first tower painted by Bruegel the Elder (fig. 10), but cast in resin three meters high, and makes use of a wide range of media, from video to sound (Mimran is also a musician), to painting. The space behind the arches around the circumference of the Tower is filled with video screens, each of which displays a mouth articulating phrases in different languages.

¹⁴ Thanks to Joyce Kozloff for suggestion and original picture of this work.

¹⁵ *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt and surveyed by Peggy Phelan (London: Phaidon, 2001), p.77.



15 Patrick Mimran, *Babel.TV*, 2001
Mixed media including audio & video
365.7x365.7x609.6 cm



16 View of the Tower at Ruigoord, The Netherlands, 1999

But perhaps the most astonishing example of contemporary Towers of Babel comes from the non-official artworld, from the submerged strata of over the edge creativity that produced an extraordinary interpretation of the mythical building: the construction that was built – and subsequently destroyed – by a group of ‘idealist’ artists and hippies on a desolate stretch of wasteland in the village of Ruigoord in the Netherlands (fig. 16).

The shape of the tower is closely reminiscent of Bruegel’s most famous painting; it was made of wood and pallets donated by various industrial firms. The intention of its constructors was to protest against the decision of a group of American, German and Japanese industries to annex that little corner of Holland where they had established a pacific artists’ colony since 1972.

After somebody initiated the idea of building a tower of Babel, materials and volunteers were organized for the enterprise. The tower was fully habitable, equipped with basic facilities and decorated with artworks by the community. The epilogue came on New Year’s Eve 1999, when this new Tower of Babel was set on fire by its inhabitants and vanished forever. The village of Ruigoord, too, will shortly cease to exist. The latest maps of Amsterdam omit its name.¹⁷

These are only a few examples of visual artworks that make explicit reference to the Tower of Babel: as it is beyond the aim of this dissertation to extensively cover this area, I shall now talk about other references that have been of greater impact on my work, which may or may not specifically address the Tower.

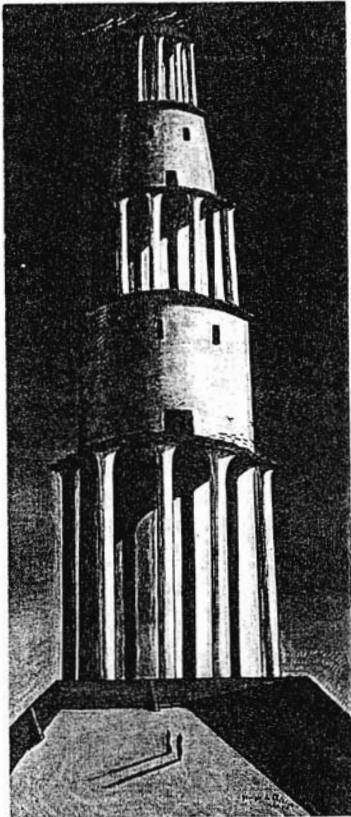
¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Cf. Barbara Stoeltie, “We need cash to fight capitalism,” in *The Architectural Review* (1999): p.54.

A.2b - The architectural metaphor

What if we extend the concept 'Tower of Babel' to the history of utopian projects (ideal cities, gigantic towers), or unfinished, ongoing projects (such as Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*), or the fascination for ruins and representation of catastrophe, or the use of multiple languages as is often the case of artworks of the latest generations? The list of examples could be endless, but I shall point out some that are particularly significant by beginning with two figurative painters of the last century, Giorgio De Chirico and Fabrizio Clerici.

De Chirico's *The Great Tower* (fig. 17), *The Red Tower*, *The Enigma of Fatality*, *The Purity of a Dream* among other works, were painted between 1913 and 1915. The presence of a tower in a solitary setting, where we seldom see a human figure venturing onto deserted squares enclosed by an architecture reduced to its minimal elements (such as the round arch that forms arcade passages), evokes an arcane, mysterious atmosphere that gained the movement he founded the name 'Metaphysical painting.' When these pictures were painted, the modernist movement in architecture was forming, with architects such as Adolf Loos, the Bauhaus School and the Russian Constructivists movement, calling for a simplicity and rationality of forms and absence of ornament. Their goal was to create a language that would be universally accepted. We shall return to this point later.



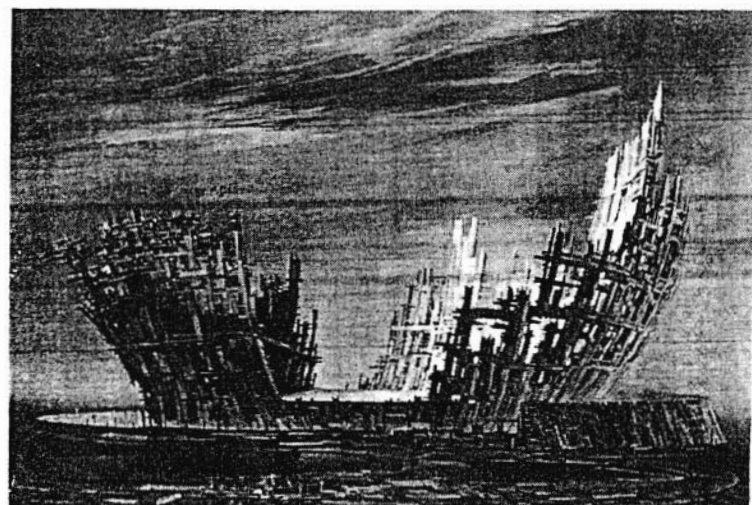
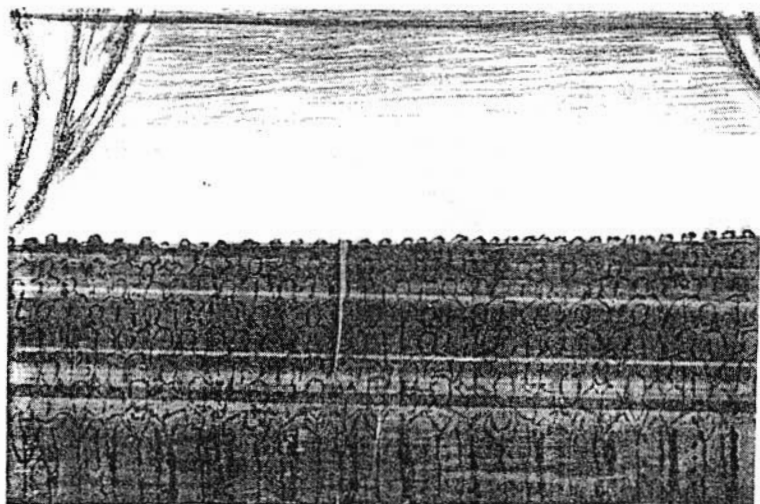
However, in a later work, *Tutti più un oggetto misterioso* (Everybody plus a mysterious object, fig. 18) of 1972, I find an analogy with Babel perhaps even more significant than the previous ones. There seems to be a theatre stage, suggested by the curtains on the upper corners and a low horizontal line that defines the foreground; an undistinguished lump lies solitary at the centre of the space. A faceless, undifferentiated crowd is drawn in the background frontally, as if staring at the object on the stage. No communication seems to flow among the anonymous people. Is it the crowd of Babelians contemplating the mysterious object of their ruin, resembling a ruin itself?

- 17 Giorgio De Chirico, *The Great Tower*, 1913
Oil on canvas, 123.5x52.5 cm.
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,
Düsseldorf.

Fabrizio Clerici has been painting ruins of imaginary, abandoned cities throughout his life, such as *Minoutaur's Trial*, or *Oriental City* (Fig. 19), conveying in a neat, precise style his vision of places that bring to mind the *Invisible Cities* described by Marco Polo to the Khan in Italo Calvino's homonymous book. *Oriental City*, in fact, resembles Venice more than any other eastern city, while the numerous scaffolding and buildings under constructions that often figure in his paintings are reminiscent of the Babelian enterprise.

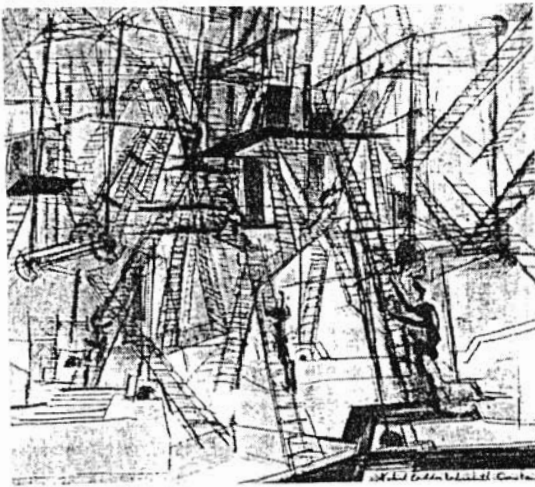
Among the artists who work with three-dimensional models and sculptures I would point out to Constant, Dieter Roth, Louise Bourgeois, Sarah Sze, Mary Miss and Lois Renner. I shall elaborate on Kurt Schwitters when talking of the "Total work of art" (see A.2c).

Constant (Constant A. Nieuwenhuys) worked from 1956 to 1974 on his project *New Babylon* (Fig. 20), "developing countless models, drawings, prints, collages, and paintings. '*New Babylon* is not a urban planning project, but a way of thinking, of imagining, of looking at things and life.'

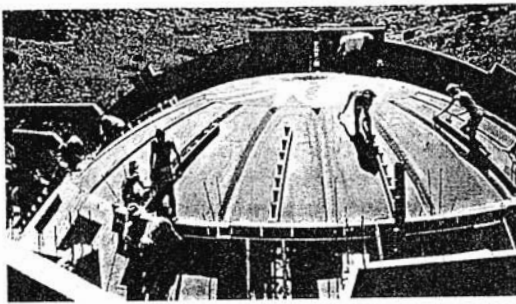


18 Giorgio De Chirico, *Tutti più un oggetto misterioso*, 1972

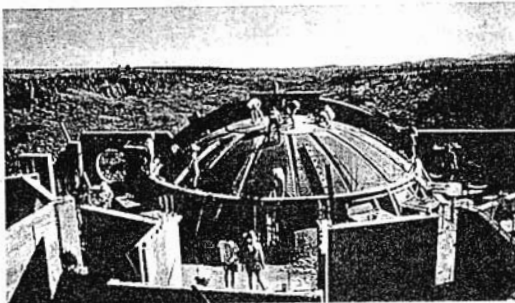
19 Fabrizio Clerici, *Miraggio di città orientale*, 1954



New Babylon is based on the idea of future mechanization, which would make it possible to dispense with human workers. People could use their energy to be creative, in order to shape the world according to their desires. The human, as *Homo ludens*, would be able to freely determine time and space. No longer bound to a location, he would lead a nomadic life. With its indefinite, flexible, mobile structure, *New Babylon* would then be a suitable environment for this new type of human, and at the same time provide a solution for increasing population and traffic.¹⁸ In this sense his work is close to some architectural utopian projects, such as *Arcosanti* by Paolo Soleri (Fig. 21-22), a city built from scratch in the middle of the Arizona desert and entirely planned according to the needs to a community of men and women that have chosen to live in integration with their existing ecosystem.



20 Constant, *New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (ed Mark Wigley, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam), 1999



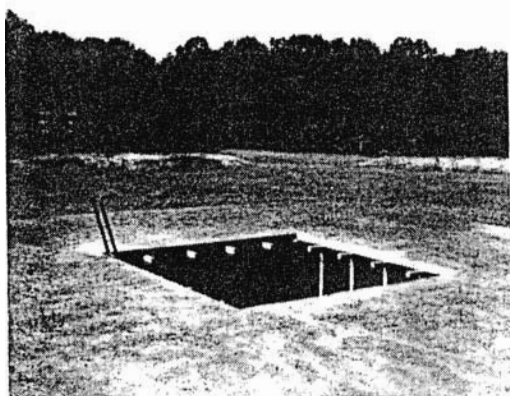
21-22 Paolo Soleri, images from *Arcosanti*, 1971

Dieter Roth is interesting in this context for his table installation *Große Tischruinen* (Large Table Ruin), which has been described as “a modest relict of his œuvre, begun by chance in 1970. A few tools were stuck in paint on his worktable in Stuttgart, so he attached the other objects that were on the table, too, including some tape recorders, which were then used to record the noise of his work. New furniture, bottles and tools were gradually added, and over the years the work became larger and more expansive. This wild growth of ordinary, used objects mirrored the artist’s creative process throughout his life, and right up to his death.”¹⁹ The whole piece suggests a tower-like structure, where the architecture is defined by the chaotic assemblage of threads, beams, wires, lamps and so on, suggesting organic growth and decay, and ultimately to the temporality and insignificance of things.

¹⁸ From the catalogue *Manifesta 4* (Frankfurt a. M., 2002).

¹⁹ Ibid.

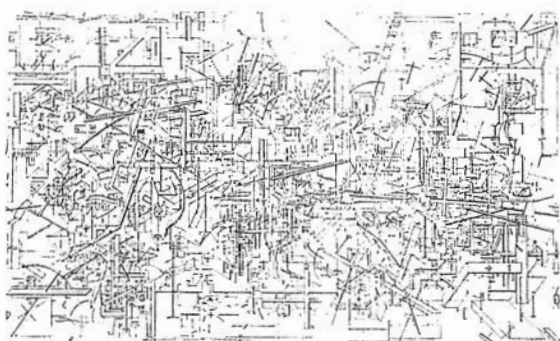
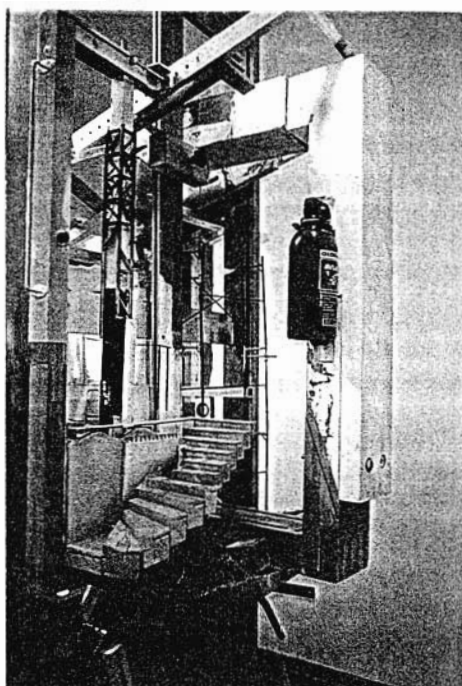
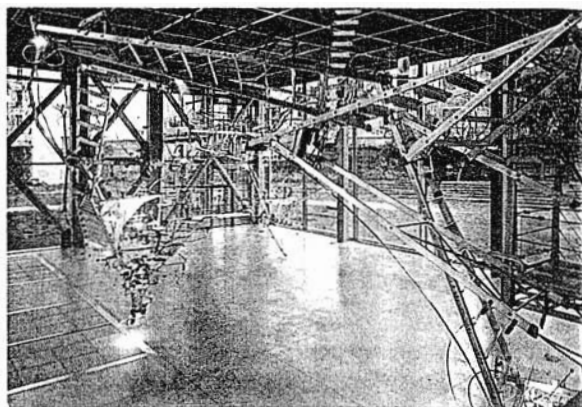
Louise Bourgeois created three towers as part of the first artist's project sponsored by the Tate Modern in London for its opening in 2000. *I do, I undo, I redo* is the title: the first two of the three steel towers are accessible from the outside via staircases leading to the top, the way back following the same route. The last has an external access too, but the outward journey takes place inside, via an internal passage along which small sculptures are located in wall niches. The Towers look imposing and perfectly sealed from the outside. The three 'phases' can be found in the story of the Tower of Babel too, namely its building, its interruption or failure, and the consequent dispersion, or abandonment, thus a new beginning for the people of Babel.



23 Mary Miss,
Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys,
1977-1978. Wood, steel, earth
Tallest tower: 5.5 m, underground
excavation: 12x12 m, pit opening:
5x5 m

A work by Mary Miss, *Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys*, 1977-78 (fig. 23), is different in concept and form from the Bourgeois, but also incorporated three towers, where the tallest measures 5.5 meters. The installation was built on a 10 hectare (4 acre) site. It included three tower-like structures, two earth mounds and an underground courtyard. "The work must be walked through in order to be experienced in its entirety; there are changes of scale in the towers and inaccessible spaces in the underground structure. [...] The viewer is aware of both the passage of time and of the changing relationships of the body in space."²⁰ Japanese temple architecture and symbolic garden landscaping have been compared with this work, perhaps also because of the work's ephemerality (it has been largely destroyed by the elements). What I find fascinating in this piece is the simultaneous presence of a tower structure with a pit; bringing to mind the correspondence drawn by Kafka between the Tower of Babel and the hollow space below it ("We are digging the pit of Babel") and evoking the old mystical say that "every ascent is a descent."

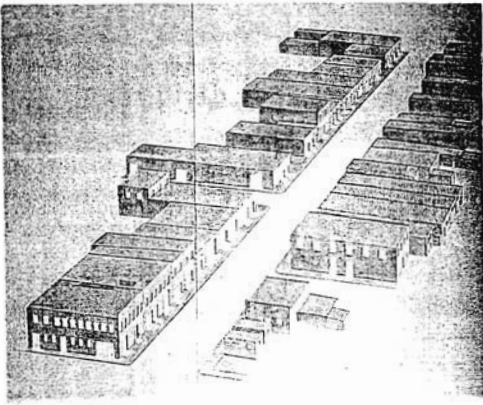
Sarah Sze builds extremely complex structures reminiscent of Piranesi's intricate cross-hatching that look nevertheless amazingly light, as if floating in space: she uses all kind of different materials, including found objects (again a case of multiple, condemned language) for her site-based installations (fig. 24). They somehow remind the drawings of Daniel Liebeskind from the series *Micromega* (1978-79), where the dynamism of the black line on white paper, without shadows or any illusionist device, create fantastic spaces in which not one but hundreds of vanishing points define as many 'possible worlds' (fig. 25). Liebeskind has also conceived some beautifully crafted miniatures of his buildings, objects that are jewel, architectural model and sculpture at the same time.



- 24 Sarah Sze, *Everything that rises must converge*, 1999. Mixed media, Fondation Cartier, Paris
- 25 Daniel Liebeskind, *Micromegas No.10 Dream Calculus*, 1979
- 26 Lois Renner, view from the installation at Trakelhaus, Salzburg

The work of Lois Renner (fig. 26) ranges from painting to architectural models to photography to sculpture. One of his installation shows a reconstruction model of his studio in Vienna, built upon a painter's easel. He subsequently shot very detailed pictures that play with an illusionist perception of scale and proportions. When the large photographs were shown alongside the model, one did not realize that they were pictures of the model until one noticed an element such as a brush or a pair of scissors, revealing the actual scale of what was represented. We are confronted with this double reality, wondering what is real and what is fictitious space. The making of his studio becomes the artist's obsession and his ongoing project, paralleled by the construction (and its reconstruction) of the model, in a way that recalls the Babelians' obsession for the Tower, and in analogy with Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*.

I shall conclude this brief section mentioning the work of Toba Khedoori, an artist that crosses the boundaries between architecture and painting, by working extensively with drawing on large sheets of paper that she prepares with coats of beeswax (*Untitled – Model*, 1998, *Untitled – Cityscape*, 1998, fig. 27). "A glance at the motifs chosen by Toba Khedoori reveals their aesthetic background: empty houses, overpasses, bridges, windows, doors and seats are rendered with almost maniac precision.



These are abandoned places, unused spaces for waiting and living, walking and crossing. Mobile factors such as trains and cranes are also represented, and these, too, have no people in them.”²¹

The emptiness, the sense of void and suspension of time, the reference to modernist architecture in these large drawings ideally closes the circle that we opened with the ‘metaphysical’ painted architecture by De Chirico.

27 Toba Khedoori, Untitled, 1993
Oil and wax on paper
335x610 cm

A.2c – The total work of art

There is indeed a further idea that constitutes the core of the Tower-image, the idea of the Tower as a *totalizing object*, a concept that immediately suggest the “total work of art,” *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which dates back to the Romantic movement and is to be found again in the avant-garde movements (generally known as Modernism) of the twentieth century.

The Tower is a projection of this dream of totality: it is the total work of art as intended by its builders; it is the final answer to the primordial desire for the total enclosure of human experience, a solution that, because of its ambition, is fatally doomed to remain unfulfilled, broken, partial, unaccomplished, abandoned...

Maybe this metaphor, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, indicates the pinnacle of writing practice and the reflection of the avant-garde itself and of its labyrinthine processes: the *place* in which soul and form, language and life, silence and word, wait and hope. Art has been called to regenerate a fragmented, dispersed and painful condition of existence. Poetry, theatre, the *totaltheater*, architecture, painting shall be the interpreters of this task that is rather a mission, through a deep renovation in themselves.²²

The dream of totality bridges the separation between art and life (as in the historical avant-gardist movements), reaching a synthesis of the arts in a work that may encompass them all (as we see in the latest installation art) and making every individual action part of a *universal necessity, but within the work itself*, in order to avoid its dissolution into the incandescence of life. “So the work swings dangerously ... between its incompleteness and its dissolution,”²³ in a back-and-forth movement that is still unresolved.

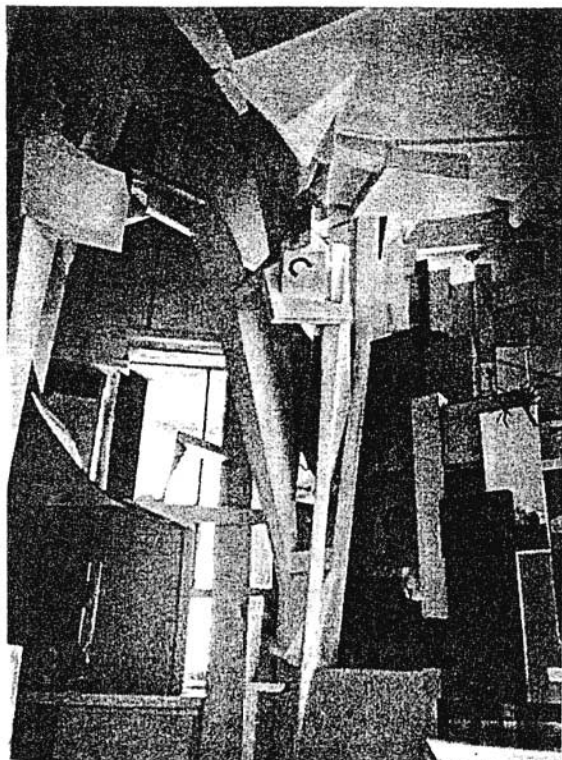
Many Modernist artists pursued the idea of totality in their work, but probably none was as radical and consequential as Kurt Schwitters. He began building his *Merz* at the age of 32, in 1919, in his Hanover

²¹ Rainer Stange, “Toba Khedoori,” in *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st century*, ed. Uta Grosenick (Taschen, 2001), p. 258.

²² Angelo Trimarco, *Opera d'arte totale* (Roma: Luca Sossella, 2001), p. 22. My translation.

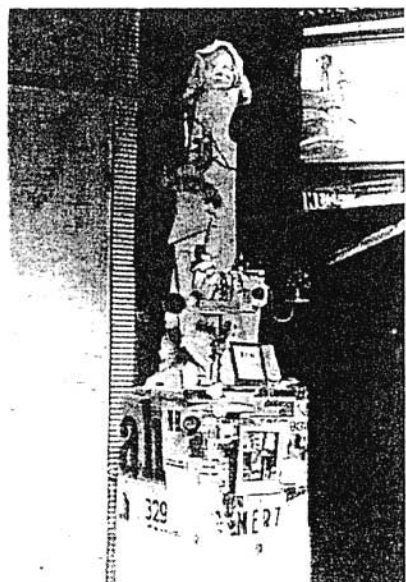
²³ Ibid.

studio-house. *Merz* was the answer to all his struggles and questions, a new departure in his art. "He declared that all values in art were relative and that any limitation to a particular medium was a restriction." His ambition was "the unity of art and non-art" (Alan Bowness). Schwitters said "I don't see why one shouldn't use in a picture, just as one uses colours made by the paint merchants, things like old tram and train tickets, scraps of driftwood, cloakroom tickets, ends of strings, bicycle wheel spokes – in a word all the old rubbish which you find in dustbins or on a refuse dump." (fig. 28-29).



My aim is the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), which combines all branches of art into an artistic work...First I combined individual categories of art. I have pasted poems from words and sentences so as to produce a rhythmic design. I have on the other hand pasted up pictures and drawings so that sentences could be read in them. I have driven nails into pictures so as to produce a plastic relief apart from the pictorial quality of the paintings. I did so as to efface the boundaries between the arts.²⁴

The construction was carried on for nearly twenty years in the same house in Waldhauserstrasse 5, and after its destruction during World War II, Schwitters worked at the reconstruction of the *Merzbau* in other houses he inhabited, until his death in 1948 at Ambleside in the lake District, England. It was a lifetime project; in 1946 the artist wrote to his friend and publisher Christof Spengemann: "Eight spaces were merzed in the house. Practically, my *Merzbau* was not an individual space, but...sections of the *Merzbau* were distributed over the whole house, from one room to the next, on the balcony, in two spaces in the cellar, on the second floor, on the earth [outside]. [...]"



28 Kurt Schwitters, *Hanover Merzbau, mit Blaue Fenster (Blue Window)*, c. 1930 (photograph) Museum of Modern Art, New York

29 Kurt Schwitters, *Merzsaule (Merz-column with death mask of first son, Gerd)*, c. 1923 (assemblage), whereabouts unknown

²⁴ Kurt Schwitters, "Merz (für den 'Ararat' Schreiben)," 1920, in *Das Literarische Werk*, p. 74.

By 1936 the *Merzbau* had expanded so rapidly that it started to sprout through the outer shell of the house (stretching finally) from the subterranean to the sky.²⁵

In *Stein auf Stein ist der Bau* (Stone upon stone is building), a poem Schwitters wrote in 1934, we might find a description of his *Kathedrale-Merz* art process:

Stone upon stone is building.
But not as sum, building is form.
Building is form out of mass and space.
The hands create the form and give it color. Though they give more: Time.
Creating hands give to space everything the person who creates it, is:
His world.
In the form, the play of forms, of colors, of images, of laws, yes, even of the things that are not named in the building, time lives in space for all times. Thus space becomes a parable for time and points toward eternal creation [*ewige Gestaltung*].²⁶

In reality, the total work of art was HIM: Kurt Schwitters". The Column, in fact, was "his life's work [...] the work with which he identified himself more than with any other one, the one that had grown with him, in spirit and body through all the times of his life."²⁷

Schwitters's *Merzbau* is the work of a lifetime and not only the dry work of languages that cross and act on each other. This work of sculpture and architecture that occupies the whole space in which his world develops while transforming it, is produced by time whose beat is given by the artist's life and events. Even more, his work, the *Merzbau*, is *his world*.²⁸

The idea of "total work of art" embraces the space of life as existential experience as well as social form and politics. The present time, the phantasmagoria of modern life (Baudelaire), the interconnection between painting and modernity define step by step the art process. Of Baudelaire's prophecy a guide or theme remains: that of the city. The theme of the city (Metropolis) plays a fundamental role in the definition of the total work of art; as Angelo Trimarco said, the city is appointed by the modern artist as the place in which art and life are tightly intertwined; the city becomes the theatre where the divisions are overcome in favour of the unity of experience: the city as *totaltheater*.

A.2d – Architectural Utopia(s)

Monuments are the expression of man's highest cultural needs. They have to satisfy the eternal demand of the people for the translation of their collective force into symbols...The people want the buildings that represent their social and community life to give more than functional fulfillment.²⁹

Towers of any kind have fulfilled this task for time immemorable, often becoming a city's landmark or symbol: is it possible to imagine Paris without Tour Eiffel, London without Big Ben, New York without Empire State Building, Toronto without the 'Big Stick,' Frankfurt without the Messeturm, Pisa without leaning Tower...? It is significant that during the last war in Bosnia the image-symbol of the city

²⁵ Quoted in Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), p. 7.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ H. Richter, *Dada. Arte e antiarte* (Milano: Mazzotta 1966), quoted in Trimarco, op.cit. p. 23.

"This was his masterpiece – according to Richter – it wasn't transportable and it did not represent a definitive expression. Built into the room(s) of his house this column was in a continual proteal metamorphosis, in whose body a new layer was covering the appearance of the day before enclosing it in itself and making it invisible." (p.183)

²⁸ A. Trimarco, op. cit., p. 23.

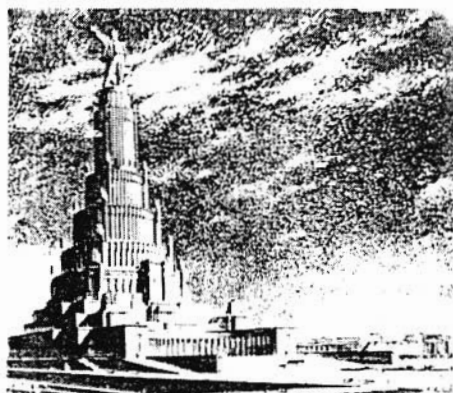
²⁹ Sigfried Giedion (1943), cited in Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture, Settings and Rituals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 719.

under fire was the minaret of Sarajevo mosque in pieces, while on the other side it was the besieged CNN Tower in Belgrade - not to mention the symbolical dimension acquired by the destroyed Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York!

Towers are symbols of power, political, economical or religious power: it is visible in the medieval towers of San Gimignano as much as in the skyscrapers of a modern metropolis.

Sometimes monuments and buildings rise to the status of 'Babel Towers' by virtue of their scale, ambitions, (failed) utopian visions, or chaotic assemblage; the metaphor often points to a negative quality, less often a positive one, like that of the 'cultural melting pot,' or the wonders of technology when applied to architecture.³⁰

Rem Koolhaas in his celebrated books *Delirious New York* and *S, M, L, XL* often makes explicit reference to the mythical Tower to describe contemporary architectural practices, gigantic projects or the out of scale will to power of architects who want to redesign the entire world, such as Le Corbusier. Koolhaas starts a chapter on the Palace of the Soviets with the words: "This is a Babel story, but without a Bible; a dissonant fairy tale; no lesson, no allegory, just a grasping."³¹



30 B. Jofan, V. Gelfreich, L. Rudnev, *Palace of the Soviets*, definitive awarded project, 1933

The Palace of the Soviets was one of those bombastic and unachieved projects that aimed to restore a vacuous and stale 'classicism' in monumental architecture at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was particularly so under totalitarian regimes such as the Stalinist one that promoted the competition for it in the 1930s. Ironically, it was supposed to be a monument to the Third International. The commission was won by Boris Iofan for a building that was "partly American skyscraper, partly hollow Babel," with the statue of Lenin pointing forward from its top (fig. 30).

Construction began; year after year the building "progressed." First it went down: the colossal foundations. Then concrete was poured. The site had been marshland: water kept leaking through the foundations, obstinately inundating humankind's largest basement. Steel girders were placed, tentatively pointing upward. Each addition made the remaining distance only more poignant. Five years later, war broke out. Building slowed down, stopped, and went into reverse; the steel - just erected - was dismantled and used to make weapons.³²

With the end of the war, a solution was found for the unfinished building: "instead of a solid, the building would become a void: an absence," and provided a gigantic swimming pool for Moscow's entire population.

³⁰ Cf. the project for *La Tour sans fin* (the endless tower), by Jean Nouvel, for the Grand Arch at La Defense in Paris, "the most slender building in the world", 420 meters high and only 43 meters base diameter, whose transparent top virtually disappears into the sky.

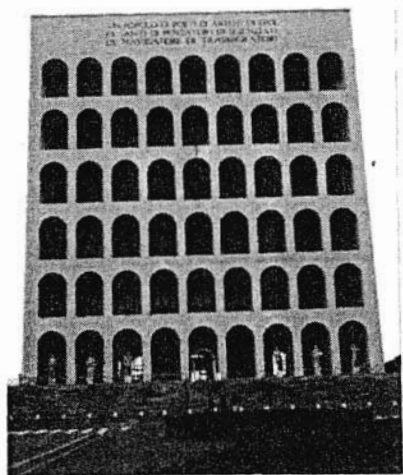
³¹ Rem Koolhaas (OMA), *S, M, L, XL* (010 Publishers, 1995), p. 823.

³² *ibid.*, p. 824.

The pool becomes positively Roman: arena, absorber, social condenser, great emancipator, connector – undeniably fabricator of a community... *The evaporation of the actual building infinitely enlarged its possible programs.*

Is there perhaps a reference to the use of the Colosseum as a pool for ship battles that were played as an entertainment in the early years of the Roman Empire?

In any case, the Palace of the Soviets exemplifies the idea of ‘buildings of power’ that pullulated in Europe and in other parts of the world in the first half of the last century: the Reichstag designed by Albert Speer for the Nazi regime in Berlin was to be the biggest building in the world, with a dome sixteen times the size of St. Peter’s. In Rome, the Palace of Italian Civilization by Guerrini-La Padula-Romano (fig. 31) was baptized the ‘square Colosseum’ for its resemblance to the classical Roman architecture, but ultimately proved to be a hollow shell, and the quarter that Mussolini imagined as the new Roman forum (the EUR) did not fulfil its ambitious task.



31 Guerrini-La Padula-Romano, *Palazzo della Civiltà Romana*, 1942

Authority demanded an architecture in which the spectator was reduced to a number. In the words of Speer,

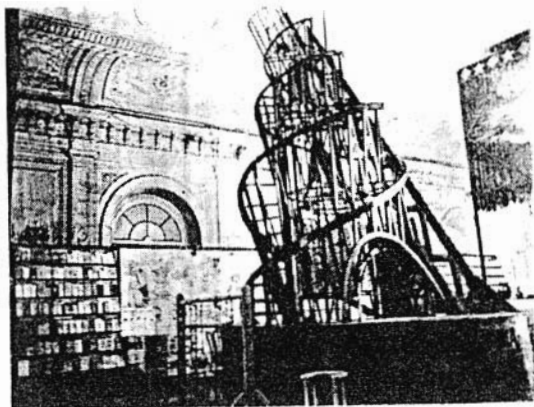
It was not my aim that he should feel anything. I only wanted to impose the grandeur of the building on the people in it. I read in Goethe’s *Travels in Italy* that, when he saw the Roman amphitheatre in Verona, he said to himself: if people with different minds are all pressed together in such a place, they will be unified in one mind. That was the aim of the stadium; it had nothing to do with what the small man might think personally.³³

So we have established a parallel between the Babelian myth and a certain kind of totalitarian idea of architecture, which as the metaphor it represents, is doomed to remain virtual or unaccomplished. But this totalitarian idea of architecture and also, to a certain extent, of art, is not confined to the classicist revival of the first half of the twentieth century; it is to be found in its very opponent too, namely the movement called Modernism.

In launching their revolution in the first quarter of the century, the modernists insisted that theirs was an inexorable process, born of the social and technological imperatives of the age. How buildings looked was no longer a matter of choice, they argued. The new architectural language was both exclusive and universally valid. As its early historian Nikolaus Pevsner put it in 1936: ‘This new style of the twentieth century...because it is a genuine style as opposed to a passing fashion is totalitarian.’ The term International Style coined in 1932 carried the same message. And the broad acceptance of modernism after the war looked like destiny fulfilled.³⁴

³³ Quoted by Robert Hughes in ‘The faces of Power’, *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays On Art And Artists* (Collins Harvill, 1990), p. 102.

³⁴ Kostof, *op.cit.*, p. 721.



32 Model of Tatlin Tower as exhibited at the 8th Congress of the Soviets

The idea of Modernism goes hand in hand with the celebration of the idea of ‘progress,’ ‘modernity,’ ‘style’ and ‘universal language.’ The Babelic utopia of a language that would be understandable in every part of the globe found an embodiment in buildings that would look exactly the same in Berlin, New York, Hong Kong or Tokyo.

This utopia of universality has been part of human imagination for several hundred years. There is a line of continuity passing through medieval miniatures of heavenly cities, fifteen century projects for ideal cities (Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo, Filarete), eighteen century visionary and Pharaonic architectures in revolutionary France (Boullée, Ledoux), nineteen century citadels such as Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia, the political projects for industrial cities of Tony Garnier (between the nineteen and twentieth century), the “International World Centre” that Hendrick C. Andersen and Ernest Hébrard planned in 1913, the “Vertical City” by Ludwig Hilberseimer, 1924 (fig. 33), an architectural concept based on a radical and absolutist minimalism, Le Corbusier’s “Ville Radieuse” planned in the 1920s (fig. 34-35) and Frank Lloyd Wright “Broadacre City” of 1935.



Elements of the “utopian city”: regularity; symmetry; strict division of functions; large green areas, motorization, etc.

Here’s our City of the Future:

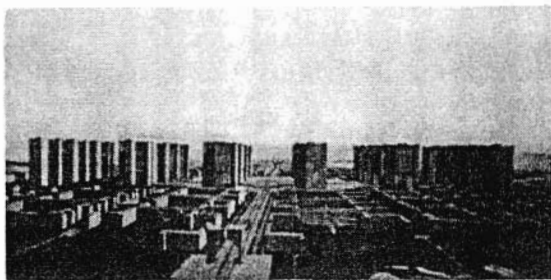
Around a large square of regular proportions public warehouses will be erected storing all the necessary supplies and entailing the hall for public gatherings – everything of the uniform and pleasant appearance. On the outside of that circle city districts will be regularly arranged – each of the same size, similar form, and divided by equal streets...

All buildings will be identical...

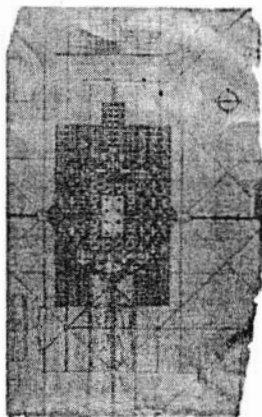
All districts will be so planned, that if needs be they may be expanded without disturbing their regularity...³⁵

33 Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Vertical City*, 1924

³⁵ Morelly, *Code de la Nature, ou le véritable esprit de ses lois de tout temps négligé ou méconnu* (1755), quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 36.



Quickly a concept of 'brasilitis', the new pathological syndrome of which Brasília was the prototype and the most famous epicentre to date, was coined by its hapless victims. The most conspicuous symptoms of brasilitis, by common consent, were the absence of crowds and crowding, empty street corners, the anonymity of places and the facelessness of human figures, and a numbing monotony of an environment devoid of anything to puzzle, perplex or excite. The master plan of Brasília eliminated chance encounters from all places except the few specifically designed for purposeful gatherings. To make a rendezvous on the only planned 'forum', the enormous 'Square of the Three Forces', was, according to the popular jibe, like agreeing to meet in the Gobi desert.³⁶



Seviriade is 'the most beautiful city in the world'; it is marked by 'the good maintenance of law and order'. 'The capital is conceived according to a rational, clear, and simple plan, which is rigorously followed, and which makes this the most regular city in the world.' 'The streets are wide and so straight that one has the impression that they were laid out with a ruler' and all open on 'spacious plazas in the middle of which are fountains and public buildings' also of a uniform size and shape. [...] 'There is nothing chaotic in these cities: everywhere a perfect and striking order reigns.'³⁷

34 Le Corbusier, *Ville Contemporaine de trois millions d'habitants* (Contemporary City of three million inhabitants), 1922

35 Le Corbusier, *plan for the Ville Contemporaine...*, 1922

At the end of the 1960s at the periphery of Palermo, a district of popular housing called "ZEN" was constructed; it became another failed utopia. In 1973, a group of women forced to live in this neighbourhood still lacking any kind of services, denounced:

"They have sent us here to die...we have been abandoned *in the desert*, deported to an island like in the Stone Age, it's worse than a cemetery."

Nowadays, what remains of this search [for the ideal city]? Is it still possible to imagine the ideal city of tomorrow? Everything seems to have been already invented, the death of the city announced and its renaissance proclaimed. In this heritage in which architecture hesitated between experimentation and daydream, are not we lacking nowadays but the citizens, the builders, the master-builders, the architects choosing their way, their tradition and who, on a everyday scale, for the construction of a new quarter or the remodelling of an ancient one, are able to think the real city, the one we inhabit?³⁸

Rem Koolhaas suggest a continuity of this idea in contemporary postmodernist projects which unite old utopias into new conceptual frames:

This "Babel: The Sequel" contains the promise of a new architectural system; it establishes episodes of a global enterprise: an infrastructural project to *change the world*, its aim a montage of *maximum possibility* collected from any point, lifted from any context, pilfered from any ideology. It promises the final installment of the Promethean soap opera.³⁹

³⁶ Bauman, *Globalization*, p. 44.

³⁷ D. Veirasse, *Histoire de Séviriades*, quoted in Bauman, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

³⁸ Jean-Claude Vigato, "L'architecture de la cité idéale", in *À la recherche de la cité idéale*, p. 35. My translation.

³⁹ Rem Koolhaas (O.M.A.), *S, M, L, XL*, p. 368.

And he carries on the analysis of The European Metropolis by comparing its symbols to a sort of new Babylon:

Has any idea in history – except perhaps the Forum in Rome – ever been richer in architectural history than the Forum des Halles and its immediate vicinity, including Beaubourg?

Here an entire urban region is now a seamless, almost Babylonian amalgam of destruction, kitsch resurrection, authentic historical particles, a delirium of infrastructures, a mass grave of both good and bad intentions that crawl out of the pit like the rejected species of an alternative evolution.

Of what parallel Galápagos is the experiment part?

What about the culmination of La Défense, where all the geometric rigor of a city collapses in a maelstrom of randomness and incoherence, made more pathetic by the profusion of roads, ramps, and other "connections" that resemble a wind-tunnel test accidentally executed in concrete? Yet it mysteriously works or, at least, is *full of people*.⁴⁰

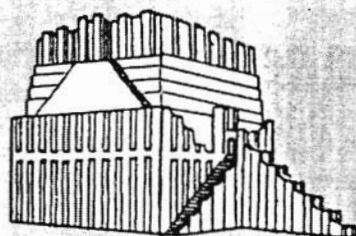
The power of the crowd: don't we measure nowadays the success of every event, TV programme, exhibition in terms of numbers, that is, attendance, audience? Does this indicate anything about the quality of the event, programme, exhibition? Actually not, but it works in the collective mind as evidence of success – when the real event is precisely 'being there' rather than the thing itself (almost like in contemporary museums and art galleries we are more often impressed by the space than by the works displayed within).

One day, perhaps, there will be a sign of intelligent life on another world. Then, through an effect of solidarity whose mechanisms the ethnologists has studied on a small scale, the whole terrestrial space will become a single place. Being from earth will signify something. In the meantime, though, it is far from certain that threats to the environments are sufficient to produce the same effect. The community of human destinies is experienced in the anonymity of non-place, and in solitude.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., in "The Terrifying Beauty of the Twentieth Century", p. 205.

⁴¹ Marc Augé, *Non-places* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 120.

HUIT FAÇONS DE VOIR LA TOUR DE BABEL



projet de Koldewey



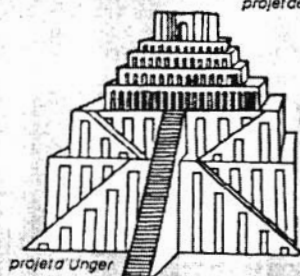
projet de Busink



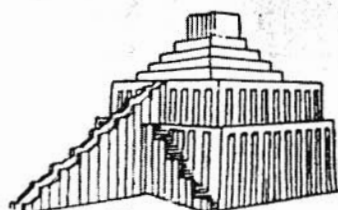
projet de Martiny



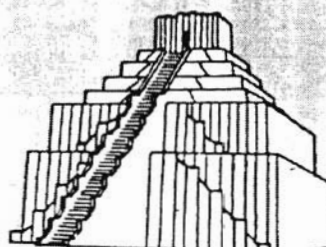
projet d'Andrae



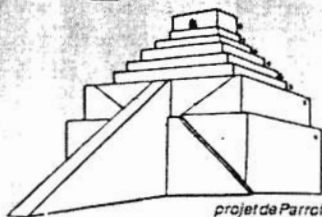
projet d'Unger



projet de Bombar



projet de Moberg

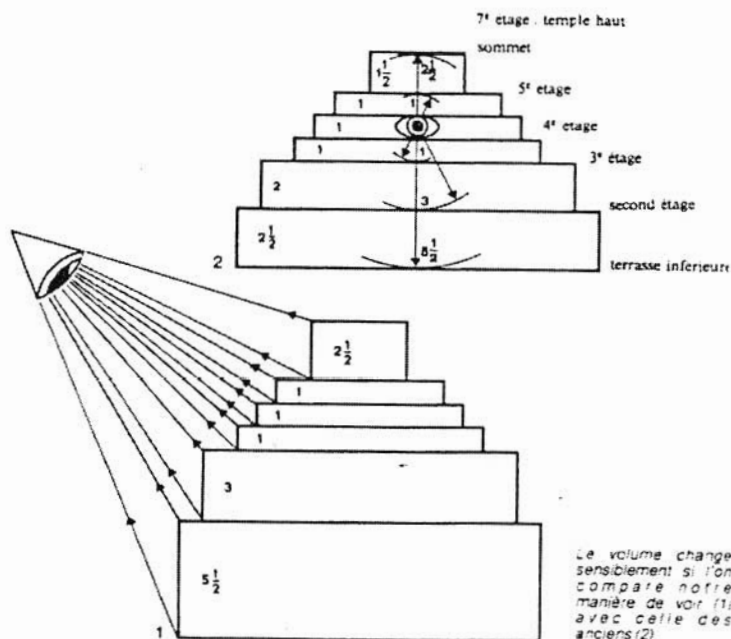


projet de Parrot

36

Illustrations from "Nouvelle Image de la Tour de Babel," by Jacques Vicari, in *Dossiers d'Histoire et d'archéologie* (n. 103, 1986): p. 47.

Vicari recomposes the structure of the Tower of Babel, basing his studies on an ancient Seleucidian tablet found on the archaeological site near Babylon where the Tower was supposed to be built. He throws light on the obscure description of the tablet by challenging the conventional, Western, linear perspective-based viewpoint and adopting a viewpoint that takes into consideration the position of the scribe who wrote the text. The proportions of the building appear thus sensibly different from those of other similar reconstructions.



A.3 - THE STORIES OF BABEL

In this section I shall provide insight into the original text and its historical background. The already mentioned essay by Paul Zumthor, *Babel ou l'inachevement*, has been taken as a main reference text for the first part of the chapter (A.3a) because of its exhaustive interpretation of the Biblical myth.

In the second part of this section (A.3b) I shall present my interpretation of the 'nomadic' and 'babelian' condition from the artist's perspective, while composing the text as a collage of voices from various sources. Rosi Braidotti's *Nuovi Soggetti Nomadi* (New nomadic subjects) was an important reference point. I shall also give an historical background of my relationship with the 'Tower of Babel.' The writing style itself reflects a personal approach to the subject.

NB: quotations are often written in different fonts to emphasize the multitude of voices in the text.

A.3a - The original text

Who were the authors of the text? Not those who lived in the city and built the Tower, but those who observed it from the outside: the nomads whose camps were at the margins of the big city, in the middle of the desert. Before grouping around their first kings and to their god of the Sinai, the *Jews* (literally: "those of the beyond", i.e. from the inhabitants of Mesopotamia viewpoint, "the beyond the Euphrates") wandered in the lonely lands of the Middle East, just like the bedouins today. They were sheep and goat breeders (camels were considered an extraordinary luxury), and living mainly within a poor pastoral and sometimes agricultural economy, heavily affected by natural conditions, like drought and transhumance. They ignored slavery and were organized in patriarchal bands united by real or fictitious blood bonds; each of them had its own divinities (the *elohims*), considered free from any topographic tie, nomadic as they were, going from Palestine to Egypt, to Chaldea.

The origin of this people are still unclear; maybe from Arabia, or the Persian Gulf. Later the Jews claimed a Babylonian origin, asserting that Abraham came from Ur, one of the most ancient Chaldean cities. In reality, they were a mix of different lineages from the western regions of the Middle East. Ur was the centre and the original site of the Sumerians, one of the first monumental civilizations on earth. Around the same time, the Egyptians and Miceneans appeared. While these civilizations were expanding in all directions, creating the first masterpieces in the politics and in the arts, perfecting tools and technologies, the shepherds tribes remained firmly within their traditions, fond of their own "immobility" and opposed to innovative enterprise.

A primitive reaction, emerging from the archaic layers of their spirit, inspired them diffidence if not horror of the work, of the building, of the machine, of the second causes. Their implicit faith in the righteousness of nature made it in their eyes as the only safe guide for individuals and peoples.⁴²

This suspicious attitude towards the activities going on in the big city laying in front of them explains the resentment of the nomads towards the urban citizens, and their condemnation of the Tower, a symbol of their power, and of lost purity in contrast to memories of a universal harmony that their legendary traditions maintained.

The story of the Tower of Babel begins with a vision of a city about to be built by people who all share the same origin (they speak the same tongue). In the middle of the city, they plan a Tower "whose top reaches into the heavens" as a testament to their power and abilities (to make a name for themselves). However, they over-reached themselves and the project was abandoned along with the city itself. "They

⁴² Paul Zumthor, op. cit., p. 32. All quotations from this text are my translation.

quit building the city, which was accordingly called Babel, because there The Lord confused the whole world's language and from there The Lord scattered them over the whole face of the earth."

The original tales date back to the tenth, perhaps the twelfth century BCE (but some scholars date them to the third millennium BCE). The successive version of the Bible has been fixed between the ninth and the seventh century. The scribes who edited popular texts evoking the mythical origins of Israel, those nomads of the Syrian, Sinai and Jordan desert, whom by the time had intermixed with the local population, conceived the different legends as chapters of a history, the development of which concerns us 'today' and leads to a 'tomorrow'. In this way the basis was set for a moral, no longer mythical, interpretation of their existence.

In the Bible, the brief story of Babel is inserted between two monumental blocks: the end of the Flood (Noah's Ark) above and the infinite list of the generations of Shem (the descendants of Noah) below. So isolated and with no clear relationship with the story that precedes and the one that follows it, the tale of Babel appears as an abandoned and bizarre fragment, almost like the monument itself, the destiny of which it foretells: the Sumerian or Babylonian ruins from which it draws its inspiration. For this reason it has been said that Babel is the *project of a ruin*,⁴³ whereby ruin is meant to indicate simultaneously, both the fragmented state of the building itself and the sense of failure that the story conveys.

This intimate fragment of an immense mosaic (20 lines in more than 3000 pages!) is supported by the same strange physical law that - alongside all human chronicle - situates so often the gravity point in the eccentric, the origin of greatness in the mean, the first step of rational constructions in the poetic imagination.⁴⁴

Babel exists as a tale, but as an open and incomplete tale, lacking homogeneity. From the anecdote to which Genesis refers, "a net of meanings and allusive references emanates, in which entire sections of the historical experience have been captured. These sections are concerned with the reciprocal relationships among human beings and their problematic connection with a *transcendence*, with the *language*, with *spiritual works and power*."⁴⁵

In *The New York Trilogy* (that includes *City of Glass*), Paul Auster tells the story of a crime novelist who becomes entangled in a mystery that causes him to assume various identities. *City of Glass* uses the Tower of Babel as a recurring theme - for example, the detective follows another man for days around New York on a seemingly random path, only to realise that his steps inscribe the letters 'Tower of Babel'. The following are excerpts from the book:

1. Babel is the very last incident of pre-history in the Bible: after that, the Old Testament is exclusively a chronicle of the Hebrews. The Tower of Babel stands as the last image before the true beginning of the world.

2. It is an exact recapitulation of what happened in the Garden, only expanded, made general in its significance for all mankind.

3. It was generally accepted that the Tower had been built in the year 1996 after the Creation, 340 years after the Flood.

4. Nimrod, the first ruler of the world, was designated as the architect. Building the Tower became the obsessive, over-riding passion of mankind, more important than life itself. Bricks became more important than people

⁴³ Zumthor, op. cit., p. 23, quoting Giorgio Manganelli.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 29. My italics.

(women labourers didn't stop to give birth to their children; they secured the newborn in their aprons and carried on working.)

5. There were 3 different groups involved in the construction:

- those who wanted to dwell in heaven
- those who wanted to wage war against God
- those who wanted to worship idols

6. A person could walk for 3 days in the shadow of the Tower without ever leaving it.

7. Whoever looked upon the ruins of the Tower forgot everything s/he knew.⁴⁶

There are basically three fields of interest within the story:

1. THE SPACE 2. THE ACT OF BUILDING 3. THE LANGUAGE

Space and *act of building* are intrinsic, basic elements of the visual art practice. *Language* is what makes it possible for us to talk about such a practice and communicate our experience to others (verbal language), but it implies also the visual language(s) through which the artwork articulates itself. As I have already mentioned, my approach to the issue of language does not focus on problems of semiotic or communication patterns (a favourite topic of conceptual art), but investigates the variety of visual forms that an artwork may assume to represent (indicate, express, imply, evoke) the Tower of Babel theme.

SPACE

The place where the Tower was built was an urban space: the space of the city. The Tower was to be edified in the centre of the city, at its very heart; around it, the desert.

In the plane where the ephemeral camps of the nomads barely mark the horizon line, the empires instead raise their palaces and their temples. Among the sands where the flocks were grazing a rare grass, the empires spread the fertility of their canals. Mocking in contempt the humble divinities of the shepherds, ferocious divinities are forever manifesting themselves in hand-built and apparently unbreakable sanctuaries!⁴⁷

The **ACT OF BUILDING** refers both to the Tower and the city. We have therefore two different tales, one about the city and the other about the Tower. These two stories were probably the product of the superimposition of three narrative layers, by different authors from different ages.

Without entering in the detail, we can summarize the Babel story as follows:

-a basic oral tale, collected from an oral tradition dating back many centuries before the first edition of the Bible;

-several editions and adaptations of the original tale into an historical narrative with maybe a fourth, more recent textual layer.

⁴⁶ Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, also in *New York Trilogy* (1987), quoted in www.towerofbabel.com.

Layers, superimpositions, rehandlings: from the beginning Babel presents itself as a complex stratification in the structure of its very text, the key to the visual representation of the myth.

Iahvé, witnessing the simultaneous construction of a city and a tower, gets truly irritated with just the former. Only the city justifies the condemnation. Why the city more than the Tower, that strives to raise itself to heaven? Undoubtedly because it symbolizes for the Iahvist [the scribe who writes the story] the drawing of mankind and responds more obviously to its will of "making a name for itself". Humankind was dreaming of discovering itself, to possess its power and exalt its greatness. God wonders, takes time, disperses, but he does not destroy the foundations of desire.⁴⁸

The desire of humankind is an ancient one: to become god itself, to reintegrate the cycle of the heroes. God (Iahvé) feels the danger of this desire, yet he does not exterminate humanity as he did previously with the Flood; he decides to contain the danger by interrupting the work of the humans and in so doing, to empirically protect himself from the revolutionary consequences of the event.

The juxtaposition of the two ancient tales gives to the text a particular depth. The geographical dispersion and the plurality of the languages appear like the double effect of one cause. They manifest [...] what makes the essence of history: the conflict between man and divinity. ...[The multiplicity of the languages and the dispersion of the peoples] delineate the two dimensions of an initial explosion of the human monad: *horizontal*, regarding the social community; *vertical*, concerning its communication and knowledge.⁴⁹

The primitive legends of Babel ignored the central presence of a hero. The original story is in fact a story without heroes (the builders of the Tower are as anonymous as the bricks of which it was made). The tower is constructed by the same crowds that populate the visions of Baudelaire walking the streets of Paris at night, or of Benjamin describing modern Berlin.

This could possibly explain why there are not many representations of the episode of the Tower in the great cycles of Renaissance painting. The drama is there, even the tragedy, but is faceless, ambiguous, hardly reducible to any direct representation.

Later editions of the biblical text introduced the figure of Nimrod (Genesis 10, 8-12), the "king of Babel" and possible initiator of the enterprise. During the two centuries before the Christian era, when the edition of the books that became the Bible was essentially completed, a new trend emerged, apocryphal texts that expanded its narrative. We have thus a series of parallel or 'alternative' stories to the original myth, in which ambitious dreams are projected into a future outside history.

Some of these stories employ other similar (pagan) myths, others introduce amusing elements of a vivid imagination. For instance, in the *Jewish Antiquities* (I, IV) the historian Flavio Giuseppe (first century BCE) fuses rabbinical speculations with the historical books of the Bible. He writes that after the flood, the children of Noah and their clan decided to establish themselves in the plain of Senaar, coming down from the Armenian mountains. They organized into states, divided the properties, and planned an emerging industry. Man is now in the world as in his own house. One of Noah's descendants, Nimrod, is

⁴⁷ Zumthor, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴⁹ Ibid. My italics. On horizontality and verticality see below, A.3c.

the prophet and the tyrant of this new world, where God was not contemplated. The fear of a new flood was to be exorcised by building so high a Tower that the waters could never reach it.

The Tower was raised with no particular difficulty, and thanks to the work of many hands, it aroused better than one might have hoped. The width of its base was such that from a close inspection it seemed almost equal to its height. The external walls were covered with cut-back bitumen to avoid water penetrating and demolishing it. When God finally saw their folly, He decided not to exterminate them all, since the catastrophe of their ancestors had not scared them⁵⁰; but He introduced among them the *confusion* generated by the diversity of languages, so that the aberrant words made it impossible for them to understand each other.⁵¹

And another version, from a series of *Sibylline Oracles*, attributed to the "Third Sibylla", supposedly the daughter of Noah:

Now, when the time had come for the menaces that the Great God had once announced against the mortals to accomplish their deeds, when [the mortals] started building a tower in the land of Assyria (they were all of the same language and they wanted to raise until the starred sky), the immortal suddenly charged the air with extreme violence, and these winds knocked down the big tower and produced among the people a reciprocal incomprehension: that is why the mortals called the city Babylon. When the tower fell and the languages of men changed into different idioms, the earth was filled of local kings. Then the tenth generation of people came out of the ground after the Deluge fell upon the first human beings. And Chrono, Titan and Japet became kings.⁵²

In this way the Tower went from history into myth, becoming an eternal paradigm. The Tower is by now, for the talmudian scribe, rather a construction of words than of stone or brick. Huge, vertical, the Tower appears as a "work against nature": 463 cubits in height, or 210 m., according to the *Apocalypse of Baruch*; 2500 m. after the *Book of Jubilees*; 81.000 "Jewish feet", as Voltaire lists ironically in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*. In a delirium of imagination the Tower was given nine miles of height, claiming that from its top one could hear the angels singing!

According to the *Tagum* (part of the Hebrew Genesis), "while contemplating the yard, God was surrounded by seventy angels: those who were sent onto the plain to execute His sentence. Each of them was speaking a different language and carrying a small tablet: on each tablet were the characters of a language. Each angel was to gather around himself one of the seventy people who are still today dispersed across the earth. From the moment they stopped understanding each other, these peoples started killing each other; and because they could not build Babel any longer, they put all their efforts in their never ending sequence of wars."⁵³

THE LANGUAGE

The whole earth: the same *lips*,⁵⁴ same words. They say: let's go, and build a city and a tower. Its top: in the heavens. Let's make a name for ourselves.

Iahvé says: Yes! Only one people, the same lips for everybody. Let's go, let's descend! Let's confound their languages, men will not understand their neighbours' lips. And here he cries out *its* name: *Babel*, confusion, because there Iahvé confounds the lips of the whole earth.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ A reference to the Deluge.

⁵¹ Flavio Giuseppe, *Antiquities* (I, IV), cited in Zumthor, op. cit., p. 67.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁴ In the original Hebrew "lips" and "language" share the same word.

⁵⁵ Zumthor, op. cit., p. 34.

This last sentence is rather ambiguous: does "its name" refer to the city (as almost every translation presumes), or to God itself? In Jacques Derrida's interpretation (*Des Tours de Babel*, 1985) is the latter hypothesis that prevails. The sentence expresses the untranslatable quality of God's name (and of language itself) and the limits imposed on mankind. In dealing with the problem caused by translation, and the frustration with the confusion of language and its various meanings, Derrida begins by breaking down (or deconstructing) the words in the title of his work and giving them different meanings.

Heaven is to be conquered in an act of name-giving that nevertheless remains indissolubly linked with natural speech. One tribe, the Semites, whose name means 'name', wish to build a tower up to heaven, to make a name for themselves. In this context, taking up a position in heaven means giving oneself a name - a grand name, from the lofty elevation of a metalanguage, which will allow one to dominate the other tribes and the other languages. In other words, it is an act of colonization. God, however, descends and thwarts this undertaking by uttering the word 'Babel', a proper name which resembles a word meaning confusion. With this word, he condemns humankind to a **multiplicity of languages** and the process of **translation**. The tribe must thus abandon its plan of domination through a language which would have been universal. The fact that this divine intervention gave rise to a **work of architecture**, to construction - and conversely deconstruction - and at the same time involved a defeat or the imposition of boundaries on a universal language to frustrate any plan of political or linguistic dominance of the world, indicates, among other things, that the diversity of languages is uncontrollable...[The story of Babel] also contains an allusion to a finite, but nonetheless divine, aspect of God. This can be seen in his intervention in the building of the tower, an intervention which becomes necessary because God is not almighty...It is a token of His finite nature, and in this respect He finds himself in the same situation as the Semites, whom He would seem to be opposing. He is therefore unable to control the situation and even though He stops the construction of the tower, *He does not destroy it completely*. He leaves it in a state of **ruin** and thus makes possible the diversity of tongues and of architecture...This story should always be seen in the light of a deity who is finite. One characteristic of postmodernism, perhaps, is the fact that it takes account of this defeat. If modernism is distinguished by striving for absolute dominance, postmodernism may be seen to reflect an awareness of the experience of its end, the end of the plan for domination.⁵⁶

Today Babel is usually associated with confusion. However, if the word is translated and broken down, it has a different meaning. Ba means father and Bel means God. Babel signifies the holy city, or city of God. Derrida argues that the Ancients gave all of their capitals this name. This would mean that the biblical city was called Babel before the confusion occurred. Even so, the name Babel signifies confusion because of the confusion of the builders who could no longer understand each other and/or because the language was confused.

Derrida asks why does God punish the people? Is it because they wanted to build to the heavens or for wanting to accede to the highest and make a name for themselves? He suggests that God punishes them for wanting to assure a unique and universal genealogy by themselves. God causes deconstruction of the tower and scatters the genealogical filiation. This creates the need for language to be translated and simultaneously makes it impossible to be translated.⁵⁷

The issue of language (and specifically, the *confusion* of languages and their consequent *multiplication*) is related to the multitude of visual languages that the artist chooses as her tools to give form, voice and soul to an intuition, an idea or an emotion. The artist dreams of being understood by everybody; but the Tower (its ruins) stands there emblematically to remind her of the impossibility of finding the *universal language*, the sacred grail of twentieth century utopian projects. Even more, the

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Archi/Textur und Labyrinth," in *Das Abenteuer der Ideen* (Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin, 1984), p. 97. Quoted in Daniel Liebeskind, *Radix-Matrix: Architecture and Writings*, new rev. ed. (Munich - New York: Prestel, 1997), p. 118.

⁵⁷ From the website www.towerofbabel.com.

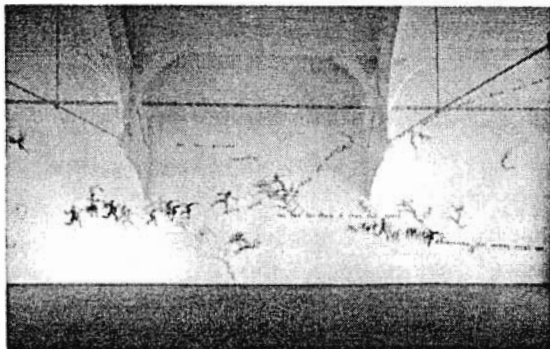
question is: what language? The language of tradition, the one that had been laid down by our predecessors in years and centuries of art history? The language of the avant-garde, the last trend, the language of fashion? The language of the *other*, the outcast, the marginal?

Babel is the experience of *otherness*: inside the building one could not tell what anything meant; and it is the experience of the *unfamiliar*.

A sign, such we are, and of no meaning
Dead to all suffering, and we have almost
Lost our language in a foreign land.

(Hölderlin, *Mnemosyne*)

An emblematic figure in this sense is artist Nancy Spero, whose work has explored at great length the search for a personal narrative by inventing a pictorial language that draws from a wide range of motives from art history ("At work in the archive of history and the memories of culture..."), but from a female/feminist point of view. In 1981 she was working under the title "The First Language," and quoted Luce Ingaray's passage:



Women need language, a language (*il leur faut le langage, du langage*). That house of language (*langue*) which for man even constitutes a substitute for his home in a body...woman is used to construct it but (as a result?) it is not available to her.⁵⁸

With reference to her "Black and the Red" paintings (1997, fig. 37), Spero wrote:



I think of doing work as dealing with the two possibilities: on the one hand, of pain, and on the other hand, of a sense of possibility. Because these things exist in life. And we cannot forget that this rather utopian and almost unrealizable thing that I portray – this sense of one's autonomy in a world of possibility – remains an ideal perhaps not to be reached in a true way. But in a certain way one attains this sort of thing...⁵⁹



37 Nancy Spero, from *Let the Priests Tremble...* Handprint on wall, view of the installation at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1998

⁵⁸ Luce Ingaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 105. Quoted in "Tongue, torture and free rein in Spero's explicit series of paintings," by Catherine de Zegher, p. 11, in Nancy Spero, "Black and the Red III" and "Let the priests tremble...", Ikon Gallery (Birmingham, 21 March – 24 May, 1998), containing a foreword by Elizabeth A. Macgregor.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Spero's paintings have by the time acquired an iconic, immediately recognizable quality by means of her hallmark figures: vividly colorful cutouts representing women in the act of jumping, running, moving ahead fast. They resemble archaic and mythical goddesses, or figures taken from Egyptian hieroglyphics, Attic vase paintings or African traditional masks and sculptures. Often her figures leave the paper or canvas surface to take the entire wall (fig. 37), interacting with the architectural space. Text is often part of Spero's compositions (see for instance the series of works inspired to Antonin Artaud's diaries), used as a political and aesthetic device. The energy that emanates from her paintings transfigures them into uplifting and true hymns to the female body and to life in all its facets.

A.3b - A personal recollection: Nomads⁶⁰ and Babelians

Legenda:

Notes to myself written "as if" to a second person; Q = questions to myself

Theoretical/narrative writing in first (singular/plural) and third (singular) person
 narrative (diary) in first person (commentary)

Quotations, voice-out-of-field; chorus (the other)

Quotations from historical texts (collective history)

C'est du même endroit que l'on sait et l'on ignore
 (graffiti writing on a Paris wall)

In this part of the building I will dig into the personal archive of the artist-nomad, or nomad-artist. I shall reconstruct the history of the encounter with the Tower and its further development into a specific subject; on the way, I shall meet the other actors in the drama: artists and key-figures who inspired and supported me during the journey, to construct a real 'poliphony of voices' where the 'I' dissolves in favour of a multitude of voices (the positive aspect of Babel, its real aim: to transcend individuality, to connect with a wider soul – L.2e).

Nomad: transversal-*horizontal*-subterrean process
 (routes) – cyclic time: she keeps going back at regular
 times: she does not lose anything, does not regret
 anything; transitory
 nature; particular
 image; solitary
 project;
 plurality of voices - within the individual)

Babelic: *vertical*, logocentric, above the
 ground, single-minded (linear and
 progressive time: no way back; permanent
 nature; universal image; collective project;
 plurality of voices - forced into unity)

⁶⁰ The term 'nomad' is used in a broad sense, and this might arise some issues about its righteousness in this context. I am aware that there is a semantic difference between 'nomad,' 'wanderer,' 'traveller,' 'tourist,' 'commuter,' and so on; however, it would be beyond the point to analyse this particular issue in depth. I shall therefore use the term 'nomad' because of its relevance in the original myth, as an archetypal figure and a metaphor for the artist whose practice of changing places becomes a poetical statement.

In our capitalistic society the business men and women can be seen perhaps as the equivalent of the Babelians (the beholders of power): they are building the Tower(s), while the intellectuals, artists and free-thinkers are observing from the outside (the Nomads).

On one side the nomads (the observers); on the other side the babelians (the constructors). Apparently, two separate worlds. But babelians were nomads once, and nomads will return, according to the story. I am going to refer to both categories, indicating the connections between them in order to provide an insight to my creative process largely based on the fluid exchange between antithetical concepts.

There is a time for wandering and collecting experience and information; a time to let oneself be absorbed by the world outside: images, voices, colours, sounds, places.

It was during one of my periodic visits to Rome that I discovered a book by the (feminist) philosopher Rosi Braidotti, *Nuovi soggetti nomadi* (New nomadic subjects), whose main line of thought I adopted to outline the theoretical program in this section of the book.

Her voice will back up the text as a 'chorus' , a voice-out of field alongside other quotations.

This fact comes as a further proof of the essential role that travel plays in the development of my work. In fact, most of the theoretical elaboration occurs to me while I am moving from one place to another: buses, trains, stations, airports, all kinds of transitory places become the theatre of new encounters and create the conditions for a *mise-en-question* of consolidated ideas and conceptual schemes previously worked out in 'stable homes'.

My creative process is based at first on accumulating and adding information from the most diverse sources (cf. L.2a-b), and subsequently in a selection and 'skimming' of the same information, to be rearranged into a visual text; travelling supplies a privileged access to external inputs that will inform my personal archive. It is true that today one does not need to travel to have access to a whole world of information thanks to the Internet; yet I would like to point out the irreplaceable function of physical dislocation as a way of letting chance (*hazard*; the unforeseen; the unknown) to enter into the creative process. By constantly moving between different places (they do not have to be too far away: sometimes a change of building or even room can suffice) I allow disruption to interfere with the order of things: each new interruption is like a little 'shock' that provokes new mental constructions. And each time a change occurs, a certain degree of clarity is brought into the process, obsolete concepts are let out of the box/suitcase and only the necessary is taken in the journey.

It is not, though, a minimalist process, or a simplistic process-by-exclusion; on the contrary, it works in the direction of complexity and refinement of initially raw ideas into extremely elaborate artifacts reflecting a multilayered system of connections and personal associations.

The nomadic condition, more than by the act of travelling, is defined by the consciousness that sustains the desire for subverting the established conventions: it's a political passion for transformation or radical change.⁶¹

I let my gaze wander through new and familiar places: I try to observe everything, remember everything, catch everything I can. I buy a new book at every station. I recognize myself in everything, and everything is a mirror of myself.

There is a time then to stop somewhere, pitch our tents and start to build; to give a body to our visions, to give a name to things, to leave a sign of the permanence of our passage. Painting (in the broadest sense) is the art of concretion: it needs a body to incarnate the concept; in it, intellectual elaboration goes hand in hand with physical action. Every new painting is a new building, every text a new scaffold. And even within every single painting we find the process of building and re-building, construction and de-construction; each painting contains a universe of possibilities.

If I consider the Tower as a metaphor of my work as an artist, then it's clear how the image of the Tower expresses that yearning and struggle to reach a unity within one's complex and manifold work, a body made of painting, drawing, prints, objects, models and a combination of all this in apparently non-hierarchical and anarchic attitude, where every piece acts as a fragment of a larger map. My attempt (utopia?) is to *re-construct Babel*, to recompose the map, to be able to perceive my work as a unity and yet to recognize its intrinsic multiplicity. For this reason I am speaking of a panoptic view (M.5a) that can grasp the whole of reality in a single glance. Is this still a modernist ideal? Even though the collapse of modernism, like other twentieth century ideologies, is an indisputable fact – at least as the idea of it being *the only possible and practicable idea* – nevertheless it would be a mistake to dismiss it tout-court.

The Tower failed surely for more than one reason, and not necessarily for the intervention of a God: it might be that they stopped building it because they simply realized that there was *nobody* up there, nothing to reach; it might have well failed because of its fragile foundations (Kafka), due to a structural problem; because it was not a collective project anymore (product of many voices), but a project that aimed to be 'universal' (to find the universal language, the universal image etc.), thus expression of one voice only – and nothing more than such an idea would be destined to fail. Ultimately, the artist is a nomad who wants to build her own tower (=her work), but another kind of tower, a mobile tower, portable tower, a tower with many forms. Yearning for mobility *while* willing to leave a permanent trace of her passage on the earth, she occupies a place in between.

The babelian and the nomad can be present in the same person at once. I see myself in both terms, and the artists who have or have had an influence on my work appear to my eyes as both "nomadic" and "babelians".

The babelians-nomads share great visions of destruction and construction carried out by powerful means of architectural space (Piranesi, Desiderio, Kiefer, Jacobo Borges, Liebeskind, Woods, da Silva), an obsession with the fragment recomposed in a 'totalizing object' or system, the use of multiple languages/identities and the crossing (or disregard) of genres (Kabakov, Duchamp, Jorge Luis Borges,

⁶¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Nuovi soggetti nomadi* (Roma: Luca Sossella, 2001), p.14. My translation.

Pessoa, Calvino, Pasolini, Scelsi, the Romantic idea of Gesamtkunstwerk), as well as a concern for ruins, architecture, materials, ethical, aesthetical and metaphysical issues.

The only theory I can practice is the one that either Ingaray or Deleuze sustain as a creative form of new ways of thinking. The only system of thought or conceptual scheme that interests me is the one that carries in itself the idea of changing, transformation, vital transition. I want a creative project, non-reactive, free from the oppressing weight of the traditional theoretical approach. The feminist theory is for me the place of such transformation: from a sedentary and logocentric thought to a nomadic creative thought.⁶²

For the 'babelic-nomad artist' though, such a transformation can only take place in her artwork; no theory or philosophy of any kind could substitute for that *laboratory*, open to the most diverse experiments and internal processes.

First point, the interdisciplinarity. It means to cross the boundaries of disciplines without worrying about the vertical distinctions along which they have been organized. From the point of view of the method, this style gets close to the Structuralists' bricolage, especially praised by Lévi Strauss. It also constitutes a practice of "theft", or extensive loan of notions and concepts that according to Hélène Cixous or Adriana Cavarero are deliberately used out of their context and diverted from their initial purpose. Deleuze defines this technique "de-territorialization", or the nomadic-becoming of things.⁶³

This is also the method advocated by William Burroughs ("je suis un voleur honteuse") when suggesting to young writers the practice of stealing "everything that comes into sight", and it is also the principle on which Benjamin based the Arcade Project (**M.3 - The map maker**).

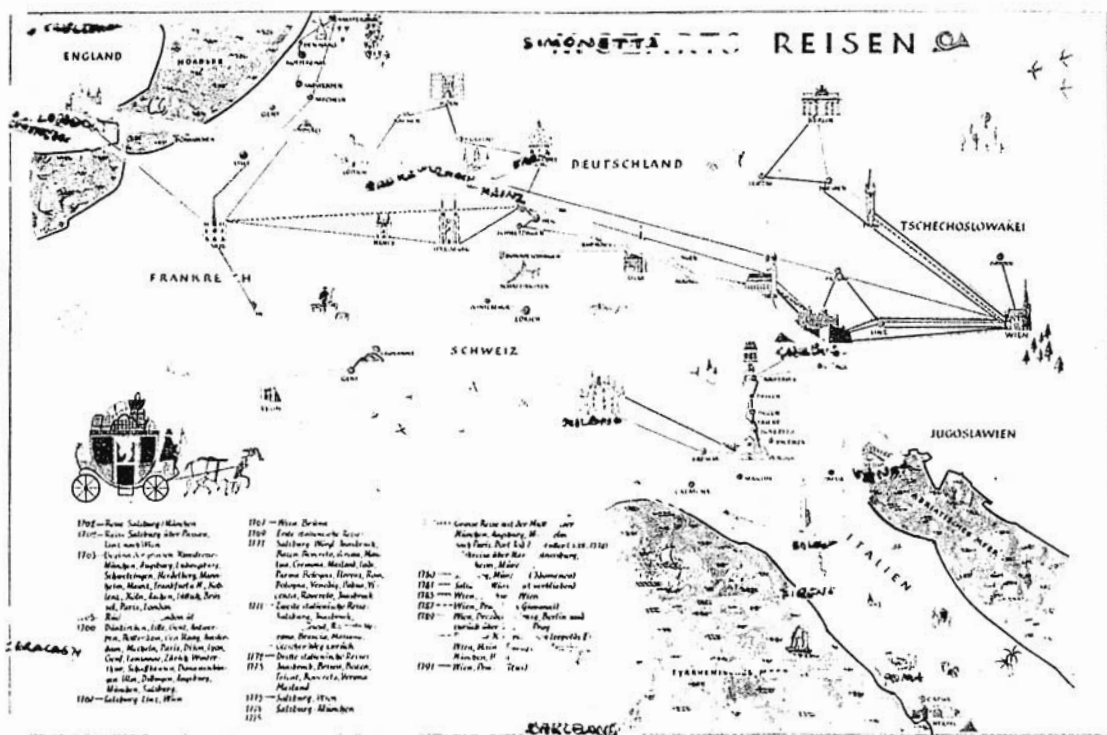
Identikit of a Nomad: the nomad artist keeps shifting her belongings from one place to the other. She has temporary studios in many places: Roma, Preston, Bad Kreuznach, Barcelona...her main tool is the cardboard box and the sellotape. She works a lot on paper because it's easier to transport (but this does not prevent her from painting large canvases mounted on wooden stretchers that require a long time to finish and dry). She prefers working on projects rather than finishing many pieces. A new working space is created at any time by arranging paper materials and small models installations. When she is spending some time in one place she makes sure that work is shifting among different buildings: for instance in Preston she is constantly moving things from Hanover Building (studio1) to 37 St. Peter's Street (office + gallery or studio 2) and back, and occasionally to Victoria Building (printmaking workshop) and home. The Harris Museum will provide even more rooms for her wanderings. Other cities like Venice, Salzburg or Caracas have been or are to become other potential places to be elected as temporary laboratories.

38 (Following page)

Map of *Simonetta's Reisen*, overpainted on a postcard bought in Salzburg illustrating Mozart's travels across Europe, 1999.

⁶² Ibid., p. 52.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 58.



Being nomadic is a state of the soul... it's about shifting ideas around and see how they change with the environment. It's about fighting boredom, perhaps... I cannot stand seeing the same thing on the wall for more than one or two weeks. I also change things around me in my apartment. It makes you look at the space in a different way. It makes you look at yourself in a different way. I can be as many people as I like. Each place allows a different part of myself to come through. Call it a dream, or fixation with the idea of parallel lives; but I do believe that we can live parallel lives, it's what we are doing all the time.

Nomadism is an intellectual form: it is not so much about being homeless, but rather about being able to recreate one's home everywhere.⁶⁴

Another word for nomad: "errant". It has a common root with "error" that means mistake (and an assonance with "erratic", i.e. strange, weird). Also in Italian *errare* is one verb that designates both wandering as making mistakes.

Errare, v.i. 1 (vagare) to wander (about); to roam; to rove; to ramble. **2** (sbagliare) to be mistaken; to err (*lett.*); to be wrong; to be incorrect; to be faulty.

It's saying that one is allowed to make mistakes by wandering. It reflects my attitude to painting and making art in general, open 'trial and error' processes, latent possibilities. My favourite painters have a story of wanderings.

Nomadism becomes synonymous with "aesthetic contamination," as architect Massimiliano Fuksas points out, discussing "the libraries of the nomad". His libraries reflect his eclecticism and his moving from one part of the globe to the other. They also reflect the frustration or the impossibility of reaching what he wants in a specific time, one of the drawbacks of moving too often:

It's impossible to concentrate all books in one place. It's also true that I never find what I need because it's always somewhere else. [...] I am interested in the elements of transition, for instance the passage between Mannerism to Baroque, Renaissance to Mannerism, or Middle Ages to Renaissance. Figures such as Michelangelo, Bramante, Brunelleschi...the "knots of transition".⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

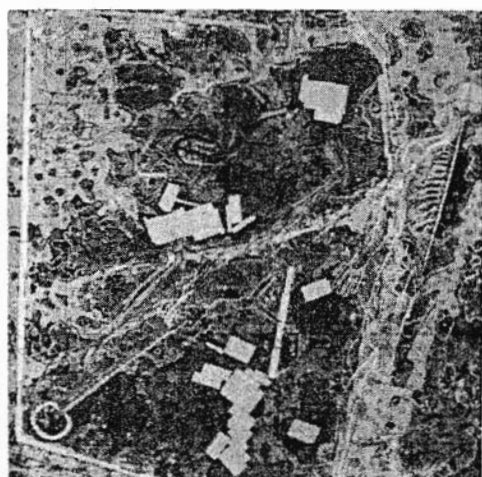
⁶⁵ Massimiliano Fuksas, in Ludina Barzini, "Fuksas: sublimi tradimenti da Hitchcock a Pasolini," *Il Corriere della Sera*, (Sunday 26 July, 2001): p. 21.

Is it perhaps from this impossibility of fitting all books into one place or finding things at the right time that the fixation with lists and archives comes from? As if by constantly organizing and classifying things, by giving them a name we would be able to fight the uncertainty of our daily lives.

I was born in Italy, in that strip of land in the North-East that the Venetians had already colonized by the 13th century. Venice was created under the sign of nomadism when its inhabitants began to sail in order to escape the hordes of Attila the Hun who were coming from the East. The city became ever since the cradle of a substantial number of globe-trotters, among which Marco Polo is still remembered as one of the major decoder of "others" languages.⁶⁶

This seeking for *my* home...was *my* affliction...where is – *my* home? I ask and seek and have sought for it; I have not found it.⁶⁷

Joyce Kozloff based "Bodies of Water: Songlines" (fig. 39) on a text by Bruce Chatwin, *Song Lines*. These are excerpts from an interview the artist had with Moira Roth, about a joint show with Max Kozloff, "Crossed Purposes" (1998-2000), in which three "Bodies of Water" paintings were exhibited.



39 Joyce Kozloff, *Bodies of Water: Songlines*, 1997-1998, acrylic and collage on canvas

I started the first piece, "Bodies of Water" last August, upon return from a sailing trip in the Baltic Sea with friends: I was fascinated by the nautical charts by which we navigated the 35,000 islands in the Swedish archipelago. Sections of those charts form the basis for this and two subsequent pictures. When I was working of "Calvino's Cities on the Amazon" (1995), a friend visited my studio and we discussed my recoil from public art. She thought the rivers looked like the inside of the body, or even the brain, and suggested that mapping was a reflection of my inward mood. This was so provocative to me that I ordered lifesize diagrams of the human digestive, circulatory and respiratory systems from a catalogue. Hovering over the cobalt water and mossy islands in "Songlines" are the crimson linear remains of a split body and the midriff of a mother connected by an umbilical cord to her baby. Additionally, I've woven into the navigational routes excerpts from "The Songlines" by Bruce Chatwin, specifically the parts in which he absents himself from his adventures among the Australian aborigines to quote people (both famous and obscure) from all over the world and across time - about their urge to leave home and roam the planet.⁶⁸

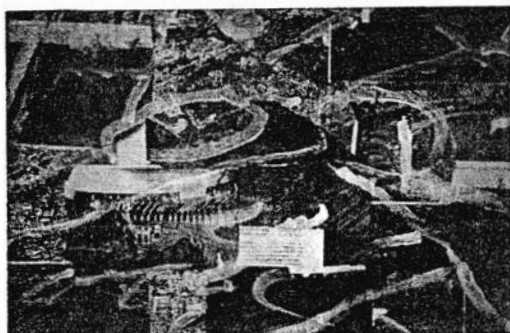
Our nomadism is an ancient one: it goes back to the time when we were wandering in the deserts of the East, looking for a place to settle our tents. My immediate relatives are of the sedentary stock (with few exceptions), but I am not, not since I set my foot on foreign lands; walking by places with tall buildings, busy roads and people speaking different tongues. The bustle of the Big City attracted me more than the quiet of Nature. I was dreaming of Babel: a place where the streets form an intricate net of parallel, orthogonal, circular or serpentine lines that map and defines the space of my movements. A place

⁶⁶ Braidotti, op.cit., p.22.

⁶⁷ Friederich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.

where there is room for differences and contradictions, for the *hazard* and the encounter with the Other. A place where things can happen or not, where people from different locations in time and space may meet, crossing and interweaving their destinies like threads on a carpet.

To me Babel was all this, and much more.



40 Figure walking in the desert, photograph Alain Sébe, 1998

41 Detail of *Large Map*, 1999
Monoprint, acrylic and collage on paper
120x160 cm

A figure walks solitary in the desert. The desert takes the whole space of the image, there is no horizon. The desert is everywhere, stopping every possibility of orientation. Is the way lost? Yet we can distinguish signs of tyres on the sand that take us in different directions. The figure is in between these traces. His/her shadow projects a further direction, cutting through all the others.

An image of the solitary journey as inner process (initiation, growth, change, mutations).

(Appendix, p. 1, passim)

BABEL: A tower, a tall building

A city, a metropolis

Languages, confusion of-; variety of languages; modes of expression

Not understanding each other's idiom; displacement, being (a) foreign(er)

Being scattered on earth; wandering - wanderlust

Confusion, multiplicity, multiculturalism, multiple personality

I first met Babel at the time when I met Jacobo Borges.⁶⁸ He belongs to the nomads too, being at home in a variety of places in Europe and America and moving fluidly among genres, media and a whole range of visual languages. But rather than a first encounter with Babel, it was a recognition of a presence that had been with me earlier. Meeting Jacobo was as a catalyst to let this consciousness emerge: Babel was already there, announced in a work I had painted in Barcelona two years before, in 1996, *The Red Tower* (fig. 42).

⁶⁸ Joyce Kozloff, courtesy the author.

⁶⁹ Venezuelan artist Jacobo Borges (b. 1931), whom the author met at the Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst in Salzburg in 1998.



42 *The Red Tower*, 1996
Oil on canvas, 195x50 cm

A tall, thin brick tower in the middle of a wasteland; probably a water tower, the kind they used to build in the end of the 19th century: a factory tower. A smaller building with broken window panes on the left is the only survivor of the industrial complex that once surrounded the tower. In front of it, a pile of rubbish and debris. In the far background, a city; all around, the desolate wasteland spreads and at the lower right hand corner, a man with a dog on a leash lingers at his back, turned to the viewer as if in contemplation of the scene (Caspar David Friedrich, the Romantic wanderer etc). Stylistically, the tower is accurately worked, painted in oil paint with a thin brush and slow movements, whilst the rest of the canvas is executed in acrylic and the figures are intentionally left undefined through brisk strokes and thick brushwork. The painting is nearly 200 cm. tall and about 60 cm. wide.

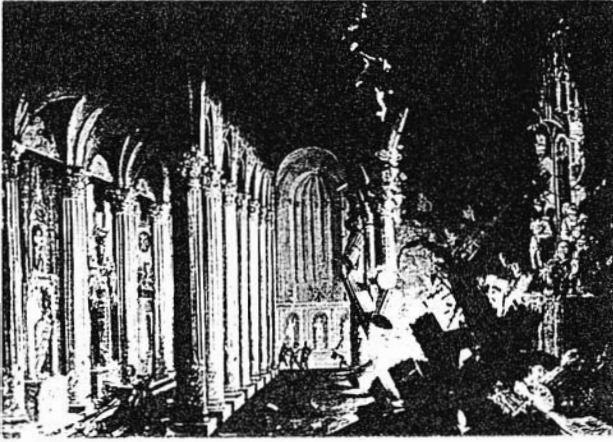
The Red Tower seemed to be totally at odds with what I was doing at the time – big, heavily worked abstract black paintings, made of textures and layers. For me, it was a breaking point, a new start, a statement of freedom and for my love of representational painting.

(But eventually I combined the two paintings, and it seemed to work).

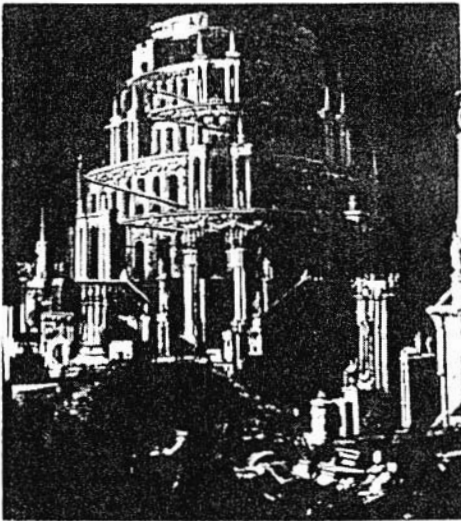
The wasteland with the tower was situated just behind our studio in Barcelona Poble Nou district, an industrial neighbourhood not too far from the Ciutat Olímpica, on the seaside. We used to go there often to collect material from the waste dump; one could find amazing materials such as wood, panels to be used as supports for painting, timbers, furniture etc.

I liked to look at the tower whenever I went down to the site; I felt drawn by it. Then finally I painted it, from a photograph I had taken (I often paint from photographs, not necessarily my own ones). And after I painted it once, I forgot about it. I did not think of making a series, apart from two small works I painted two years later. The tower was lying quietly, face against the wall in the basement of a house in western Germany, where it still rested in the back of my mind, until I went to Salzburg, in the summer of 1998.

I found Babel while I was looking for something else, in the small library at the Sommerakademie in Salzburg. I was looking for Desiderio. What better name than *Desire*⁷⁰ for a painter?



43 Desiderio Monsù (pseud.), *Explosion in a Cathedral* (also known as: *King Asa of Judah Destroying the Idols*), c. 1625. Cambridge, Fitzwilliams Museum



44 Desiderio Monsù (pseud.), *The Tower of Babel*, oil on canvas, 152x130 cm. Naples, private collection

After seeing a picture of the Red Tower, Jacobo mentioned a rather obscure and mysterious seventeenth century painter whose name escaped him; he was probably born in Naples and lived in many places, eventually arriving in Cuba.

In Jacobo's opinion, there were striking affinities between this artist and myself; he talked about a painting with eerie architectural elements and crumbling columns, a sublime vision of destruction.

Intrigued by this description, I was looking through a book on the legacy of Mannerism in modern art,⁷¹ when I saw it. It had columns crumbling, or rather exploding in the air, and the interior was evidently a church: *Explosion in a Cathedral* (fig. 43) by the so-called Desiderio Monsù (by all evidence, a pseudonym). It was an impressive and fascinating painting indeed, and after a while, I realized that I had seen it before with another name attached. Only a few paintings have survived by this elusive artist, among which there is a fine representation of the Tower of Babel (fig. 44), a kind of Mannerist interpretation of the Gothic style, full of spires, pinnacles, pointed arches all arranged like Venetian lace.

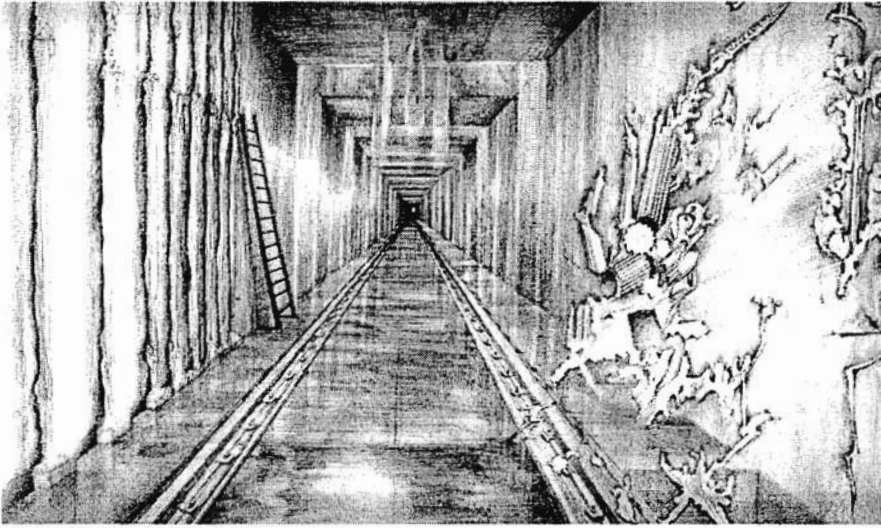
Browsing in the library, I spotted another title: *Turm Zu Babel*, by Helmut Minkowsky,⁷² a scholarly work on the Tower of Babel in the history of painting, from early antiquity to our time. Desiderio's Tower is of course

⁷⁰ Desiderio in Italian means "desire".

⁷¹ Gustav René Hocke, *Die Welt Als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der Europäische Kunst: von 1520-1650 und in die Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957).

⁷² Helmut Minkowsky, *Turm Zu Babel* (Luka Verlag Freren, 1991).

listed, but under the name of Didier Barra and François de Nôme. Whatever the truth, I prefer Desiderio.



45 Transcription from Desiderio's *Exploding Church*, 1998
Litograph on paper, 35x50 cm.

The Tower of Babel became my subject matter. It was a conscious decision, even though at the time everything seemed to happen by accident. I started analyzing the various representations of the Tower by deconstructing their basic elements and subsequently by reconstructing them as collages and drawings (fig. 46), while inventing new forms. These constituted the basis of the work and the research that followed in the next three years.

Following page:

46 Study based on Lucas van Valkenborch the Younger's "Tower of Babel" (oil on board, 49x67 cm. Mainz, Landesmuseum), Salzburg sketchbook, 1998. Collage, graphite and charcoal on paper, 29x42 cm.