Re-constructing Babel

The History and Creative Possibilities
of a Myth, Explored through Text and Installation

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Abstract of Research

This thesis and related artwork examines the layers of meaning around the Tower of Babel and how the myth can be visually represented today. This thesis attempts to give new readings to the myth drawing on history, literature, philosophy and architectural writings while using multi-media visual experimentation to highlight the contemporary experience. The Tower of Babel acts as a generator of the creative process and provides a structural framework for the motivation of my creative practice.

Throughout the written thesis the relationship between the myth and a possible contemporary reality is explored and can be seen as crucial to understanding the depth to which the myth has influenced and shaped contemporary art practice in terms of both the theory and the actual making and presenting of artwork in the late 20th and early 21st century. In the artwork this reality manifested itself in the three- part multi site exhibition of installations of my work, Reconstructing Babel. This acted as a test case in which the ideas about how and why the myth exists are explored and confronted within a given environment, the museum.

Overall, the thesis and artwork show in combination how the modern Babel manifests itself as an excess of communication in which we are no longer able to select or decode. It is a city in the throes of continuous transformation which is searching for order, a centre, a name and a universal language.

Acknowledgements

The "Re-constructing Babel" project as a whole has involved so many people that a complete list of acknowledgement is a nearly impossibile task. Therefore I shall mention only the main actors who took part to the process and have been particularly engaged with this text.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Monsù Desiderio (pseud.).

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3 And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter.

4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

6 And the Lord said, Behold, the people *is one*, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

9 Therefore is the name of it called Ba-bel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

(Genesis, 11 v 1-9)

1 *Pink Tower*, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
145x115 cm

The story of the Tower of Babel is about a city and a tower to be built, a tower that may reach into heaven. It is about human ambition and a vision of utopia that would be sought and remain incomplete; it is about lack of communication that leads to dispersion. In this thesis I shall focus mainly on the building aspect of the story, choosing not to highlight the communication, language-related issue in relation to which the Tower of Babel myth has been so often used as a metaphor in the common use. Wherever I talk about language it shall be in the context of the specific language (or languages) and styles I employ in this text or when I refer to the visual language that informs my artwork. Concerning the former, I shall point out that since the metaphor is a central rethoric figure to this thesis, the text is not presented as a discursive analysis (at least not every part of it) but rather as a collage of different voices, each indicating a possible path to follow, with the deliberate intention of taking the reader for a detour (which is also the title of perhaps one of the most representative pieces of this project). This process entails the possibility of going astray, of losing one's bearing, of not knowing what is waiting around the corner: but it is in no way purely arbitrary. A degree of objectivity is ensured by the logical construction of the text and by providing a map that identifies three main areas or sections, namely the Archive, the Museum and the Laboratory. I shall explain these points further on in the overview.

The story of the Tower is therefore taken as a *pre-text* (in the literal sense of the expression: a text before the text) to initiate a discourse, elsewhere described as a 'journey', around issues of nomadism, mapping territory and the space of the city, stratification, growth and change, human activity, architecture and the passion for constructing, de-constructing, re-constructing and re-spatializing.

The Tower carries a rich vocabulary of symbols and images that have been used as motifs for a series of theme related artworks; a particularly poignant issue is the idea of the city evoking images of the past and the present, often blurring and superimposing one upon another. This has been visually rendered by the layering and superimposion of different pictorial planes and through the use of different media, materials and styles.

Finally, the Tower is this thesis *and* the work to which the text refers. We have therefore a double level of metaphor: one corresponds to the meaning of the subject matter in relation to the artwork, the other takes the Tower as the symbolic image of the work itself. The former is analysed in the written part of the project and visually explored in the artwork, the latter is embodied by the existence of the project itself, meant as an organic whole of written and visual material.

II. RECONSTRUCTING BABEL

The main scope of this thesis is to present a theme – "The Tower of Babel" – and to unravel its story and mythology in the light of my work as a visual artist, with reference to other artists whose work has been inspired by the same theme or presents some affinities with my own work.

Some artists are more than references: they are inspiring and influential figures, and they often appears as 'voices' within the work. Most of the time they suggest a new idea, a new project, a new painting. Sometimes they indicate a possible solution to common artistic problems. I especially consider as valuable those works, ancient or modern or contemporary, that show me something that was not there before.

This research has evolved in the direction of investigating the sources of my creative process while setting the results of this process into a historical context. This book is born out of the necessity to historicize my art practice and possibly define a theoretical frame that draws from archetypal figures acting as generators for a personal narrative based on associations and metaphors.

I shall adopt the figure of Wittgenstein's rope (*Seilmetapher*) as a representation of the concepts contained within:

> [...] In fact we have found that the use which we really make of the word "comparing" is different from that which looking at it from far away we were led to expect. We find that what connects all the cases of comparing is a vast number of overlapping similarities, and as soon as we see this, we feel no longer compelled to say that there must be some one feature common to them all. What ties the ship to the wharf is a rope, and the rope consists of fibres, but it does not get its strength from any fibre which runs through it from one end to the other, but from the fact that there is a vast number of fibres overlapping.[1]

The fibres of the rope become here a metaphor for the fragments of which each chapter or section is made: at the same time it is an image of the relationship that runs between the text and the artwork (paintings,

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, from "The Blue and the Brown Books", in *Preliminary studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p. 87.

drawings etc.), and even between the images within a single painting or drawing. As in the rope, we do not find a thread that runs from the beginning to the end, but a series of segments whose strength lies in the connections of the fibres with each other. Truly, there is a *fil rouge* that is 'the Tower', explored in a number of possible aspects: but the Tower does not play the role of an *essence*, it rather acts as a metonym for a structural system: it is **(a)** subject matter (source of inspiration, historical content), **(b)** creative process (the making of the work and its conceptual implications) and **(c)** architectural frame, scaffolding (structure of the book, container; the text in relation to the visual). The Tower as a subject matter and its possible ways of representation, including reference to other artists' work, shall be developed in Part one – '**Archive**', and two – '**Museum**', whilst the point concerning the creative process shall be explored in Part three – '**Laboratory**'. In this respect the progression is 'logical', as it focuses first on collected material, including references, then on my own elaboration of this material as visual artwork and finally on the critical assessment of the concepts that underly my studio practice.

As for the latter point (c), it shall be demostrated how the Tower relates to the thesis format and to the artwork itself in the course of the dissertation.

(a) In the Archive and Museum (A – M)

Symbols and myths have always played an important role in the work of the most diverse artists, and comprehensibly so, as the symbol offers a key to the deepest and hidden levels of reality. Myths on the other hand give the artist the possibility to talk about issues that touch the present human condition within a timeless frame of reference, in a way that transcends the historical circumstances and therefore aims to a wider, even universal understanding.

In the past, allegorical figures were created to represent concepts that would be otherwise unrepresentable: how to represent, for instance, qualities such as ambition and haughtiness? A typical artists' device was to 'humanize' such qualities giving them anthropomorphic features, as we can see in any Medieval or Renaissance representation of, say, the virtues or the capital sins. Nevertheless, the Tower of Babel as a subject matter for the contemporary artist eludes at this point such rhetorical attempts, and demands a deeper understanding and a wider comprehension of its meaning and implications.

The question arising at this point is: how is it possible nowadays for the contemporary artist to represent in visual terms a myth as complex and in many ways elusive as the Babelian one? A myth that has been widely depicted in the past centuries but somehow confined to its literary appearances only? Ultimately, how to represent the idea of a grandiose building (a grandiose but never finished project) that is about *everything* and at the same time a simulacrum to hide its nonsense or its emptiness? A subject matter that is in so many ways unrepresentable and hardly reducible to an icon of any sort is nevertheless a challenge for the artist who may see in it a chance to explore concepts such as nomadism or mobility, multiplicity, dispersion, transcendental yearning, failure; or key-figures such as the city, the desert, the map, the ruin, the fragment. The broader sense of the question should actually be, is *any* representation of a narrative still possible nowadays in painting and visual art in general? If the answer is yes, as I believe, then in what terms, in which ways? It is not a question

about 'style' (this one being only a very limited part of the problem), it is a question about the very nature and aims of the artwork.

My purpose is not to make an *illustration* of the subject 'Tower of Babel', but to use the theme of the Tower as a starting point, i.e. a generator of ideas that acts as a stimulus by means of associations for a visual narrative. Babel as a machine for thought and images, where the resulting product depends on a virtually infinite combination of elements (the concepts within the narrative) ruled by the mutual exchange between discipline and freedom, or by a sort of 'system submitted to chance'.

"What to paint?". This question implies freedom towards the subject matter, the distance that is necessary to take and the fact that every subject matter is but a pretext for the artist to indicate something in her own terms. "What to paint" means: there is nothing given *a priori*, and we do not know what the Tower actually is. Or better, we have the intuition that it stands for a number of things, from the debris left after WW II in Dresden (but it could be Sarajevo, the Palace of Soviets or the World Trade Center) to the planet Earth. And that of course gives us a wide range of possibilities in the choice of things that could be represented. The Tower is by its own nature all-embracing, encyclopedic, ambiguous and metamorphic. It's a dream-utopia of a perfect microcosm. A dream that in our minds has already taken the emblematic form of one of the most famous towers in the history of art, the Pieter Bruegel the Elder's large painting presently at the Albertina Museum in Vienna (fig. 10). As Helmut Minkowsky shows us in what is the most exhaustive historical survey on the subject, *Turm Zu Babel*, hundreds of towers have been depicted through the centuries (from the early ages to our time) as a tall, multistorey building in the making, with some minimal variations on the shape and the surrounding landscape. Sometimes a different end of the Tower is suggested, as we can see in the most catastrophic versions where the natural elements are transfigured in a vision of Sublime and gain the upper hand over human hubris.

I have made use of this iconography taking it as a reference for a series of paper work based on reproductions and collage (M.2), paintings (*Pink Tower*, fig. 1) and drawings (*The Feasts of the Empire*, fig. 122-124). Examples can be found in the work of contemporary artists (A.2), such as Patrick Mimran who recently exhibited a highly acclaimed version of one of Bruegel's Towers in form of a video-sculpture (Fig. 15). Re-elaborating traditional motives by using contemporary media is a legitimate and rather straightforward operation, albeit in its own way quite predictable. But what about 'traditional' means such as painting or drawing? To paint a Tower of Babel as a cylindrical building with many floors and infinite arches and windows can surely still be done with admirable results, but I suspect that it wouldn't add anything to what we know already about the story, and most of all about the possibilities of painting to be able to evoke those aspects that are implicit in the subject matter and not immediately visible or representable in visual terms. To simply paint a Tower would be either a stylistic exercise or the illustration of an idea.

But I wish to suggest rather than to illustrate. To indicate a possible way rather than to make a commentary; to display an index of possibilities rather than one way only; to make history paintings without being too literal, and free from the rhetoric of the 'contemporary'; to translate the meanings of the Tower into a vision of complexity that may challenge the traditional boundaries between disciplines, combining painting, drawing, printmaking, architecture and writing in one body of work.

The Tower as subject matter is an invisible presence that should be perceived through the traces made visible in the work, but left unspoken. The attempt to keep all the pieces together reflects the primeval struggle of the builders of the Tower, trying to hold the work together in spite of the confusion of languages. And like the builders of the Tower eventually realized that the Tower could not be accomplished, I came to the conclusion that the best way to represent the Tower its actually through its non-representation. Or better, by shifting the attention onto the elements around it, one might tell its story better than the Tower/building could – onto the city, the desert around it, the builders and the observers; the space between the bricks.

The story of the Tower is the "story of a ruin" as Paul Zumthor aptly pointed out in *Babel ou l'inachevement* (Babel or the unfinishedness). The work was interrupted and the building left unfinished. Babel is the story of a failure. My imagination flourished trying to figure out the possible reasons for its failure. Different hypotheses produced a multitude of stories, visions of oblivion and catastrophe. I wanted to represent different phases of the Tower's story, trying to reconstruct its story through the abandoned ruins, and the collective memory of a people through a personal recollection.

(b) In the Laboratory (L)

What role does theory play in the art work? How to make sense of the multitude of voices and relationships, correspondences and associations that the artist sees in her work? Here we come to the Tower as a symbol of building process, a permanent construction site, forever open and unfinished.

Writing about process serves here at least two purposes: there is the writing in form of notes quickly scribbled down before or while making a piece, as a memorandum, as a form of fixing ideas before they fly away, and the writing made *a posteriori*, a reflection on the work after its completion, or meditations on specific concepts. My journals contain both elements, with a predominance of the first – and that's where the dissertation reveals one of its function, i.e. to organize and elaborate scattered notes, thoughts and reflections. Writing in this case leaves the fluid narrative form to adopt a synthetic prose where the main concepts are divided into brief paragraphs.

(c) Image and text – the architectural frame

This thesis is first of all an investigation of the Tower of Babel from the artist's point of view. The Tower has been deconstructed and taken apart in its singular elements and then reconstructed again, according to the artist's plan. What emerges is a story that has never been written before, a new Tower that is the artist's work itself. The text stands to the artwork like the scaffolding to the Tower: it sustains and follows its construction step by step. Other times it might seem that the images are the carrying structure while the texts are the bricks of the building[2]. This relationship, image-text, runs through the whole book without a rule establishing which of the two terms comes first; at times the text springs from an image, other times the opposite. What is important to point out is the circular movement between text and image, how one influences the other and vice

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[2] One of the numerous variations on the original myth says that each builder was carrying a brick on whose surface his or her name had been carved (A.3)

versa. There is a similarity at this point with opera. As in opera, music, text and scenery go hand in hand and one would be incomplete without the other, so in the artwork images and text should be seen as one project, an art concept itself. However, as in opera the predominant role is played by the music, it is not suggested that a perfect equality exists between the image and text: for the artist writing is *not* the same as painting or making artwork in general. Writing in this case is always writing *about* something, but the artwork has an existence of its own, even when it refers to a number of things 'without'. There are some specific cases in which the text is part of the artwork (such as some installations, e.g. *The Archaeologist* – **M.5**, or the series of *Portable Models* – **M.8**), but on a general basis the text is an aid to acquiring a deeper level of understanding, that is, different levels of reading the artwork, without its becoming determinant for the appreciation of the work as such (Mozart used to say that words should be the handmaid of music and not vice versa.). Another analogy with opera is the multiplicity of voices and their simultaneous presence, whereby I mean the different elements 'singing' at once in the artwork, which appear as a homogeneous unit but are built in layers.

(c.1) The text as a system

If the problem is multiplicity, fragmentation and dispersion as the result of the 'after-Babel', a possible solution is the invention of a 'system of totality' or a system that is able to summarize the multiplicity into a unity, by re-constructing (a personal) Babel.

This text is part of this 'unit' and works like an hypertext where there are constant cross references from one part to another, and in which an image or a chapter can open many windows onto other texts or images, quite in the same way as on a web site or in certain religious texts, such as the Talmud[3]. Often the same concept returns in different parts of the book (cf. the dilemma of location in the library of Leibniz, **A.1**) but each repetition in a different context helps to bring light to another aspect of that concept rather than merely replicate it. The repetition transforms the concept in the same way as the repetition (the copy, the imitation) of a form generates a new form (**L.2**).

Among the proposals that Italo Calvino points out in his *Six Memos For The Next Millennium*, under the voice "Multiplicity", there is the "plural text *(testo plurimo)* that substitutes the unity of the thinking 'I' with a multiplicity of subjects, of voices, of world views, according to a model that Michail Bachtin called 'dialogical' or 'polyphonical' or 'carnivalesque', tracking back the precedents from Plato to Rabelais to Dostojevski."[4] (cf. **L.3e**).

The book format refers to a building-like structure, or to the structure of an ancient city, where one can see through many layers at the same time, by means of glass pavements or archaeological excavations. Chapters and paragraphs are marked by numbers and letters, corresponding to differnt 'rooms' of an imaginary building that takes as a model the Harris Museum's structure, where the exhibition that is part of this research

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[3] "The Talmud, like the Internet, is non-linear, almost hypertext. Each page is divided into passages and commentaries from a variety of sources, referring back to the Bible and to each other. The links, icons and doorways of a web page find their parallel in this multitude of Talmudic cross-references. And both are full of conflict and contradiction: the Talmud records, often with delight, the Rabbi's disagreements. [...] Rather than dogma, there is debate." Eliane Glaser,"Wanderers of the Web", *Times Literary Supplement* (March 1, 2002).

[4] Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane: sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Mondadori, 1993), p.128. Translation mine. In future quotations the following English version has been used: *Six Memos For The Next Millennium: the Edward Norton Lectures* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992).

will take place (see fig. 1). Some of the subjects follow the disposition of the works on display. At the same time it echoes the structure of the ancient Babylonian ziggurats, built in levels, and the biblical definition of the Tower, "as tall as wide" (thus, a cube). It would be beyond the point, however, to look for exact correspondences between these references, as they constitute a poetic tool rather than a programmatic system . If there is a system, this is necessarily made flexible, and it allows idiosyncrasies and ambiguities to arise.

III. THESIS' STRUCTURE

PART 1 - ARCHIVE

Here the artist is called to be the *archivist* and the *historian* of her own work, whose narrative proceeds alongside the collective story of the Tower of Babel, reconstructing it through the images she has collected and produced herself. Firstly, the concept of "Archive" is introduced (A.1); secondly, an overview of references that are in various ways connected with the subject is given (A.2); and finally, in the "Stories of Babel" section (A.3) a more personal style has been used to explore issues of nomadism, personal recollection and references that coexist with a reflection on the original text.

PART 2 - MUSEUM

This section is a catalogue of works and projects developed in the three year research programme, in which the art is located within a context that focuses on some elements of the story: the **Map**, the **City**, the **Tower** itself. The reader is taken into this section as a visitor to a museum, following a route where the artwork is divided into specific themes (such as: city paintings, maps, panoramas etc.). The artist in this case plays the role of the *curator* of her own work by arranging and contextualizing it, or even that of the *archaeologist* by recomposing the fragments of an artistic production – the traces of a passage – that together form the whole body of work. The same idea will be developed in the *Harris Museum Project*, a comprehensive installation work that will be on display at the Harris Museum in Preston in October, 2002 as a conclusion of the research. A separate section at the end of "Museum" is dedicated to this project.

PART 3 - LABORATORY

The artist uses this space to explore concepts, techniques and working methods. She shall talk about the creative process, of working alternatively on text and images; of making her own 'tower': the artwork itself. Often the reflection on specific artistic problems merges with the reflection on broader issues that might include philosophy as well as politics or social trends, only when this proves to be relevant to the main discourse. It goes without saying that it is not in the artist's intention to cover each possible clue that the Babelian myth calls forth, let alone to provide an answer to each question that might arise from her explorations, or expertise in fields that lie outside art and her immediate experience.

The *Appendix* at the end of this section collects extended notes that did not find adequate space within the main text.

IV. CONSIDERATIONS

This book is intentionally 'baroque,' as its main goals are to be open-ended, circular, transversal, fragmented, anti-minimal, multilayered. It is a book that can be opened at any page, offering a route to follow. It reflects the idea of a 'system without a system', a research conducted on multiple levels where intuition has the same weight as rational thought, one path might lead to ten others and many ways are equally practicable. I have often let other people speak for myself, adopting other points of view, in form of quotations or assuming someone else's personality, as a metaphor for the multiple nature of the Tower. In reality there is not *one* story of Babel, but *many* stories, as there cannot be one project inspired by Babel but dozens, hundreds of projects, many of which will remain on paper. The unrealized projects become an artwork itself.

The underlying theme is architecture, and specifically painted architecture, or architecture in painting, but also architecture as a metaphor. From architecture to site, place, journey, map the step is short; this book could also be called "History of a wandering," or "History of a detour," with the accent placed on strolling around, making a journey, falling astray from the route, losing oneself in the labyrinth of associations, ultimately finding the way back home.

Perhaps in this 'After Babel' era, to cite the title of a famous essay by George Steiner, in the after-history, after-modernity, after-postmodernity, 'after-all' age we are witnessing the prophecy of Walter Benjamin's "Angelus Novus", trapped between the here and now and the uncertainties of the future, while the failures of the past are still looming behind.
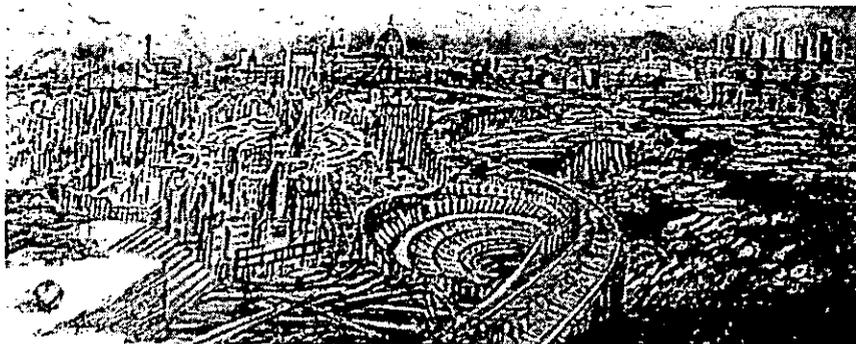
2 Angelus Novus, 2001
   Watercolour and graphite on paper, 40x60 cm

His countenance is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees nothing but catastrophe incessantly heaping ruin upon ruin and hurling the debris at his feet. He would probably like to linger awhile and piece the fragments together; but a storm approaches from paradise, a storm that entangles itself in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him inexorably into the future on which he turns his back, while the heap of rubble before him mounts up to heaven. The name we give this storm is 'progress'.

The angel of history, like myths, reminds us the importance of knowing our origins, wherever and whatever they might be. By knowing our ancestors we can eventually be free from them, that is not to be a slave of their power of fascination. The Tower, its ruins, acts as a 'block of memory' in the middle of the city (a place where the pulse of life beats stronger than everywhere else on earth), a block that may recall the original rough stone on which the city was built at the very beginning of the story. A block that contains not only the ruins of the past, but also the relics of the present, which will be able to give testimony to the years in which we are living, to future generations. To convey and disclose the memory of the present: is this not the task that the artist has set for herself, out of her own urgency?

The angel of history is blown into the future by a storm called Progress: but its name may well be Utopia.

> The utopia to which we are referring is the one which E. Bloch talks: utopia as hope, as a project for a more just, more conscious, more creative future. Bloch has taught us to free our desire and our imagination, which "let the possible come through the real". He has spoken of the hopeful look that crosses through existence and is not satisfied with making order from the data of reality like the "conservative look" does, which is afraid of the future and perceives it only as disorder. A noncontemplative look, but constantly open to research. To go beyond reality, to find in it the "traces", the signals of new perspectives. Similarly, according to Bloch identity is not only the recognition of the limit, but also the constant attempt to overcome it.
> Bloch launches the idea of utopia again and invites us to the journey, but he warns us: "the geographical maps that do not include the country of Utopia do not even deserve to be taken into consideration." [5]

I have been working with the myth, following a path that I started from the beginning of my art practice. I have explored my relationship with history and the possibility of recreating a personal narrative as an antidote to current processes of globalization.

I am first of all a visual artist, and a painter: my point of view is that of a painter. Even when I play the role of the architect, or the writer, or curator I always do it as a painter. This means that I hold onto a tradition of working with physical matter as well as with ideas and abstract concepts, where the physical approach to things generally follows a 'trial and error' approach, and prefaces any theorization or programmatic scheme. It is still the inductive method employed by Galileo in science or Leonardo in his studies of the most various nature. On a practical and theoretical level I collect data, observe, experiment, select and catalogue, and finally, contextualize.

I did not want to provide any definitive answer, let alone any moral judgement; I rather wanted to detect an index of possibilities, and investigate my process. I have tried to open things up, rather than close them down to a singular idea or conclusion; in this sense one could see an attempt to deconstruct the 'phallic image of the tower' in order to reveal the level of complexity underneath, although by no means does this thesis aim to treat the subject from a feminist point of view.

[5] E. Bloch, *Il principio speranza*, ed. R. Bodei (Milano, 1994). Quoted in *Taccuino di viaggio nel territorio della città*, ed. Rosario Pavia (Pescara: DAU, 1995). My translation.

The whole project has been a challenge and it is probably going to be a challenge for the reader to follow the maze of metaphors and personal associations that have played a fundamental role in building this text and the visual work which it elucidates.

As Hélène Cixous has said, "one must have traveled a great deal to discover the obvious; one must have gone a long way in order to finally leave behind our need to veil, or lie, or gild," in order to "create without commentary, without condemnation, without interpretation. With respect for the shadows as for the light. Without knowing more and better."[6]

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[6] Hélène Cixous, "The last painting or the portrait of God," 1ˢᵗ published in *Entre l'écriture, des femmes* (Paris, 1986), pp. 171-201. English trans. ed. Deborah Jenson, in *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 104-131.

1 ARCHIVE

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).
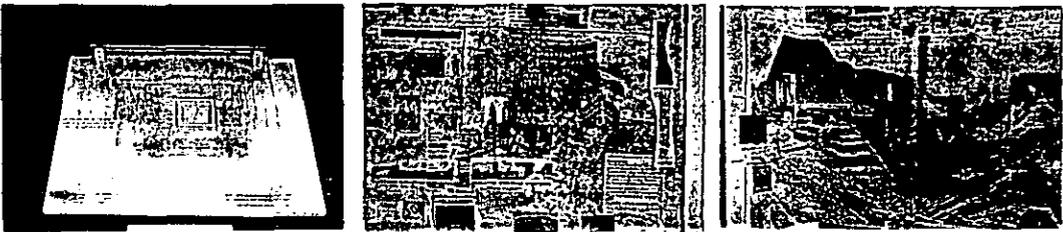
3   4   5

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 levels[1], corresponding to a series of symbolic meanings:

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

- ATTIC	*future*	realization
- 2ND FLOOR	*present*	organization
- 1ST FLOOR	*past*	discovery
- GROUND FLOOR	*city doors*	journey
- BASEMENT	*foundations*	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*
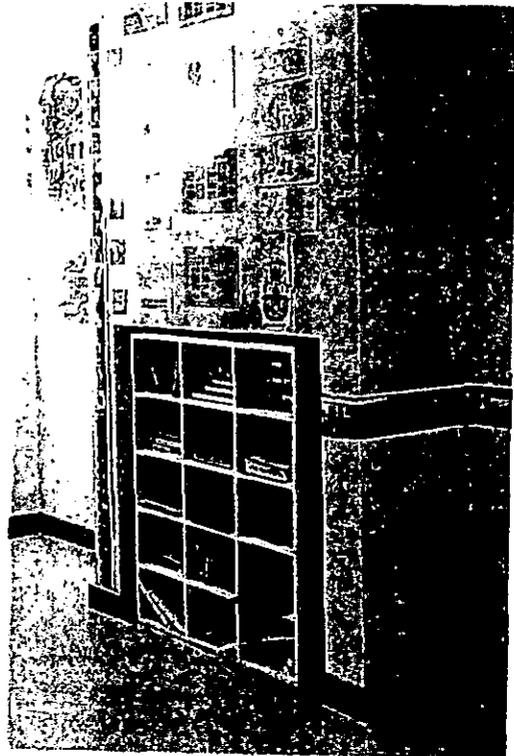
The making of one's archive puts forward a series of problems, such as *where* to locate one item in the catalogue, that is, to which aspect of it one should give priority over many others; within a series of possibilities?

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 Leibniz[2], 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 view[3], Leibniz expressed his faith in a world open to invention and possibility, in anthitesis to a closed and geometric one.

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[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*.

3

> 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 writings[8]. 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 commedies 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 *fictious 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 fictious 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).

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[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 – 1ª). 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.

In *Les archives de l'architecte* (The archives of the architect, fig. 7), 1991 and *Mnémosyne – 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.

7   Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Mnémosyne: 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**).
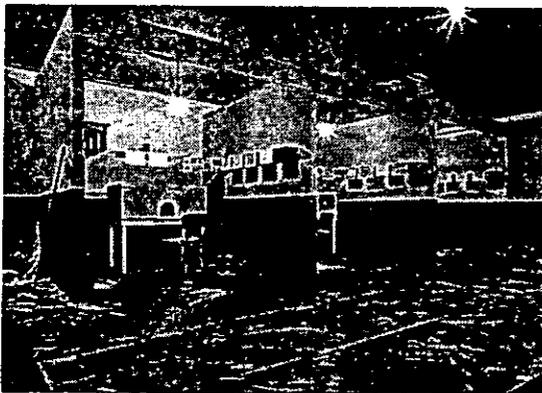
The dreamer constructs and reconstructs the upper stories and the attic until they are well constructed. And [...] when we dream of the heights we are in the rational zone of intellectualized projects. But for the cellar, the impassioned inhabitant digs and re-digs, making its very depth active. The fact is not enough, the dream is at work. When it comes to excavated grounds, dreams have no limit.[10]
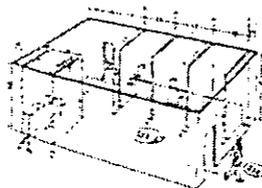
8   Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Big Archives*, 1993, installation view at the Stedljik Museum in Amsterdam.

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[10] Bachelard, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

6

A.2 – THE ARTIST'S ARCHIVE: ON REFERENCES
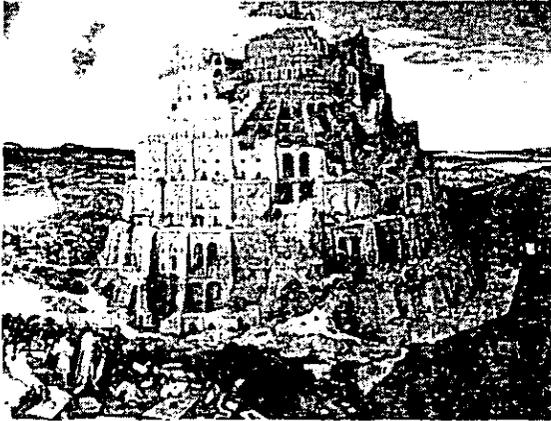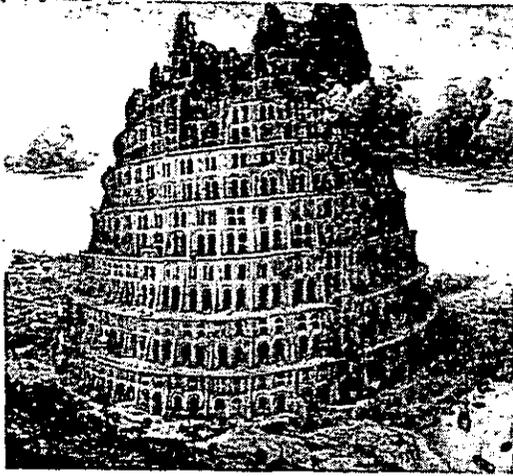
Let us begin with the image of the Tower of Babel painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, probably the most famous of all Babel representations before our time. He painted two versions of the same subject: one named "The Small Tower," the other one known as the "Tower of Babel" (Fig. 9-10).

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 Parrot[11] 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 raisen 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]

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[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'inachevement* (Paris: Seuil, 1997). My translation.

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.

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

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., Schwitter'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

8

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* an 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.

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[13] Claire Doherty, from the presentation of the exhibition catalogue *Babel: contemporary art and the journeys of communication* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1999), p. 9.
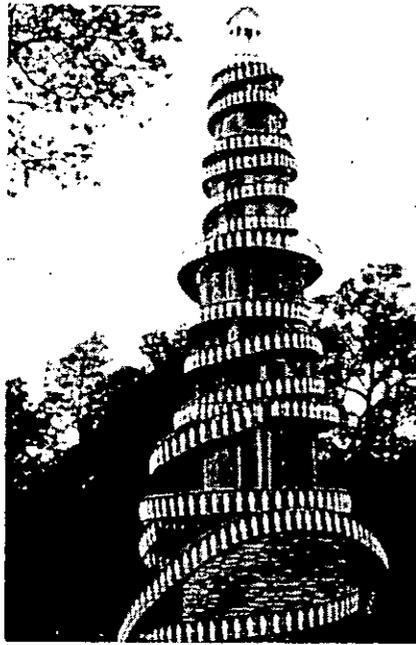
Alice Aycock is a New York artist who created a three-dimensional Tower of Babel by wrapping a wooden tower in a forest with a row of Madonnas (the kind that are sold as souvenirs) ascending in spirals to the top where a small model of a Greek temple was placed[14] (fig. 13). Aycock also designed site-based 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
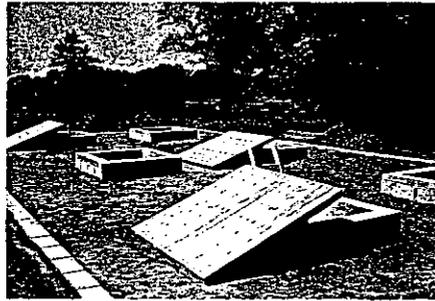
14 Alice Aycock, *A simple Network of Underground Wells and Tunnels*, 1975
Earth, concrete, timber
Wall: 30x900x1500 cm, Underground
excavation: 600x1200 cm
Merriewold West, Far Hills, New Jersey

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.
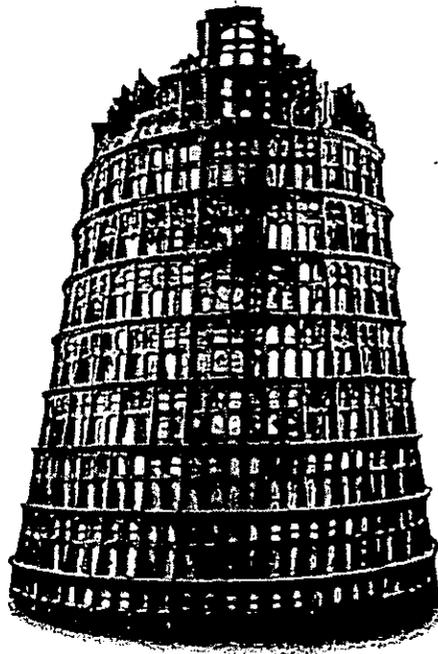
15   Patrick Mimran, *Babel.TV*, 2001   16   View of the Tower at Ruigoord, The
       Mixed media including audio & video   Netherlands, 1999
       365.7x365.7x609.6 cm

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 Nederlands (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.

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Cf. Barbara Stoeltie, "We need cash to fight capitalism," in *The Architectural Review* (1999): p.54.

11

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.
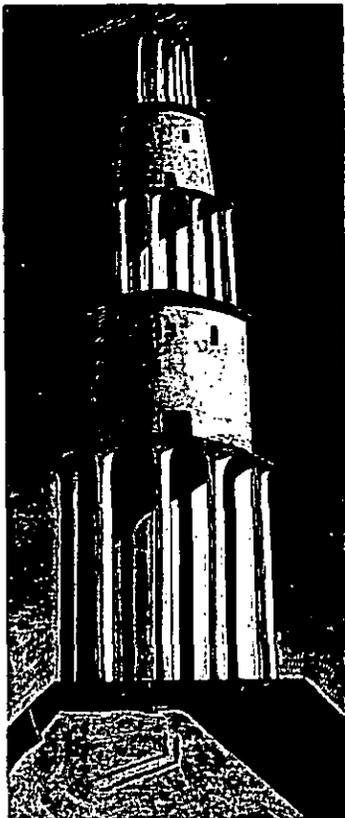
However, in a later work, *Tutti più un oggetto misterioso* (Everybody plus a mysterious object, fig. 18) of 1972, I find an analogy with Babel perhaps even more significant than the previous ones. There seems to be a theatre stage, suggested by the curtains on the upper corners and a low horizontal 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 Burgeois, 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.'
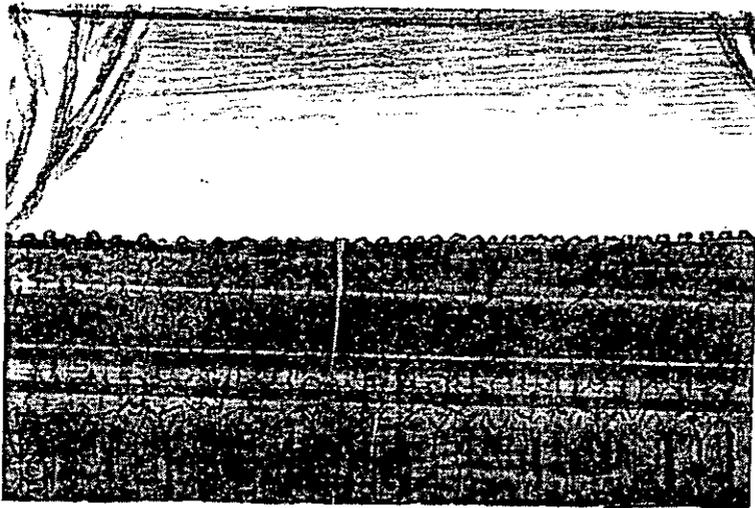
18 Giorgio De Chirico, *Tutti più un oggetto misterioso*, 1972

19 Fabrizio Clerici, *Miraggio di città orientale*, 1954
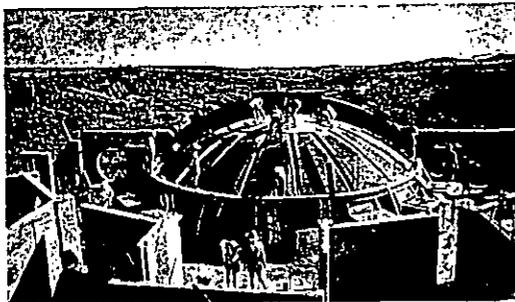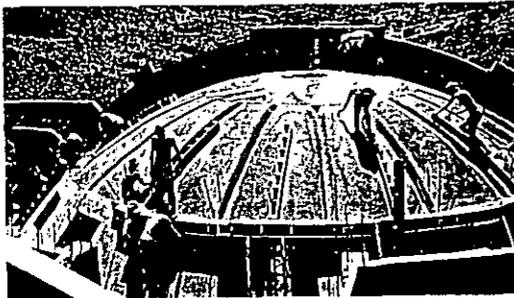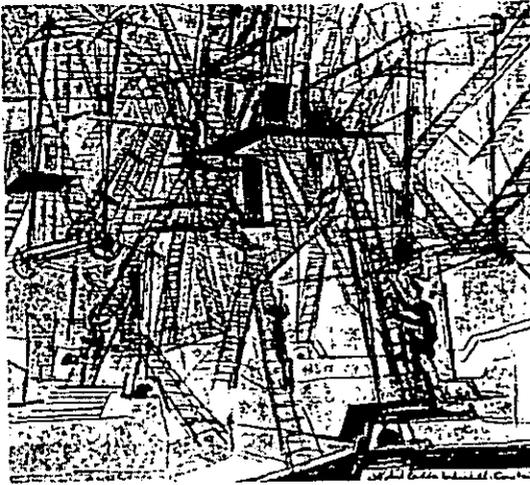
New Babylon is based on the idea of future mechanization, which would make it possible to dispense with human workers. People could use their energy to be creative, in order to shape the world according to their desires. The human, as *Homo ludens*, would be able to freely determine time and space. No 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.

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[18] From the catalogue *Manifesta 4* (Frankfurt a. M., 2002).
[19] Ibid.

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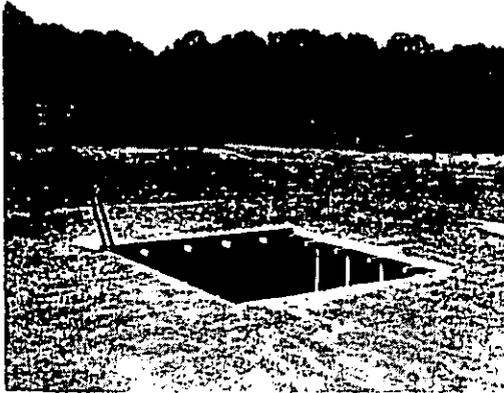
23   Mary Miss,
     Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys,
     1977-1978. Wood, steel, earth
     Tallest tower: 5.5 m, underground
     excavation: 12x12 m, pit opening:
     5x5 m

A work by Mary Miss, *Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys*, 1977-78 (fig. 23), is different in concept and form from the Burgeois, 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, contemned 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 fictious 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.

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[20] *Art and Feminism*, Edited by Helena Reckitt and surveyed by Peggy Phelan (London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 77.

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] Raimer 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).
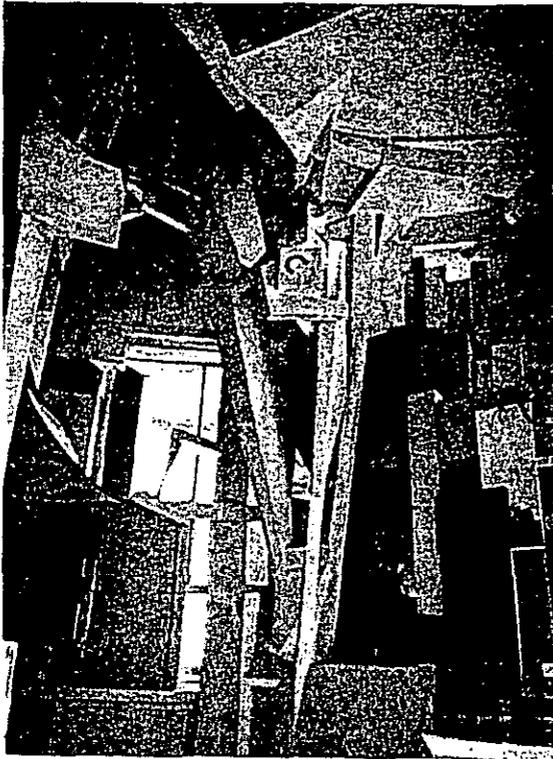
My aim is the total work of art (*Gesamtkustwerk*), which combines all branches of art into an artistic work...First I combined individual categories of art. I have pasted poems from words and sentences so as to produce a rhythmic design. I have on the other hand pasted up pictures and drawings so that 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

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[24] Kurt Schwitters, "Merz (für den 'Ararat' Geschreiben)," 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]
> Schwitter'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

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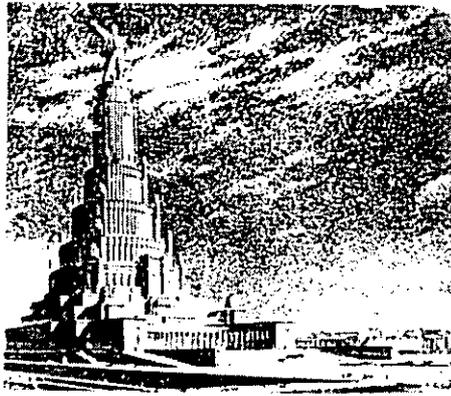
30 B. Jofan, V. Gelfreich, L. Rudnev, *Palace of the Soviets*, definitive awarded project, 1933

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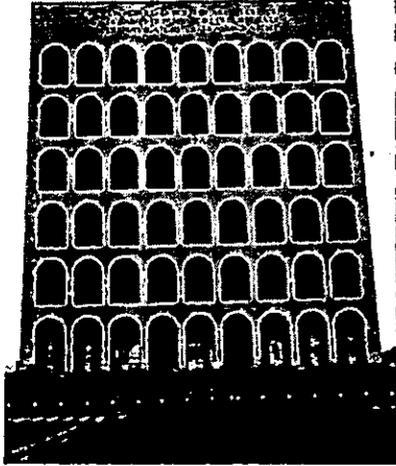
31 Guerrini-La Padula-Romano, *Palazzo della Civiltà Romana*, 1942

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

> It was not my aim the 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]

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[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.

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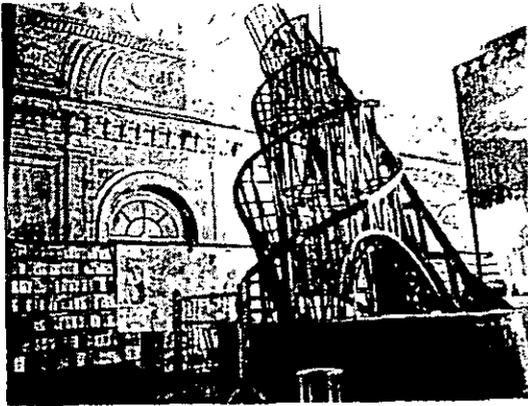
32 Model of Tatlin Tower as exhibited at the 8th Congress of the Soviets

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.
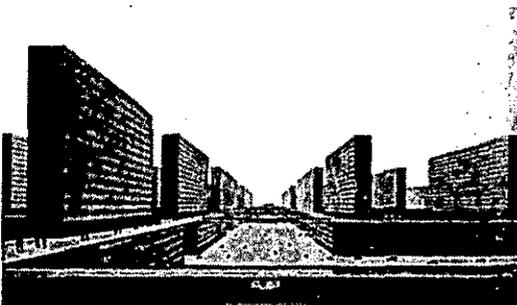
Elements of the "utopian city": regularity; symmetry; strict division of functions; large green areas, motorization, etc:
Here's our City of the Future:
Around a large square of regular proportions public warehouses will be erected storing all the necessary supplies and entailing the hall for public 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.
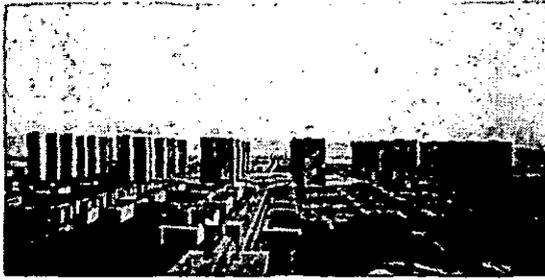
Quickly a concept of 'brasilitis', the new pathological syndrome of which Brasilia was the prototype and the most famous epicentre to date, was coined by its hapless victims. The most conspicuous symptoms of brasilitis, by common consent, were the absence of crowds and crowdiness, empty street corners, 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 Brasilia 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 Fotces', was, according to the popular jibe, like agreeing to meet in the Gobi desert.[36]

Sevariade 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 Sévarambes*, 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 Koldeway
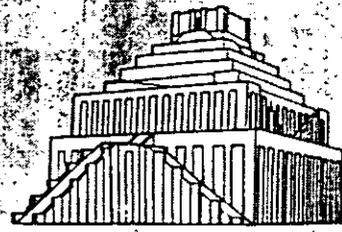
projet de Busink
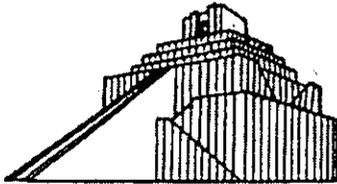
projet de Martiny

projet d'Andrae
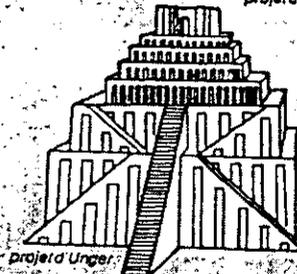
projet d'Unger

projet de Bombart

projet de Moberg

projet de Parrot

7ᵉ étage . temple haut

sommet

5ᵉ étage

4ᵉ étage

3ᵉ étage

second étage

terrasse inférieure

Le volume change
sensiblement si l'on
compare notre
manière de voir (1)
avec celle des
anciens (2)
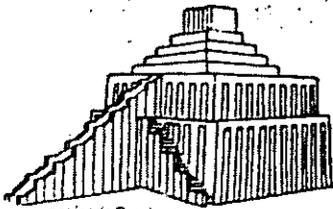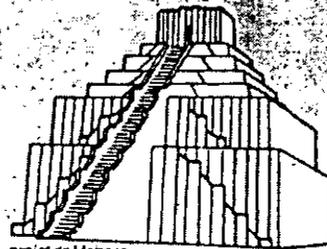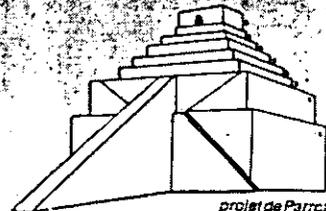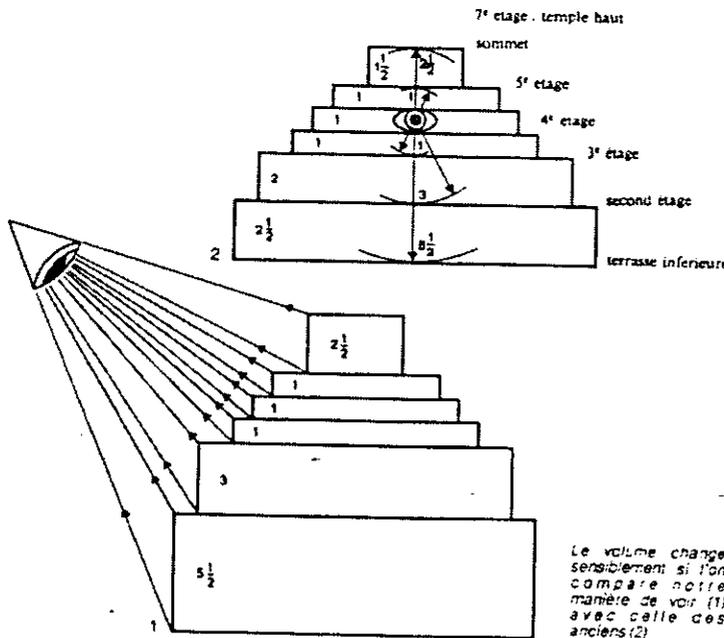
36

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 exaustive 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 emphazise 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 fictious 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, perfectioning tools and technicnologies, 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 difidence 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 if 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

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[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

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[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 edificated 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.

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[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

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[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 them[50]; 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: *Bavel*, confusion, because there Iahvé confounds the lips of the whole earth.[55]

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[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 ist 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 indissolubily 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 linguistical 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 or 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 or 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

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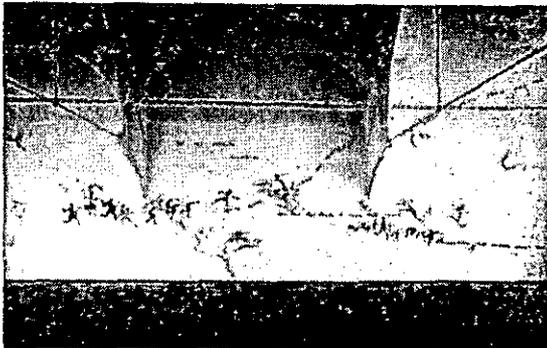
Women need language, a language (*il leur faut le langage, du langage*). That *house of language* (*langue*) which for man even constitutes a substitute for his home in a body...woman is used to construct it but (as a result?) it is not available to her.[58]

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: Nomads[60] 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)

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[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 unforseen; 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-hierarchic 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,

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

35

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 logocentrical 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.

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[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]

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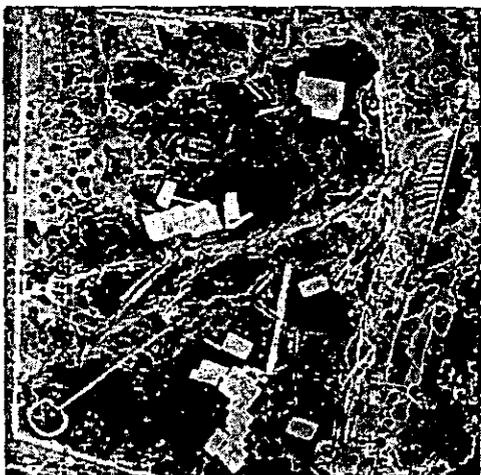
39   Joyce Kozloff, *Bodies of Water: Songlines*, 1997-1998, acrylic and collage on canvas

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 \

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[66] Braidotti, op.cit., p.22.
[67] Friederich Nietzche, *Also Spracht 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.
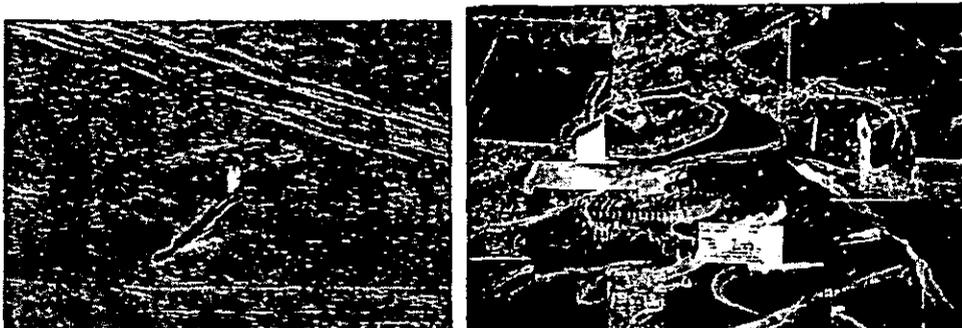
40   Figure walking in the desert, photograph Alain Sèbe, 1998

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.[69] 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).

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[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.

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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 Friederich, 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.

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

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 Ciudat Olimpica, 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, were 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   Desidèrio 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

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[70] Desiderio in Italian means "desire".
[71] Gustav René Hocke, *Die Welt Als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der Europaische 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.
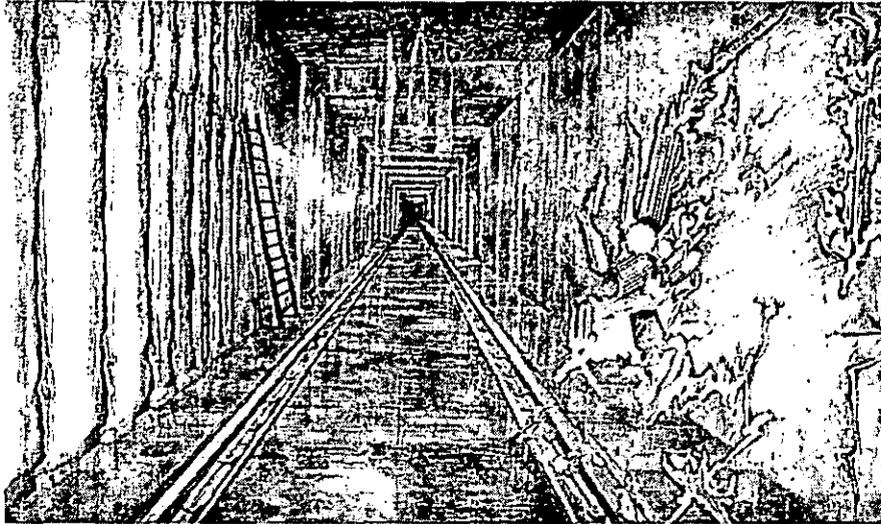
45   Transcription from Desiderio's *Exploding
      Church*, 1998
      Litograph on paper, 35x50 cm.

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.

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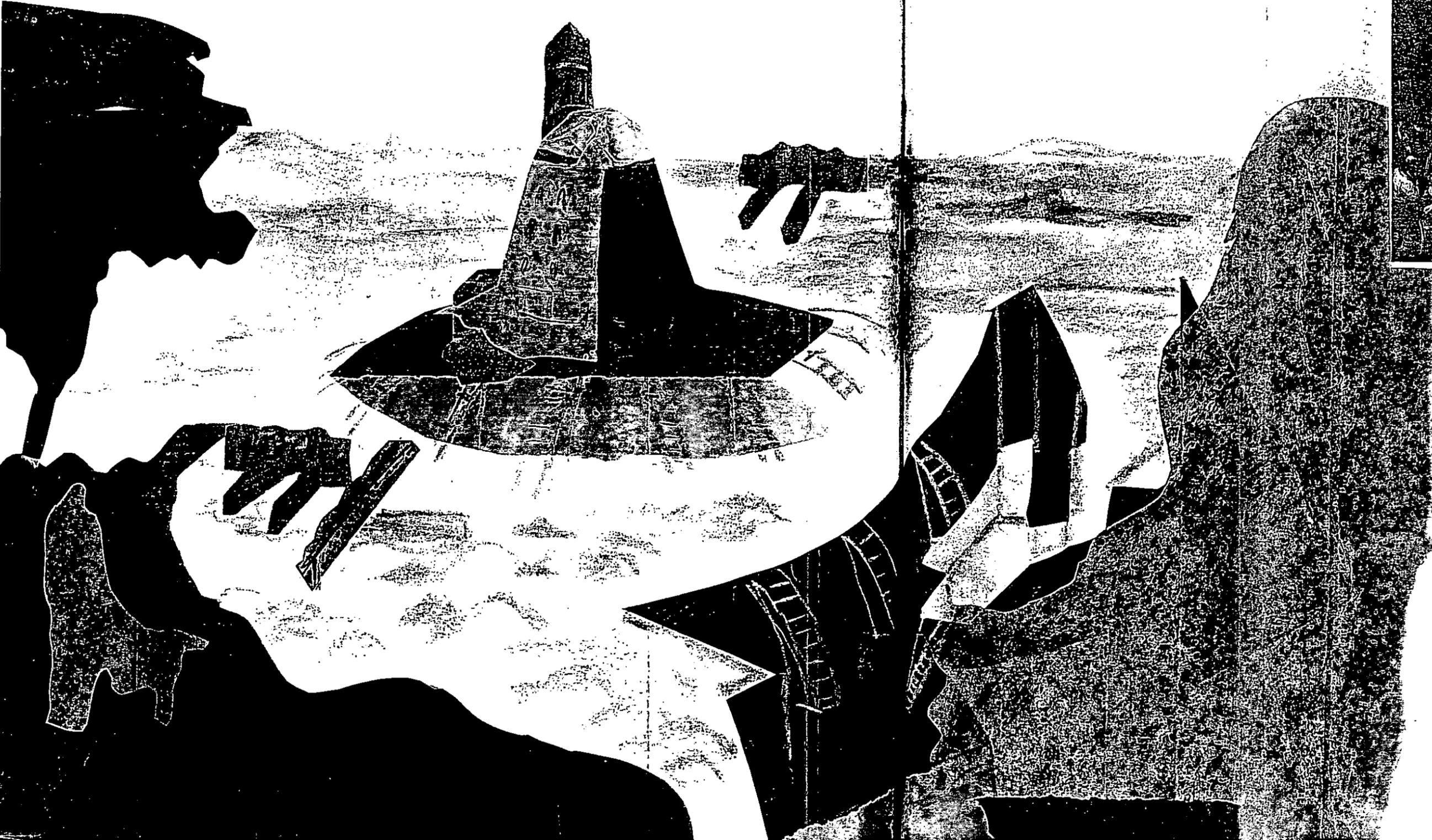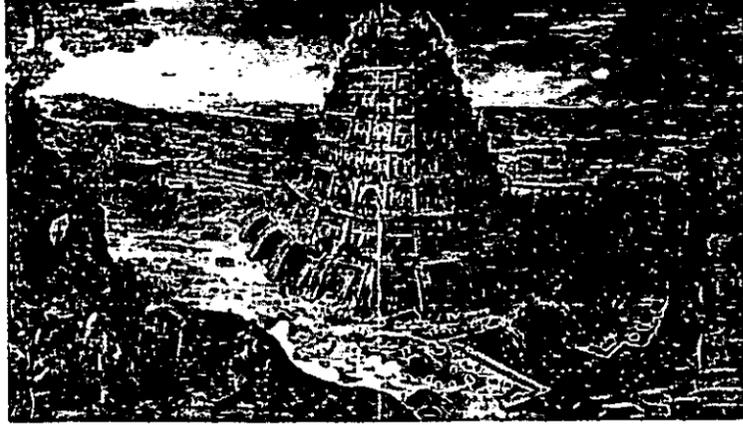
2   MUSEUM

M.1 - THE LABYRINTH

> I had crossed a labyrinth, but I was overwhelmed and repulsed by the bright city of the Immortals. A labyrinth is a house that is made to confuse mankind; its richly symmetrical architecture is subordinate to this aim.[1]
> Jorge Luis Borges, El Inmortal

> Sometimes I dream of a work of really great breadth, ranging through the whole region of element, object, meaning and style.
> Paul Klee
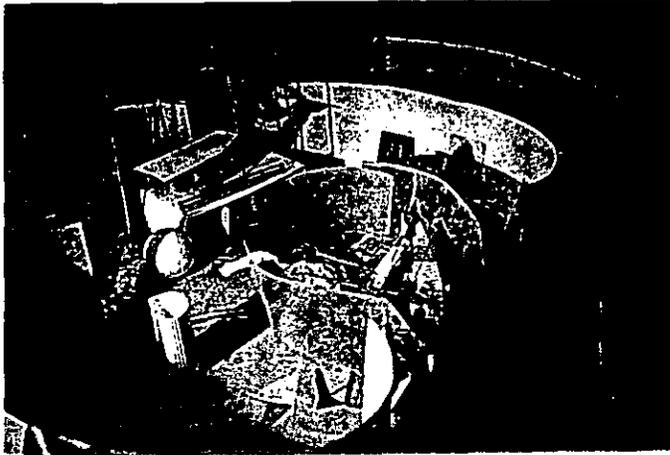
47   Detail of *The Labyrinth*,
preliminary version, 1999
Mixed media, c. 100x100 cm

Description of the installation, Salzburg 1999

There is a room, whose walls and floor are painted white. The entrance is located on the right hand side and that is the exit too. The room has four walls: a large map of an imaginary continent hangs from the one opposite the entrance; a map of a circular city is displayed on the wall in front of it, and on the wall in between, small diagrams and maps of the city of Salzburg are arranged. In the middle of the room, on the floor, is the labyrinth. The model is located at about 1 meter from the wall on all four sides, allowing the visitors to walk around it and look at it from any direction.

The labyrinth model is built upon a large sheet of paper (ca. 150x150 cm.) representing a diagram of the Tower of Babel main points' scheme (table II). Each room or section of the labyrinth corresponds to a category or concept of the underlying scheme. The former is not built according to a strict plan but it rather follows a kind of organic, improvised construction on curved lines that trace the inner structure of the old city of Salzburg. This means that, should the labyrinth be reconstructed again, it might take a different form and employ new materials.

The walls of the labyrinth are made of corrugated cardboard, which offers stability and the necessary flexibility to create curved shapes. They are held in place with paper sellotape, easily removable. Most of them are white, but there are grey, black, bright red and pale yellow walls too: each colour defines a different route and encompasses different groups of work. The red paper wall encircles the sculptural piece of the "Fallen Tower," towards the first entrance to the maze and works as a signpost. The objects \

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[1] My translation.

and reproductions of paintings are made from paper and cardboard; some elements are composed of metal wire, balsa wood and plastic. The paintings displayed in the labyrinth are often small-scale reproductions of past paintings, or anticipations of future paintings and tri-dimensional works (such as the globe, the archive, the library etc.). Small-scale black paper figures are distributed along the maze to indicate human scale in relation to the construction.

Q&A (The artist in conversation with herself)[2]

- Why the labyrinth?
- I had an idea (from a dream) that at the centre of the Tower there was a labyrinth: a place in which to get lost, a place where many voices in many different languages resounded and echoed from room to room. Many different voices are talking to you and you don't know which way to turn, which decision to make. Each of them has the right to speak; none of them seems to be more relevant than the other. They can give you many new ideas but at the same time they can induce paralysis, as you find yourself completely frustrated, unable to choose between one or another.

- Your journals bear testimony to this inner dialogues and argue between the parts. Different possibilities are taken into consideration: various hypothesis, ideas, methods and ways of approaching a theme. What use would you make of this material?

- It's my personal archive, and a way to negotiate the multitude of ideas that come to me. Sometimes I choose one possibility out of ten, or more than one, or none, keeping the list of possibilities as a work in itself – an unfinished work, or potential work to be developed another time. This multiplicity of voices gives the idea of an existing fragmented condition and of the struggle within oneself to bring the contradictory voices to some kind of unity – to *one voice* only. Of course this attempt is soon revealed to be impossible, as there cannot be a unique voice out of the chorus, as much as there cannot be just one language out of many. Thus, the need for a system, or the invention of a structure that can make sense of the apparently contradictory voices by organizing them into a comprehensive, synthetic form.

- The first piece in which you produced this kind of 'systematic organization of ideas' is what you called the *Labyrinth of Babel - model for an hypothetical exhibition*, at the Sommerakademie in Salzburg in 1999, in which an imaginary show is developed on an irregular labyrinthine route tracing the shape of Salzburg's inner city centre.

- Each room displays a different facets or theme derived from the Tower story and by so doing, organizes the work into categories or genres: the "Tower paintings" room, the "Maps" room, the "Tower in ruins" room, the "Languages" room, the "Archive," the "Library," etc.

The actual model of the labyrinth works as a paradigm of the second section of this book, that is the Museum-Gallery-Catalogue (**M**), therefore is used as an introduction to the series of works that can broadly be divided into paintings and drawings, installations and models. The Tower is represented by the figures of the Map, the City, the act of building, and considered from the viewpoint of the wanderer (nomad), the painter, the architect, the archaeologist, the curator (cf. **Appendix**, "Harris Project").

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[2] The following dialogue, like all the Q&A in the next chapters, is an imaginary interview with myself, in which the questions are posed by an 'observer' and the answers are given by the artist.

- The Labyrinth is ambiguous because it hovers between virtual reality and becoming an artwork in its own right. What is it that we are looking at? Is it a model for an exhibition (the scale of it could be compared to a personal museum!), a sculptural object, a childlike toy or a tri-dimensional illustration of an idea?

- Perhaps all these things together. To consider it as a model for an exhibition would project it into the realm of utopia; it would not be impossible, but surely demanding in terms of space and materials. To regard it as an artwork in itself would raise questions about ephemerality and durability (the labyrinth is now dismantled and contained in a bag: but it could be recomposed again at will), given the materials employed, which are subject to deterioration and would be hard to preserve in their actual state. In both cases, it is interesting to point out the relationship established with the object from the point of view of its scale: we are forced to assume the size of an insect to imagine ourselves strolling through the routes of the labyrinth and at the same time we feel like giants looking from the top of the world into a realm of small beings (a godlike condition). It's precisely this shift from the microscopic to the macroscopic and vice versa that makes the work so captivating and ambiguous.

- This project resembles in some aspects some of the installations produced by the artistic duo Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, in particular the *Palace of Projects* (fig. 48) from 1998.
- When I made the Labyrinth I was not cognizant of the Kabakovs' project and it was actually not until I met them in Salzburg during the summer of 2001 that I realized the conceptual similarity of our respective works.

Palace of Projects, Ilya Kabakov: an archive of utopian projects.
The Palace answers the following questions:
1. How to make yourself better – 2. How to make the world better – 3. How to improve creativity.
There are 65 projects in all.
The form of the palace is a spiral, like the Tatlin Tower or the Babylon Tower. The walls are made of transparent plastic and are lit from inside. The entrance is a wide staircase; the exit is very narrow, and is a hole in the ceiling (you are supposed to fly!). After realizing that one cannot exit from the roof, the visitor goes back using a very narrow stair and out through the entrance.
Each room in the Palace responds to a fixed standard: a prepared model (object), a painting or drawing, a table and a chair (with a sketch and a description). It is thought for one person only at a time. The function of the chair is to make the viewer to spend some time in the installation, thus its importance. The table+chair combination should function as *one unit*, for each individual to sit and look at the exhibit and think. The *contemporary catastrophe* is the group visit to the museum. A visit should always be solitary. The Q. is: how to be there all on your own? The chair+table answers this Q.
Another important aspect of this project is that there is *no order*, it is like an archive where things are crammed together in a rather anarchic way.
(the Palace of Project is now permanently displayed in Essen. It was shown in the Armory building in New York City and in London too).
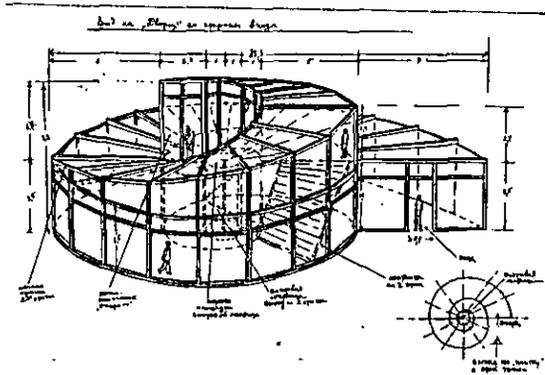
48 Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Palace of Projects*, 1998, drawing by Ilya Kabakov
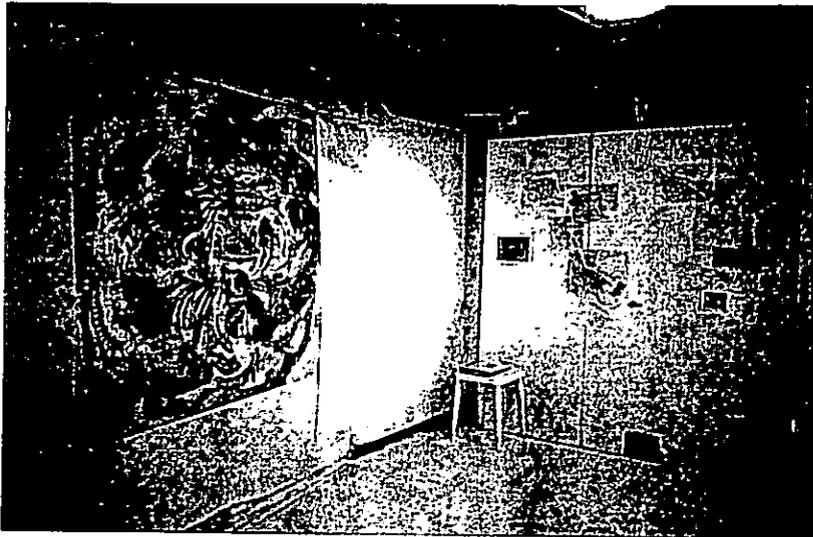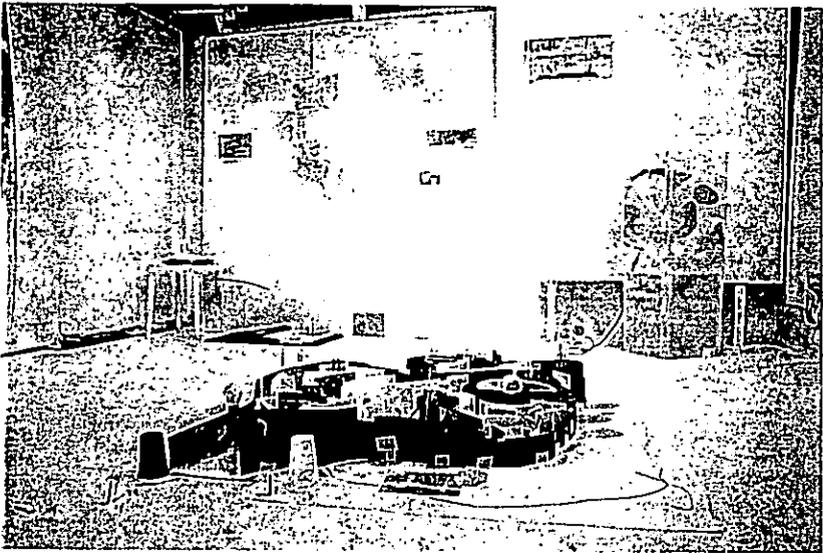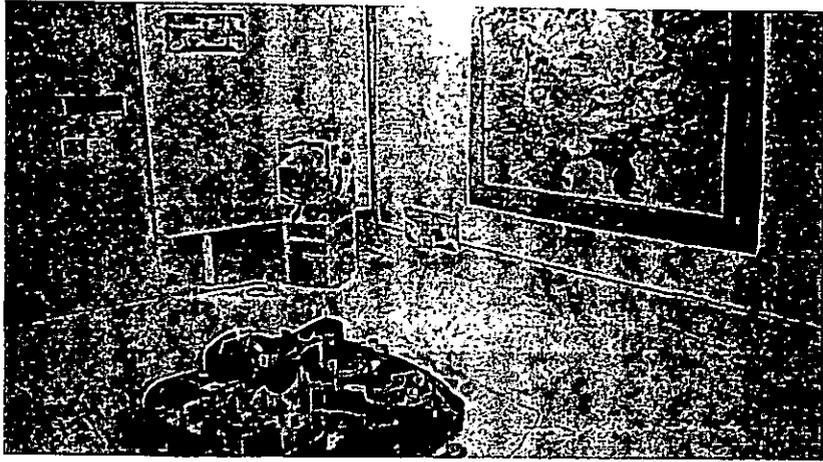
49-50-51 Three views of *The Labyrinth*, Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, Salzburg, 1999
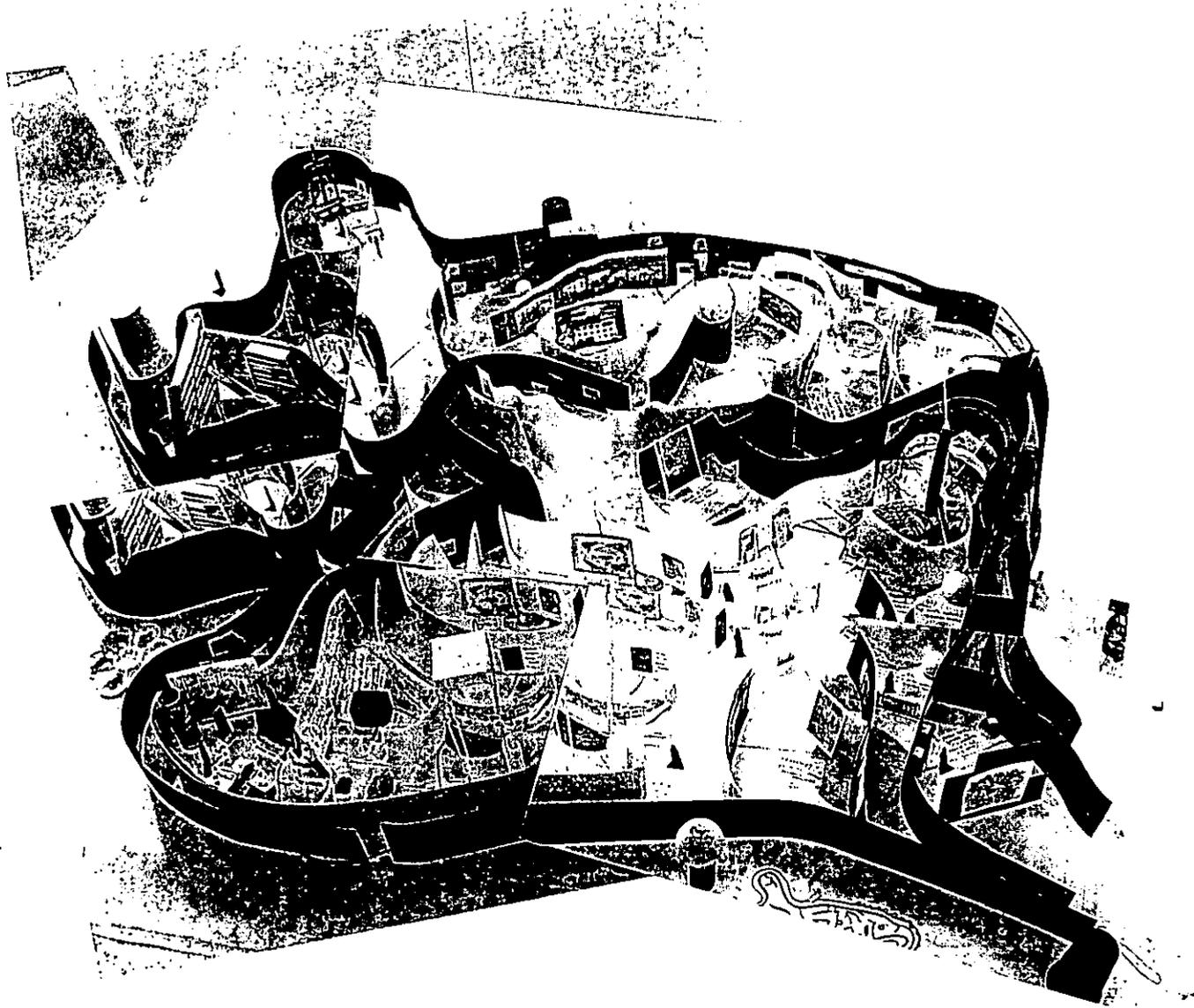
52   *The Labyrinth*, 1999
      Mixed media, 150x150 cm

- I also have to think to Robert Morris' *Three Labyrinths* for the Contemporary Art Centre in Lyon (fig. 53) and the labyrinth installation Jannis Kounnelis just installed in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome (April 2002).

- Yes, but while these two example you make are more like sculptural pieces, where their mere presence has an aesthetic value, what I wanted to achieve with my labyrinth belongs to the realm of abstract schemes and to the miniature as well. Although I wouldn't exclude a possible future realization on a big scale, the materials would have to be close to the original, therefore ephemeral. Also, the labyrinth for me is only a tool to organize my work, not an aim in itself. Anyway, there is a relationship from this point of view with the two pieces you mention, as both Morris and Kounellis have arranged previous work inside their labyrinths.
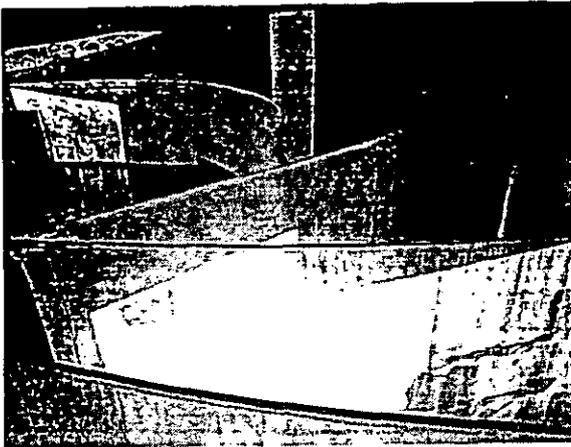
53   Robert Morris, *White Nights*, part of: *From Mnemosyne to Clio: The Mirror to the Labyrinth*, 1998-1999-2000, Musée d'Art contemporain, Lyon 2000

- Your labyrinth displays a narrative in which the story of the tower is told and developed step by step, from room to room. One should think to those grandiose yet simple narrative cycles of the Renaissance about the life of saints, in which the main character is repeated in various episodes depicting the events of his or her life throughout the whole painting.

- The same idea is to be found in a previous installation I did in Salzburg the year before, in 1998, called *Life, Death and Miracles of the Tower.*

M.2 – TOWERS AND MAPS

M.2a - Life, Death And Miracles Of The Tower

> The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Sant'Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is or have been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural background. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.[3]

Scheme of the installation
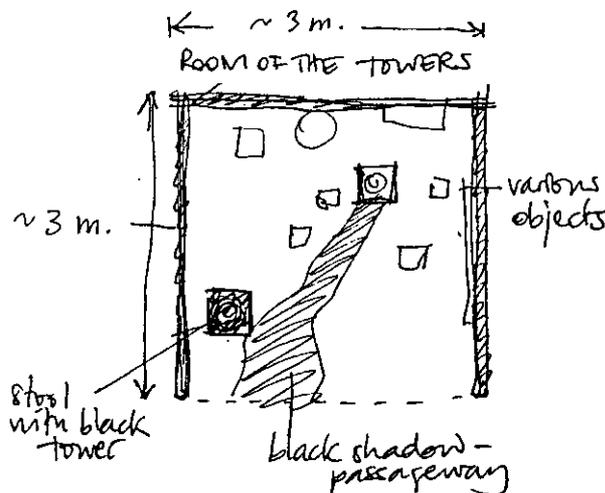
Description of the installation

There is a tri-dimensional space, a room whose walls and pavement are painted white. In this white, three walled room, a multitude of signs is punctuating the space, hanging from the ceiling, emerging from the walls and floor. They are black, white and brown forms resembling tower-like shapes; they are made of paper of different textures hanging or unfolding/unrolling, bearing pencil marks and acrylic black and white paint. A black irregular line resembling a shadow cast by one of the towers defines a path that takes the visitor inside the space.

The title refers to the Renaissance cycles of frescoes and paintings depicting the life and martyrdom of saints, in which the protagonist would appear several times in the same painting as if in scenes of a film displayed in a continuous sequence before our eyes.

Here the protagonist is the Tower itself, repeated in various shapes and colours throughout the the installation (like a 3D canvas), suggesting a progression in the narrative by its repetition with variations.

The installation was executed while attending the Jacobo Borges' class at the Salzburg Sommerakademie, in 1998.

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[3] Roland Barthes, *Language image text* (London: Fontana press, 1977), p. 79.
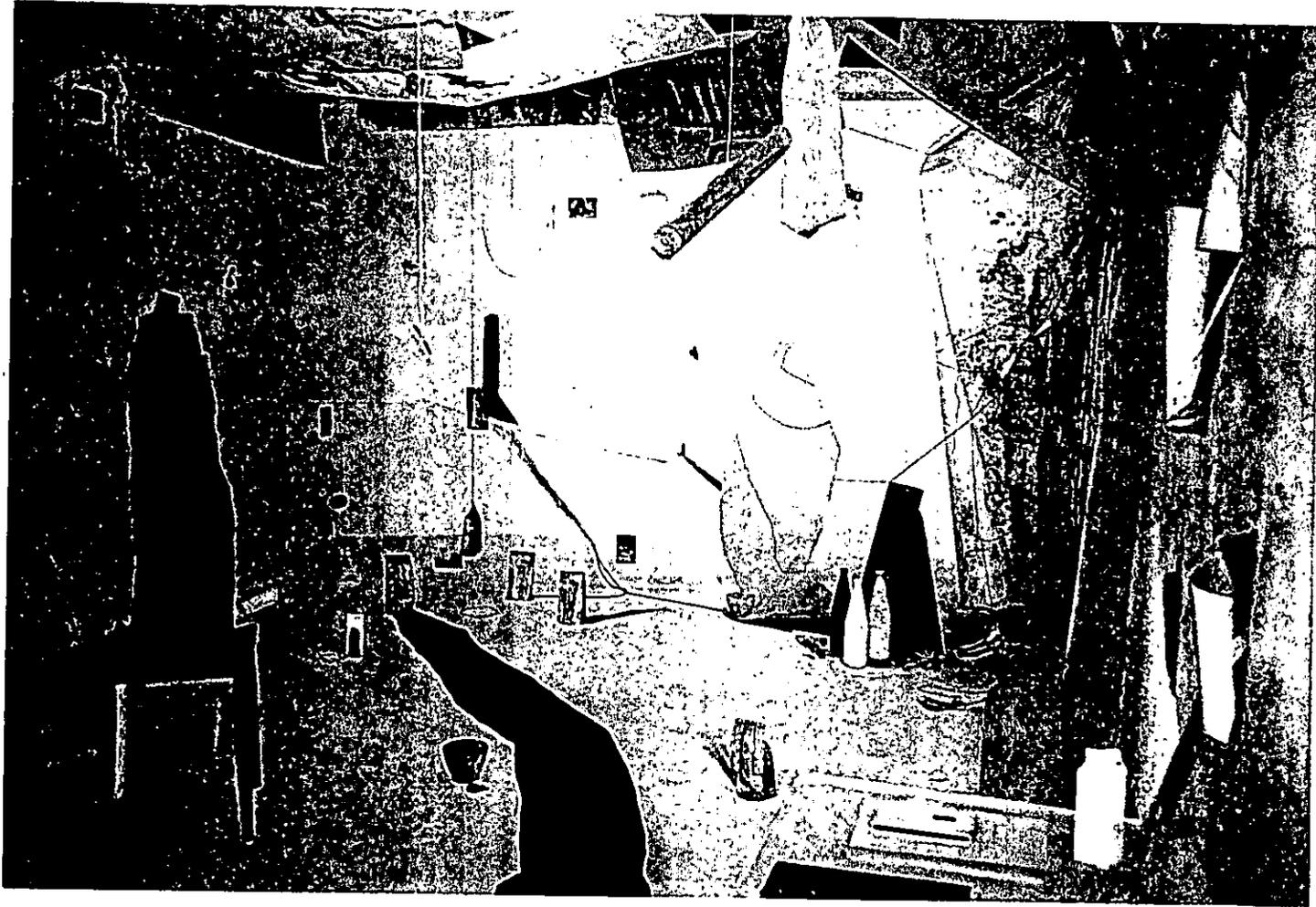
54   *Life, death and miracles of the Tower*, 1998
     Mixed media installation, c. 300x250x300 cm
     Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, Salzburg

Q&A

-How did the installation evolve?

-I was working on *the Niche* outside the studio (fig. 57 - **Appendix**, pp. 16-17) when Jacobo gave me this empty space to work inside. It was like a task, an assignment for the final exhibition at the Fortress. I saw it as an exercise and an occasion to test a tri-dimensional space in a new way. Inside the space, I placed all the work created up to then: drawings, paper sculptures, collages, lines of text etc. (fig. 54-55).

Very soon the room was crammed with all sorts of materials. I documented every phase of this process photographically, and the sequence shows how the room became progressively empty, as I discarded more and more. I realized that I needed to recreate a white cube and therefore painted the floor white. I wanted a tri-dimensional page on which I could produce and arrange black marks like on a piece of paper. Returning to this kind of 'absolute' empty white space, I began again to fill it in, but this time in a less indiscriminate way, incorporating what was really compatible with the room's proportions and what was functional to the narrative of the installation. Drawings were traced directly on the walls with charcoal and pencil, while paper was arranged as floating sheets and occasionally to build tower-like shapes on the wall and on the floor.

-What sort of material have you been using here?

-Any kind I would put my hands on: scrap paper, packing heavy brown paper, black and white cardboard, Chinese paper, tracing paper, painted bottles, wooden stools and so on. I like to use things I find by chance or that are given to me. And as I did not want to be precious about this work, everything I used was cheap, easy to find, almost banal. I kept some of the pieces and eventually recycled some of them in other projects, but most of them were thrown away after the installation was done. (**L .2b**)

-The white space, the sense of proportion between white wall and black lines is very relevant to this installation.

-Yes, the 'empty' (white) space and the relationship with the signs distributed in the space and the shadows of things are important. The shadow is a recurrent element in my work; a long, sunset-like shadow (a 'de Chiricoesque' shadow), cast by objects in several directions, as if there were more than one source of light. This shadow is sometimes painted, sometimes made of black paper as a separate object in itself, sometimes faintly traced with charcoal and wiped off with the palm of my hand. It gives weight to the object and defines an earthly presence while alluding to a non-terrestrial presence (the *double*, or for the Indians, *ka*; the 'other side' of things – **L.2d**).

(see **Appendix**, p. 15, for additional text on the installation)
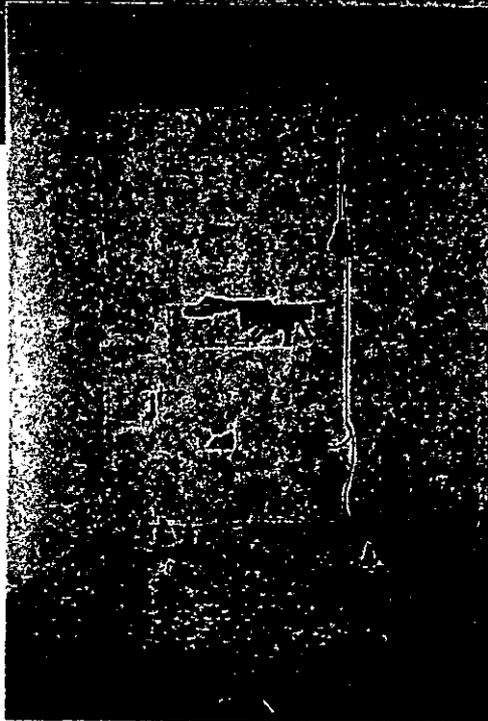
55 -56   *Work in progress inside Life, Death and*
         Miracles of the Tower, Salzburg, 1998

57   *The Niche,* 1998
         Mixed media installation, SOAK, Salzburg

58   *1000+1 Tower*, 1998
      Collage, pigments, oil on paper
      300x150x100 cm

Description of the installation

1000+One Tower (fig. 58) uses the image of the pyramidal group of towers as a collage, to form a typical Bruegel-like Tower of Babel. This is suspended at about 150 cm. on a white wall next to a niche and a black iron door in the Hohensalzburg Fortess; a scroll of paper printed with images of the same towers is hanging vertically below, extending horizontally onto the floor. Photographs recorded the variations through which the assemblage went before reaching the present state.

59 Detail from 1000+1 Towers
    Collage on paper

- Multiplicity is the underlying theme of this work and of a series of works you realized in the same period, which are based on the repetition of a basic element to construct an image of unity. Such is the case of the *Big Tower* (**Appendix**, p. 18), *1000+One Tower* and *Labyrinth City* (fig. 60), all works on paper (see **Appendix**, pp. 19-23 for other works of the same period).

- That's right, multiplicity and the idea of building through repetition. Both the *Big Tower* painting and the *1000+One Tower* composition take the Barcelona Tower as a model. The underlying idea is to reach the maximum expression with the minimum material.

- Could you briefly talk about the process?

- After reproducing the photograph of the tower several times (by means of a simple b/w photocopier) I cut out the shapes of the towers and arranged them in a composition (no larger than an A3 size paper) that in its pyramidal structure resembles Bruegel's notorious first Tower of Babel. This first collage composition would be my basic unit, or matrix, for a series of works based on the repetition of the matrix itself.

In *1000+One Tower* I used the photocopy as a material in itself, arranging the photocopies that I had already used in *Big Tower*, using the blurring effect - from the nitromous solvent employed to make the transfer - as an aesthetic device, in a new pyramidal composition that mimics and repeats the structure of the matrix. Seen as a whole the composition looks like a big tower; seen in detail it appears like a sum of a number of matrix shapes, each of which is made of singular cylindrical towers (the Barcelona tower, fig. 42).

57

M.2c Labyrinth City, Atlantis-Rome Map

60 *Labyrinth City*, 1998
    Collage, acrylic and charcoal on paper
    180x180 cm

-   How would you describe *Labyrinth City*?

- *Labyrinth City* is a map-like painting. Like a map, it's made of paper, first: not simply painted on paper, but really made of different papers, in layers. It started with a collage of black cut-outs and photocopies of the Roman Colosseum. There are several passages then of white acrylic paint, used mainly to block out areas of the collage and the brown paper underneath. And the final layer is tracing paper with printed images on top taken from various cityscapes. The tracing works as a semitransparent screen that gives the image a kind of mysterious quality, minimizing and blurring the hard edges of the black cutouts.

What I mean with map-like quality is that I would hang it on the wall as I would do with a map: without a frame or glass. And I would also survey it as I would a map, even without recognizing one single place. It's supposed to make you feel dislocated and yet at the centre.

.- It shows a centrifugal space, I would nearly say a baroque space.

- I have been interested for a long time in the baroque concept of space, and was particularly at that time. Perhaps Salzburg was also exerting some kind of influence into my work, for as you know it is a perfect example of a baroque city, nearly untouched since the eighteen century. One can sense a round, open movement in the piece, almost like a whirl, a spiral that takes you in, but not a continuous spiral: the lines are broken, fragmented; it's like a jigsaw whose pieces have been scattered around and then recomposed more or less sensibly, but inaccurately.

61   Work in progress on *Labyrinth City* (on the wall: *Atlantis-Rome Map*), 1999, Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, Salzburg

Atlantis-Rome Map

Two important characteristics of map should be noticed. A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.[9]

I begin by making a collage in the middle of the large sheet of yellow paper (approx. 200x300 cm.) prepared with white acrylic prime on which I previously drew a map taken from a reproduction of an ancient Chinese map. The collage is made out of found images of the mythical city of Atlantis. I add some black cutouts, tower shaped. Looking at navigation maps I decide to reproduce the lines of the sea routes that sailors used to mark as orientation. Instead of painting or drawing them, I use black and red colored thread, extending it from one end to the other of the paper, in an eight pointed star-like shape.

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[9] Alfred Koribski, *Science and Sanity*, quoted in *City Speculations*, p. 43.

62 *Atlantis-Rome Map*, 1999
    Graphite, pen, ink, acrylic, collage, strings, tape on paper and tracing paper
    120x160 cm
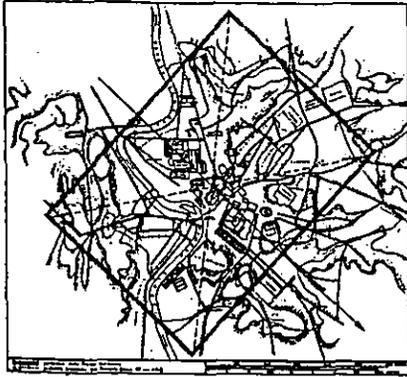
Roman Journal, September 1999: I find a book, *Forma Urbis Romae* (Carrettoni, Coli Cozza, Gatti, 1960, fig. 62) and the famous *Roma Forma Urbis* by Lugli (1986, fig. 63). The analogy with my *Map of Rome-Atlantis* (Salzburg, July 1999, fig. 78) is remarkable and surprising; the scheme represented in the drawing by Lugli (an elaboration on the secret image of Romes as described by Plinius) was to me completely unknown at the time I made the large map in Salzburg. There, the lines I traced with black and red threads indicate eight points that here correspond to a series of eight colours: therefore they form an eight-point star (like the one of the scheme in fig.) and an irregular polygon.
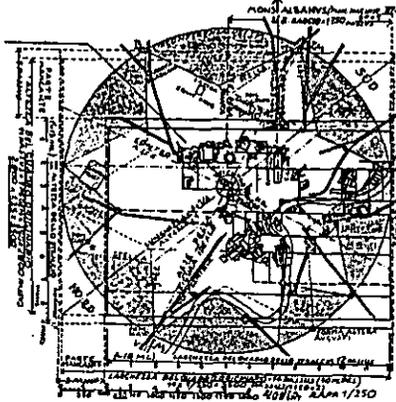
63   Orientation scheme of the "Forma Urbis Romae" (Carrettoni, Coli Cozza, Gatti, 1960)

64   "Forma Urbis Romae" in the elaboration of P. M. Lugli, 1986

Subsequently, I start working on on a meticulous tracing paper drawing taken from an aerial view of Rome: one can distinguish the Colosseum and the area around Caesar's Forum. I move the image underneath the tracing paper, following a circular movement, drawing with graphite, black charcoal and colored felt pens, until I complete a circle all around the collage in the middle. The tracing paper now completely covers the paper underneath, giving a glassy effect to the picture; the images and the threads of the first layer appear to belong to a submerged, floating, distant world.

M.3 THE MAP MAKER

The World Atlas always fascinated her. As a child she used to play the travel prize game with her cousin: they could have spent hours looking at maps in the Atlas choosing destinations for their imaginary journeys. Then they would draw free tickets for hypothetical lottery winners - complete with travel program and amenities - in their dreamlands.

She liked to observe the different maps of a same region or continent. The political map, the geographical map, the statistic map, the map that tells you how many industries are in such-and-such area, the percentage of fish resource, oil resources, the annual amount of rainfall. She used to prefer the political map because she could clearly see the names of the cities without a chain of mountains or a series of river to interfere.

(Other maps in her possession: the archaeological map, the bus map, the underground map...)

> [...] His goal is to be a competent street-map reader who knows how to stray. And to locate himself, with imaginary maps. Elsewhere in *Berlin Chronicle* Benjamin relates that for years he had played with the idea of mapping his life. For this map, which he imagined as gray, he had devised a colorful system of signs that "clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girlfriends, the assembly halls of various collectives, from the 'debating chambers' of the Youth Movement to the gathering places of the Communist Youth, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafés whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips."
> Once, waiting for someone in the Café des Deux Magots in Paris, he relates, he managed to draw a diagram of his life: *it was like a labyrinth*, in which each important relationship figures as "an entrance to the maze."[4]

The 'map maker' is also a 'map reader'; a map is a text no less than a drawing or a diagram. Few writers like Walter Benjamin could manage to explore a vast and complex number of phenomena in the same *corpus teoretico*, "which extends from the literary and philosophical to the political, economic, and technological, with all sorts of intermediate relations," as we read in the translator's foreword to *The Arcades Project*.

Benjamin refers to
Maps
Diagrams
Memories
Dreams
Labyrinths
Arcades
Vistas
Panoramas

| as metaphors of: |
| A certain vision of cities |
| A certain kind of life |

Benjamin's recurrent themes are, characteristically, means of spatializing the world: for example his notions of ideas and experiences as *ruins*. To understand something is to

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[4] Susan Sontag, *Under The Sign Of Saturn* (London: Writers and Readers Cooperative, 1983), p. 112-113. My italics.

understand its topography, to know how to chart it. And to know how to get lost. For the
character born under the sign of Saturn, time is the medium of constraint, inadequacy,
repetition, mere fulfillment. In time, one is only what one is: what one has always been.
In space, one can be another person. Benjamin's poor sense of direction and inability to read a
street map become his love of traveling and his mastery of the art of straying.
Time does not give one much leeway: it thrusts us forward from behind, blows us through the
narrow tunnel of the present into the future.
But space is broad, teeming with possibilities, positions, intersections, passages, detours, U-
turns, dead ends, one-way streets. Too many possibilities, indeed.[5]

Benjamin's monumental, unfinished, fragmentary work Das Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project in the English translation[2]) could be considered a "Babelian enterprise" in its own right and this, together with its digressions on the elements and different aspects of the city, makes of it one of the main reference texts of this dissertation. The way the author arranges the quotations and his own thoughts (the compositional principle of the montage or mosaic form) as fragments of a vaster discourse has been highly inspiring in the writing of this book. The mapping of a city finds an equivalent (or an analogy) with the mapping of the book, and the same could be said of the mapping of my own work in relation with the theme of my research and within the frame of the present book.

A few notes on Benjamin's *Arcades*: it was first part of Volume 5 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, under the title "Passagen-Werk" (first published in 1982), and "it represents research that Benjamin carried out over a period of thirteen years, on the subject of the Paris arcades – *les passages* – which he considered the most important architectural form of the nineteenth century, and which he linked with a number of phenomena characteristic of that century's major and minor preoccupations. [...] it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the 'refuse' and 'detritus' of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of 'the collective,' that was to be the object of study, and with the aid of methods more akin – above all, in their dependence on chance – to the methods of the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities, or indeed to the methods of the nineteenth-century ragpicker, than to those of the modern historian. Not conceptual analysis but something like *dream interpretation* was the model." The project begun in 1927 as a planned collaboration for a newspaper article on the arcades; it further developed into an essay (*Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland*) and then into a book, *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*. After a hiatus of about four years, Benjamin in 1934 "resumed work on the arcades with an eye to 'new and far-reaching sociological perspectives.' The scope of the undertaking, the volume of materials collected was assuming epic proportions, and no less epic was the manifest *interminability* of the task, which Benjamin pursued in his usual fearless way – step by step, risking engulfment – beneath the ornamented vaulting of the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Already in a letter of 1930, he refers to *The Arcades Project* as 'the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas.'"[3]

[5] Ibid., pp.116-117.
[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; prepared on the basis of the German volume ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
[3] From the "Translator's Foreword" to the English ed., Benjamin, op.cit., pp.ix-x. My italics.

The Arcades Project has been compared to Schwitters' *Merzbau*[4] (A.2c) for the composite, multilayered, all-encompassing and unfinished nature of both projects. And indeed, this is what makes of it a Babelic enterprise and at the same time a nomadic project: Benjamin was said to carry around his immense *Arcades* manuscript in a specially designed suitcase when he was forced to flee Paris in 1940 before the advancing German army, and he wouldn't let go of it for his life's sake. The genre he inaugurated in the essay has also been called a "theology without a God".

> The idea of a history of humanity as idea of the sacred text. In fact, the history of humanity – as prophecy – has, at all times, been read out of the sacred text.[5]

Let us consider the city as a text; the place that we inhabit (in reality or even in dreams) as an extended, tri-dimensional page: by moving across it we make marks, invent new codes and find new keys to reading. In the last three years, events in my life took me to Salzburg, Rome, Preston, London and other places as well, not necessarily in this sequence and not without returning to one or the other place. On little black-covered books I have written down these translations from one city to the other, travel notes, names of people and places, street numbers and ideas for new works. In one of the covers you read:

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Roma-London-Preston-Roma (25/11/00-3/3/01)
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In another one:

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Roma-Preston-Roma-Paris-Roma-Preston-New    York-Preston    (17/11/01-
5/3/02)
```

Each of these "diaries" is in fact an *anti-diary*, in that it is all but systematic, orderly or rigorously thematic: personal notes are mixed with train schedules, phone numbers with books details, sketches of places and paintings with quick ideas annotations. Later on, I will go through those pages and try to give an order to the materials, to make sense of encounters and the succession of events.

Benjamin explored the notion of modernity through the nineteenth century city, through its street-life, architecture, and the image of the arcade; writer Georges Perec on the other hand cast an ironic, meticulous eye on the banal events taking place in an anonymous Parisian building or in a scene observed from a café window (*La vie Emploi d'Usage; Espéces d'Espaces*) in the age of the expansion of the peripheries and mass-culture; Italo Calvino talks of distant, mythical cities through the character of Marco Polo reporting to the Khan (*Le città invisibili*), which are all specular images of the same city, Venice, and not dissimilar from the Buenos Aires that recurs in the surreal cityscapes described by Jorge Luis Borges:

> The city in me is like a poem
> of which I still did not find the words.
>
> The street of Buenos Aires
> are already my viscera.

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[4] Benjamin admired and respected Schwitters, who in his words was "like a shipwrecked man who keeps afloat by climbing to the top of a mast that is already disintegrating. But from there he has a chance to signal for his rescue." A definition that Benjamin will use for himself as well when he was urged by his friends to leave Europe during the Nazi occupations. Cited by E. B. Gamard in *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau*, p.2.

[5] Benjamin, op.cit., "Materials for the Exposé of 1935", No. 25.

Jorge Louis Borges is one of the "fellow-travellers" I met in my wanderings through the streets of Babel. He knows every little corner of the city that he tried to translate into words during his entire life. His city is Buenos Aires, but it could be Rome, New York, London...different identities that compose the colourful mosaic of Babel. It has been written that his attempt to translate the city has always been partial because of the elusive character of the original; the city of the past has disappeared, while the city of the present is made only by the places in which Borges lives.[6] What I find interesting is the way the city becomes for Borges a field for narrative and stylistic experiments and progressively a mirror of the life of the author himself.

The city becomes a *map of the self*, and to describe a city means to find the very roots of the self; we *are* the place (or places) to which we belong.

> A man takes on the task of drawing the world. The years pass by; he populates a space with images of provinces, of kingdoms, of mountains, of harbours, of ships, of islands, of fish, of dwellings, of instruments, of stars, of horses, of people. Shortly before his death, he finds out that the patient labyrinth of lines describes the image of his face.[7]

And not only do we look like the places in which we live; the places themselves end up looking like those who inhabit them. Let us refer, for instance, to Paris and the Impressionist painters: are the painters making the city we see it or is it rather the city that inspires such paintings? And would we look at the city with the same eyes without knowing those paintings that celebrate its life at the end of the nineteenth century?

We make the city and the city makes us. Any description of a city is necessarily a description of our presence in it – therefore it is an extremely difficult task. It is a conversation between us and the place; when such a conversation occurs, there is space for a "culture of inhabiting," where the invisible parts are the shared local minds, and the visible parts are the buildings. The cities are changing with the inhabitants, like languages: a language is not created by the grammarians, but by the living process of the inhabitants of a place. There are as many languages (within one language) as human functions and circumstances; similarly, there are as many cities (within one city) according to the functions and nature of its places, buildings and quarters. It is precisely this multiplicity that I would like to uncover: to trace "[...] the mental maps of men, the mental maps of women, those of the threshold between them, the pre-existences, the memories, the maps of the future,"[8] the maps of the city of our dreams, of the city as we would like it to be; the city through which we walk every day and the one we do not know; the utopian city...

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[6] Cf. La Cecla, *Mente Locale*, p. 64.
[7] J. L. Borges, *L'Artefice*, my translation.
[8] cf. La Cecla, op.cit., p. 75.

65 Entrance to the installation, Centre for Contemporary Art, Preston 2000

As I arrived in Rome in 1999 I started collecting maps, different in size and genres, old and new. There is the one that opens like an origami flower; it stays in the palm of your hand but covers only the city centre. There is the plastic one that folds nicely without breaking after a week (although in the long run it does eventually tear apart), on which you cannot easily write notes; and the huge one that covers even the remote suburban areas (le borgate) and indicates all the bus lines, but is hard to unfold especially if you are standing in the middle of a busy (Roman) street.

Then there is the map *par excellence*, the map that every architect loves to display in his or her Roman (or New York) apartment: the Nolli map of 1748, considered the first modern topological survey of the city. In September 1999 though, I chose another map to begin: the Giovan Battista Falda map, an accurate, axonometric city plan of the late sixteenth century. This map was to become the basis for a work that I would continue, with many interruptions, during the year in Rome. I would then take it back once to Preston (October 2000) and display it with a new arrangement of mixed materials - photographs, prints and drawings - in the installation *A Roman Souvenir and Other Work-in-Progress*.

Rome	Preston
City	Formerly a town – later a city (January 2002)
golden, uniform light	sharp, changeable light
dry often sunny	wet often rainy & windy
open markets	covered market
cars, motorini, scooters, high density traffic, buses, trams, subway, pollution, loudness	cars, buses, walking, indoor life, quietness
coffee, cappuccino (drink-while-standing) tramezzini, panini	malted coffee (wait to be seated) Eccles cakes, Chorley cake, Goosnarg cake, butter pie
leftist intellectuals, bar talks, flamboyant fashion, mixed population, theatre, cinemas, restaurants, Saturday night	teen-agerism, high street fashion shops, mixed population, pubs, Friday night
Smoking	non-smoking
everything goes	health & safety
Eating as social activity	Eating as eating
Do not queue up / jump the queue if there is any Be aggressive Don't talk to / ignore the driver	Respect the queue Be polite Thank the driver on leaving the bus
Gas & water towers church towers, domes yellow ochre, pale light blue facades embassies, government buildings museums Roman pines Hills	industrial towers, red brick tower, demolished tower blocks, church spires red smoky brick facades, loud colours wall paint town hall court tower Harris museum University campus flat landscape
Stones, passages, ancient walls, columns, ruins, aqueducts, stairs, subterranean city, temples, catacombs, mitrea, river(s)	alleys, streets, bridges, steeples, railways, towers, churches, parks, arcades, shopping malls, river, canals
bird's eye view	ground-level view

Description of the installation

Location: Centre for Contemporary Art, Preston, 37 St. Peter's Street.

On the left wall the large Roman Map with new interventions; on the right wall the Babel Archive, and a series of black/white photographical strip contacts, with images taken from Rome and Preston. The photographs suggest a route through the two cities, starting with Rome on the right end of the strip and finishing with Preston on the left (reading from left to right the process is reversed). The Archive is represented by a cabinet divided in equal sections, painted white and with labels for each row of shelves (see A.1 for description of Babel's Library).

Jung's description of the structure of a building and its comparison with the structure of human consciousness is taken as a reference for the Archive (Cf. A.1, p. 3), as well as quotations from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, in the form of printed texts on the wall above. An additional row of black/white photograms is displayed vertically on the left wall above the cabinet, suggesting an analogy with the content of the Archive, as it starts from the bottom with images of underground places and it follows upwards with pictures of outside spaces, intercalated by stairs, doors, passages, until the very top of the column representing the upper edge of a building, a patch of sky and clouds.

On the wall beside it a mix of different material is displayed, as an archivist would with the objects of her study before putting them back in their respective places (fig. 68). There are watercolours and drawings of parts of the city; statistical tables showing the growth of Rome in the last 100 years; prints from an obscure *Dictionary of the Occult* on the Universal Language; small maps of ancient Rome and architectural computer generated drawings. The material is very heterogeneous and carefully arranged on the wall; it is not supposed to indicate a confused mind at work, but someone who knows exactly where the links between things are, but does not reveal where: the viewer is expected to make his or her own associations.
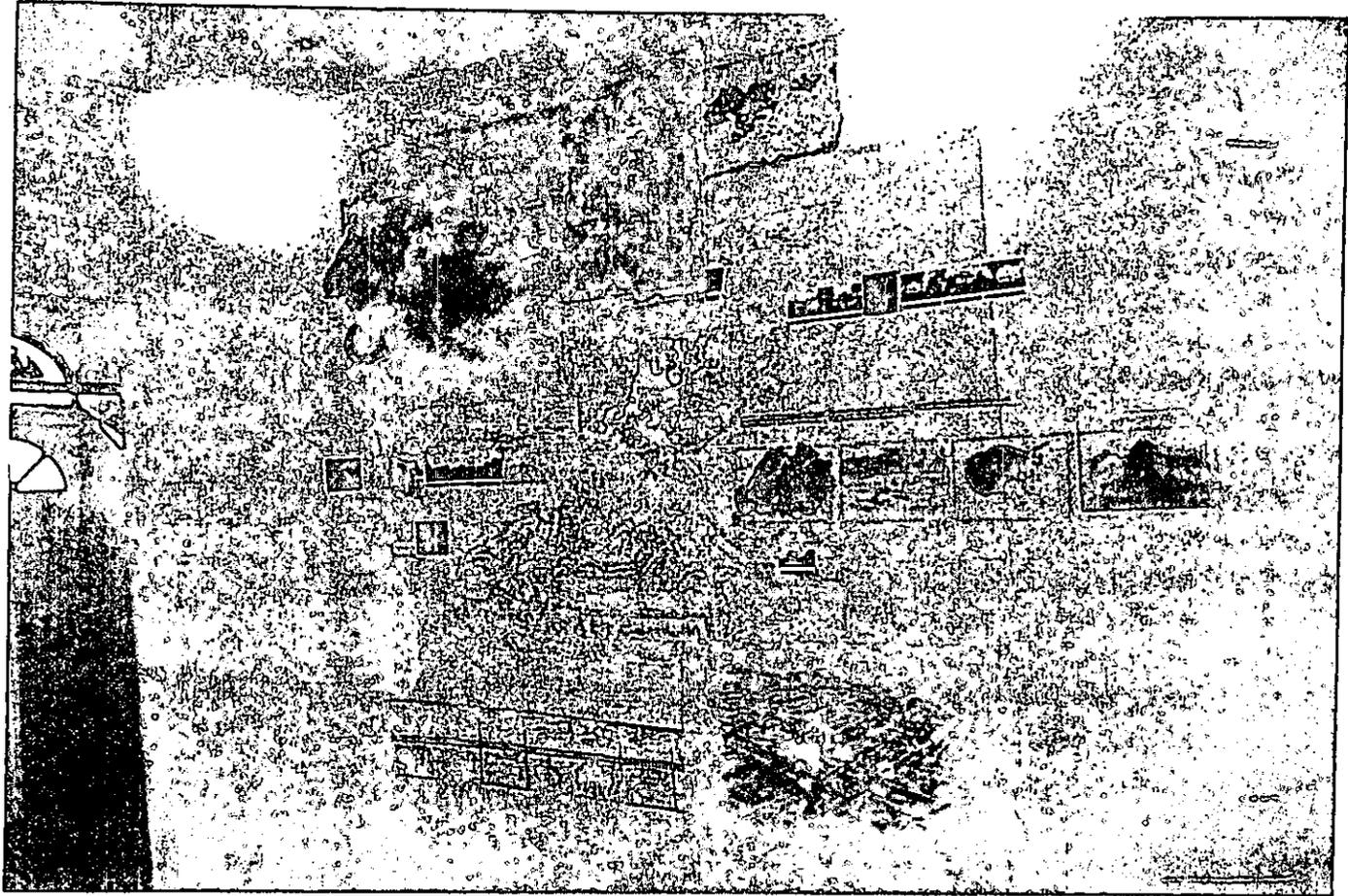
66   *Roman Map,* 1999-2000
      Graphite, acrylic, collage on paper
      200x300 cm
      View of the installation *A Roman Souvenir and other work-in-progress.* 2000
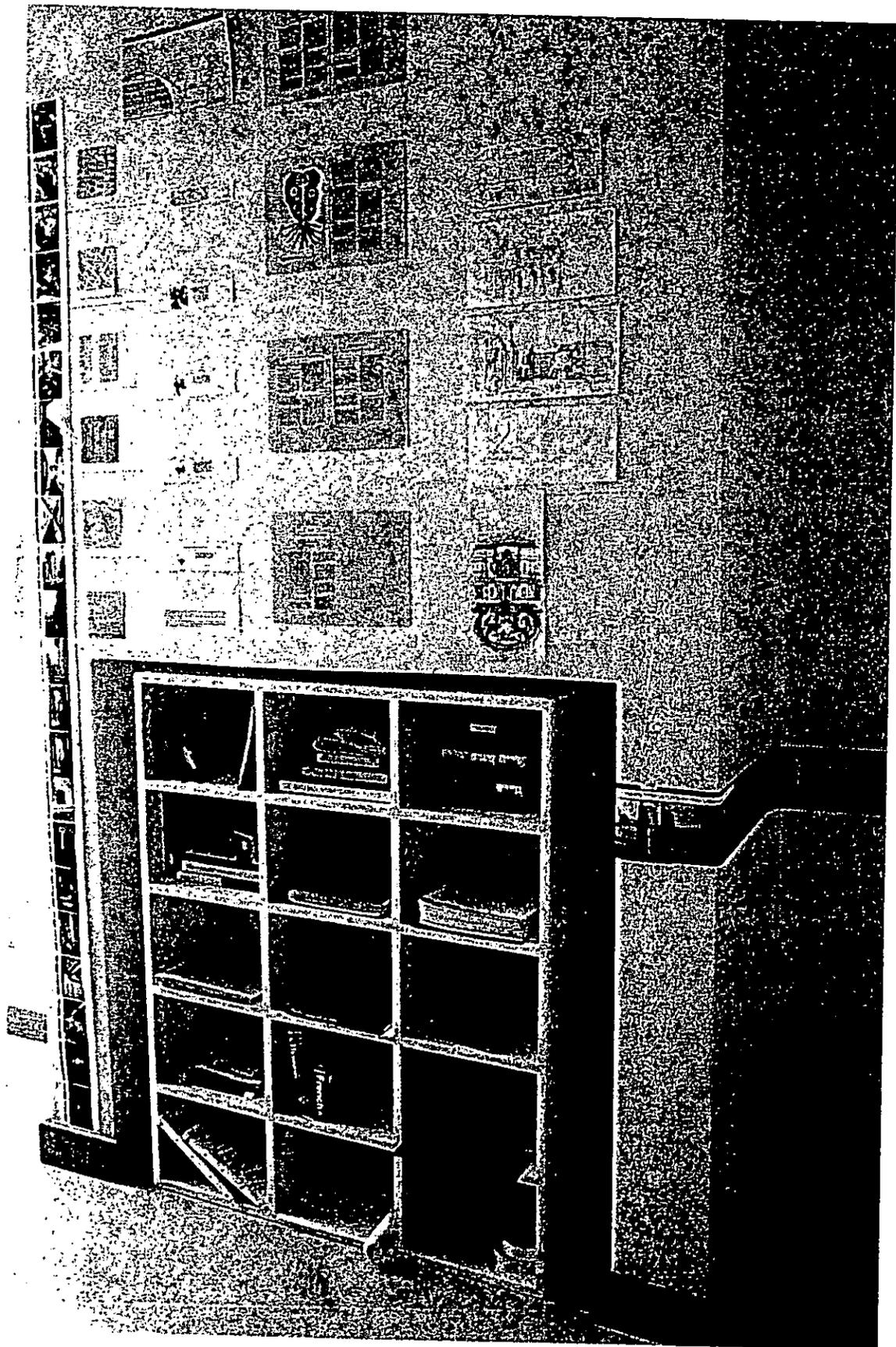
67   Detail of the installation: part of the Babel Library and Archive, 2000
Black/white strip photograms, prints, drawings
Centre for Contemporary Art, Preston
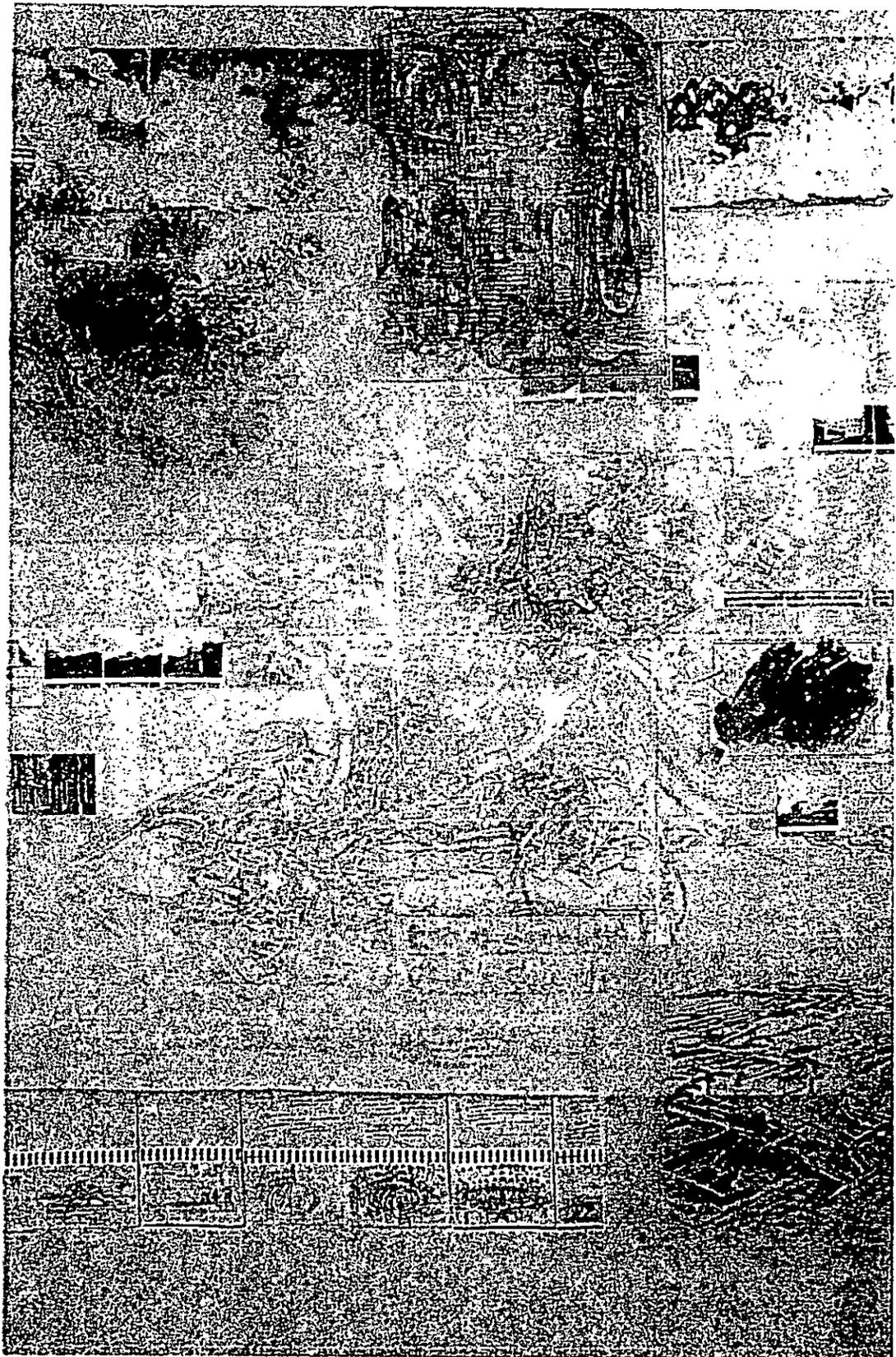
68 Detail of *Roman Map*, Centre for Contemporary Art,
   Preston, 2000

M. 3b.1 - Roman Map

> To some kind of men it is an extraordinary delight to study , to looke upon a
> geographicall map and to behold, as it were, all the remote Provinces, Towns,
> Cities of the world...what greater pleasure can there be then...To peruse those
> books of Cities, put out by Braunus and Hogenbergius.[10]

description of the map
Underneath: a reproduction of sixteenth century Falda's map of Rome, glued on yellowish paper with a thin overcoat of white acrylic paint. On top of it: a graphite drawing of fragments of contemporary Rome in bird's eye perspective.

Superimposed: tracing paper with prints from etchings and drawing reproductions; black/white photograms in a row, shots of the city of Rome; other paper collage, sketchbook notes, prints on acetate of "invisible cities". Once off the wall, the map should be folded and not rolled. Folded, it measures 50x30 cm.; opened, its size is 200x300 cm.

- This piece took a long time to get to its present state. Do you consider it finished?

- At present I would say so, although it is not unusual for me to rework a piece that I previously considered finished. Now I am thinking of building a special case, so that I can transport it. Or at least, I can suggest the idea of a transportable map. Carrying things from one place to the other has been part of my daily life for many years, and it doesn't seem to be changing. The piece in itself, meaning the drawing and the paper assemblage, it could be different as well; although at the time when I sent it over to Preston from Rome for the exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre I gave precise instructions regarding the disposition of the papers, I do not want to exclude another arrangement in a future occasion. I would like to keep it as a map-in-progress.

- Still, the map is a personal landmark of a time of transition between the two cities: Rome and Preston, and the text that goes with it lists a series of comparisons and analogies between different aspects of the respective cultures, architectural elements and their inhabitants' lifestyles.

- True, but all the same the list may change: I have already changed it several times, adding more items as they come to my mind, and as I get to know the two cities better, and the arrangement of the drawings too. It also depends on the circumstances in which you exhibit: the space may suggest another version for the same installation. This is not to be generic or unclear about my work, I think it's a necessity of mine to keep things open.

- When I observe the different textures and layers in the work I have to think of Rome itself, its multilayered structure and co-presence of different cities in one, the archaic, the ancient, the modern and the new all jammed together with no apparent contradiction...

- Everything seems to find a way to get through in Rome, even though I believe the process is not (and has not been) painless; the past adjusts itself to the present to survive; and the present often takes advantage of it, preferring transformation to annihilation. Sometimes I have the impression that the

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[10] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621. Cited in *The City in Maps: urban mapping to 1900*, ed. James Elliot (London: The British Library, 1987), p. 9.

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ancient ruins are like flowers growing up in the concrete, desperately gasping for air but persistently there.

- At the time you begun working on the Map was there any artist who inspired you?

- My reference material would mostly come from old map engravings, especially eighteenth and nineteenth century cartography, Piranesi's graphic work (cf. M.4a) and photographic material that I collected from the archive of the American Academy and elsewhere. I don't mean to deny the influence of contemporary artists. I am thinking for instance of Joyce Kozloff's work with maps and globes (fig. 70), which impressed me for the care and beauty of execution as well as the strength of its political content, something rarely found in the contemporary panorama. Kozloff was a Rome Prize Fellow at the American Academy the same year I was there as a Fulbright Fellow, so I had the privilege to get acquainted with her and her work and to exchange ideas and common interests. Also, I remember seeing at the time the drawings Cathy Prendergast did during her residency at the British School at Rome, they were inspiring in their use of graphite alone to build imaginary maps defined by an intricate net of signs. I could also mention Guillermo Kuitca, whose work I knew later and that bears a resemblance with the prints and drawings on which I was working at the time (see M.4a2). Kuitca made a series of beautiful paintings based on plans of existing buildings (like the pavement of the church of La Sorbonne, fig. 69), using mainly black and white paint, leaving the edges of the painting undefined, as if seen through a mist or smoke. He also did a series of map paintings in which names of towns and cities are replaced by names of people he knows.
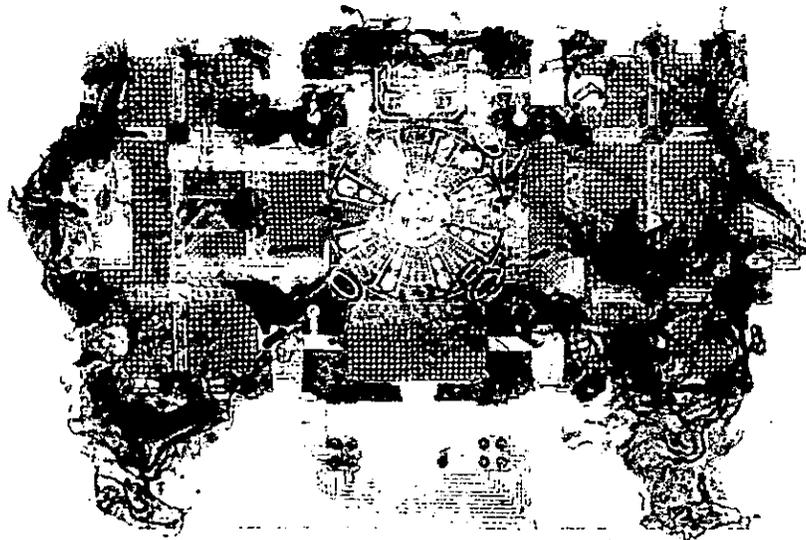
69   Guillermo Kuitca, *L 'Encyclopédie*, 1999
      Untitled (compartment of the pavement of
      the Sorbonne Church, Paris), mixed media
      on linen,
      187x160 cm
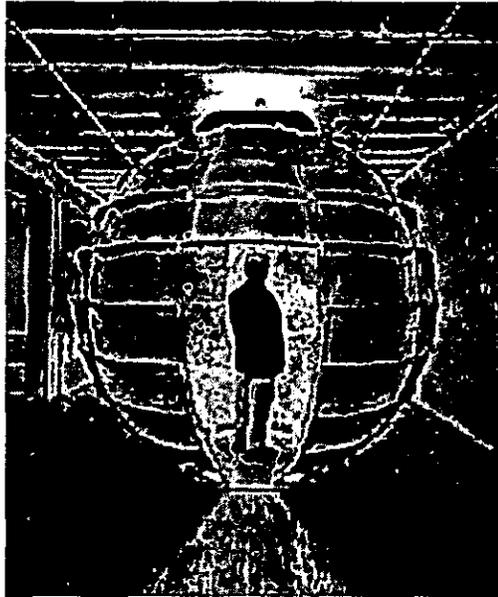
I saw Joyce Kozloff working on *Targets* while at the American Academy in Rome. *Targets* is a curved painting divided into sections that once joined together form a concave globe; it is large enough for a person to stand inside. Kozloff prepared each section with canvas mounted on special stretchers that a local artisan had made on measure. On the canvas she painted with acrylics, representing parts of U.S. military maps for each section of the globe. These maps had nothing of the beauty and fascination of ancient maps that Kozloff previously used as references for many of her paintings: they were quite dry, technical aerial surveys of zones that American Army used in conflicts worldwide. But in Kozloff's interpretation they acquired bright and sensuous colours, rich textures and the quality of an arabesque: like labyrinthine signs, they captivate the viewer and force him or her to watch *everything* close-up, in the detail. In the intimacy of the globe (significantly, allowing one-person only at a time) one has the feeling to be inside an ancient cave, or a catacomb: and to decipher signs of a distant or lost language. Even the sound is beautiful inside, reverberating like in a small apse.

So much more the surprise, then, when one realizes what those maps really are: instruments of war, symbols of oppression and domination.
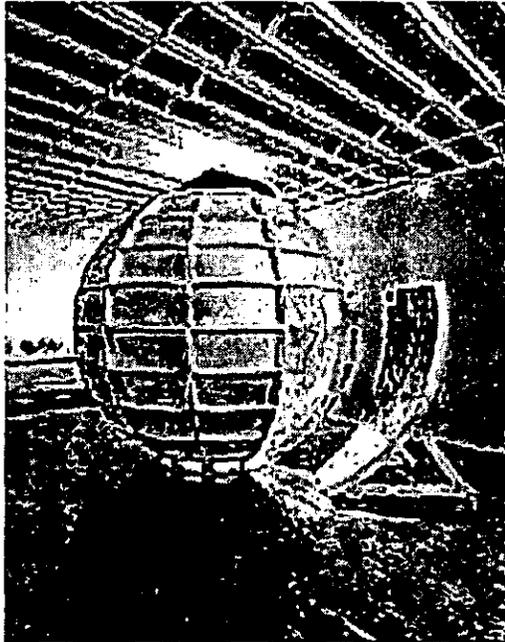
M.4 THE CITY PAINTER

> How do you know a city? How do you know your city?
> Method: one should either renounce talking about the city, or talk
> about it as simply as possible, talk about it in an evident, familiar way.
> Get rid of any preconceived idea, stop thinking in ready-made terms,
> forget about what the town planners and the sociologists said. [8]

...I love to observe the city lights from above. There is a high terrace on our building from which you can see the lights of the cars, moving slowly like a massive snake along the streets; the shine of the traffic lights, of shop and restaurant banners, and everything that creates that vibrancy across the air, as if you were observing a giant animal breathing slowly, and heavily, and you were part of that breath, too.
(from the *Roman Journal*, 1999-2000)

ROMA – ROME
Ruins

...Rome acts as both a catalyst and alchemical crucible. The synchretism of the Roman experience accomodates a rich array of physic fragments. The image of Rome as a realization and metaphor of polytheistic thought deepens and differentiate our architectural speculations. This lesson of Rome, in all its density and intensity, connects us to images at work on our souls. It may indeed threaten to overwhelm or cripple the architect, or it may well redeem her. [9]

The next series of rooms, to hold on to the metaphor of the building, displays paintings and drawings realized in the year 1999-2000, during my residency as a Fulbright Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Working with the theme of the city, and in particular with the city of Rome, was a long-cherished project of mine. In the same year I started my research at Preston; the investigation conducted in Rome and *on* Rome would then become the beginning of my research programme. Once in Rome, I realized that no other subject could have been more appropriate.

It is not possible to walk the streets of Rome without being astonished and even overwhelmed by the architecture, the variety of wall textures, the simultaneous presence of the ancient ruins and the symbols of a contemporary urban society, of sacred and secular buildings and the religious often merging with the paganism of their origins (St. Peter's, San Clemente, Santa Cecilia are churches built upon Mythraic sanctuaries, just to name a few cases out of many analogous ones).

When you stroll on a Roman street you are walking upon another city underneath: you sense that there are dark passages, caves and alleys and temples below the ground, even though you cannot see them. Rome is a city of contrasts: the light can be very bright and harsh or diffuse and soft. In my perception is a city of shadows and light: it's best photographed in black and white. It is not by chance that in Rome I put together an impressive collection of black and white slides of the city's architecture and its surroundings, a practice that I would then extend to other sites as well (London, Preston, Manchester, Blackpool...). For a year, I was photographing the ruins and the buildings; the peripheries born with the

[8] Georges Perec, *Espéces d'Espaces*, rev. ed. – 1ª ed. 1974 (Paris: Galilée, 2000), p. 85. My translation.
[9] Ryszard Sliwka, "Density and intensity", from the catalogue of the University of Waterloo Rome Program, 1999.

industrial development and the archaeological sites; cemetries and palaces; subterrenean temples and catacombs; the inner space of churches and that of abandoned, decaying houses. Most of all I was fascinated by the ruins, ancient and modern, almost like a traveller or a painter of the eighteenth century on his Grand Tour, writing and sketching at every crumbling stone, trying to make sense of what was there and its relationship with the contemporary city.
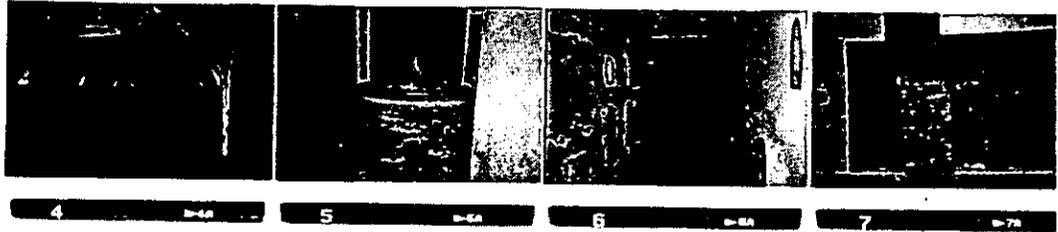
72 Series of b/w photograms shot in Rome, 2000-2001

> A ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator [...]. When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. To statesmen, ruin predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man's aspiration. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art. Why struggle with a brush or chisel to create the beauty of wholeness when far greater works have been destroyed by Time?[10]

The question of Time though, as frustrating as it might sound, does not necessarily drive artists or architects to despair and passivity. To an architect like Sir John Soane the answer to the dilemma was to play an anticipation game by imagining in 1833 his masterpiece building, the Bank of England, as a Roman ruin, as a *forum romanum* of which just some fragments have survived the passage of time. (The building shall not have the privilege of experiencing natural decay though, as it was demolished in the 1920s to make room for newly designed buildings). In the presentation paper to "Visions of Ruin," an exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum of 1999, one reads that "the 'cult of the ruin' [was] a phenomenon of 18[th] and 19[th] century Europe. Mock ruins were built as 'follies' in landscape gardens, while artists imagined how London would appear as a ruined city after the collapse of the British Empire. In Rome, interiors were painted as *trompe l'oeil* ruins, and in Paris the great chef Antoine Carême served blancmanges in the shape of Roman ruins."

John Soane transformed his house at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields in a sort of 'Wunderkammer,' a domestic museum, in which the architecture is no less astonishing than the objects that are everywhere displayed. In the text he wrote in the span of two months in 1812, *Crude Hints Towards the History of My House*, "he imagined an archaeologist of future centuries inspecting the fragments of his home: were these the remains of a monastery, a Roman temple, a magician's lair, or the house of a persecuted artist?"[11]

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[10] Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 2.
[11] Cf. Woodward, op. cit., p. 170. The text by Soane has been edited by Helen Dorey and published in *Visions of Ruin, Architectural fantasies & designs for garden follies,* exhibition catalogue, Sir John Soane's Museum (London: The Soane Gallery, 1999), pp. 61-74.

73   Sir John Soane's Bank of England as a ruin in
an aerial cutaway view from the south-east,
drawing by Joseph Michael Gandy, 1830

John Soane imagined his house as a ruin when it was under construction, after the demolition of the previous No. 13 house. Materials of the demolished house were auctioned off on the site and thus removed, creating an "evolving ruin in the process."[12]

We know from Soane's notebook that when he began writing his manuscript the front brick wall of the house was completed and some floors had been added, but mostly the front part of the house was a construction site, which suggested both a ruin or an unfinished building. This vision must have fuelled Soane's imagination about the nature of the building. In particular, his attention was drawn to the space where the staircase would be built, a windowless top-lit hole which in his archaeological spoof he compared to a Piranesian prison.

...It is to be observed that notwithstanding this building consisted of several stages or stories (like some of the buildings of Semiramis) no vestiges remain of a staircase of any kind – hence it is fair to conclude that the extent of the building was greater than its present remains shew – for a Staircase there must have been* [sic]

*Note. Admitted - but at the same time there is a space, well Suited for a staircase as it would communicate most easily with the different rooms now existing in the building – I am aware it has been supposed that this very space, if a staircase, could only have been one of those Carcerian dark Staircases represented in some of Piranesi's ingenious dreams for prisons [...].[13]

This fascination with buildings in progress and ruins is to be found in the work of Marjetica Potrč, a Slovenian artist who wrote a short text titled *Two Essays on Built Disasters* to accompany an exhibition of her installations of built walls. In the first of the two essays, "An Empty City: Attraction of a Built Disaster" she writes:

An empty building or an empty city, left deserted when its people leave, is never experienced as a neutral space. It is either scary or beautiful. I know this from first-hand experience: I build walls. And when I build a house, I usually build over the windows, and I leave the space empty. Nothing to look at but walls. What fascinates me, though, is that beyond the sense of nothingness that they convey, walls and buildings seem to be familiar to everybody. Easy to enter – not only in person, but also metaphorically – they are more reminiscent of the body than of the ordered mind.[14]

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[12] Helen Dorey, "Crude Hints", in *Visions of Ruin*, p. 53.
[13] John Soane, *Crude Hints Towards the History of My House*, ibid., p. 63.
[14] Marjetica Potrč, *Two Essays on Built Disasters*, Installations Project at *project space*, curated by Milena Kalinovska (E Street NW, Washington D.C.: October 9 – November 14, 1998), p. 3.

Potrč explores the presence of ruins in cities as diverse as Pozzuoli, Italy, and Guerrero Viejo, Mexico, comparing them to living archaeological sites, Pompeiis of our time, progressively emptied by their inhabitants and visited by tourists looking for a special thrill or a detour from the most beaten tracks.

> Back at home, the attitude towards ruins change. Nobody wants to have a shabby and deserted house next door. People like to watch ruins as long as they belong to somebody else. Ruins were what tourists went to see in Sarajevo – demolished houses, walls – as soon as civilians could fly there.[15]

(In downtown Manhattan, in February 2002, it was possible to look at the "Ground Zero" site – the place where the World Trade Center's Twin Towers once stood and were now reduced to a pile of rubble – from a raised platform situated at the edge of the large pit. Tourists with photo and video cameras gained access after purchasing a ticket two blocks away from the site and patiently standing in line for several minutes, if not for hours.)

Nobody wants a ruin next door, Potrč says. Nobody, perhaps, except myself and my alter ego U. Crymes, who wanders through the streets of Rome and finds herself perfectly at home in a flat built on the site of a derelict house that was stripped of its façade by a bomb in World War II. (see **Appendix**, pp. 38-39).

One might even say that the 'state of ruin' has a beauty in itself and that the point of so many works of art and architecture is precisely *to become* ruins, in order to acquire that special beauty that comes from the contemplation of transcience, ephemerality and the fragility of human things. Late eighteenth century concepts of the 'Picturesque' and 'Sublime' are two apparently antithetical categories stemming from the same sentiment towards nature and history: the nostalgia for a time long past.

> There are two ways of seeing a ruined building. The first is to see the fragments as pieces of a jigsaw, as clues to a reconstruction – the view of an archaeologist, or of an architect in the Renaissance. The second way is to see a ruin as *Picturesque*. Ignoring the intentions of the original builder, the artist enjoys the romantic effects of the damage done by Time: crumbling stone, ivy, mysterious dark spaces, and dramatic contrasts of light and shade. This view began in Rome in the mid-18[th] century when artists such as Piranesi, Clerisseau and Hubert Robert depicted the 'poetry of decay' and captivated young English architects in Rome, such as Robert Adam and William Chambers. [...][16]

I recognize my own way of looking at the ruins in Rome in both the above mentioned categories: I certainly sympathize with the imaginative attitude of the Picturesque character, wandering around old stones and rubble, making sketches, writing notes or simply daydreaming; it defines a poetic attitude. Myth and poetry walk on the same path. As Paul Zumthor effectively put it, *"poetic* qualifies a function and a use of the language when, instead of aiming for a direct transmission of information but without denying them, the proposition goes back on itself, playing on its own forms and in so doing often generates a hardly definable surplus of sense. The poetic belongs to the order of art as much as and even more than pragmatic communication. A poetic tale, as well as being 'historical' carries values that we would call [...] aesthetic ones."[17]

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[15] Ibid., p. 9.

[16] From the presentation to the exhibition "Visions of Ruins".

[17] Zumthor, *Babele*, op. cit., pp. 43-44. My translation.

Nevertheless, this approach does not exclude a critical view. In *The Towers of Babel* (1999, fig. 89), for instance, the classic ruins in the foreground are like distant witnesses of the background: an industrial landscape, the kind you find in central and northern Europe (this was taken near a factory in the German region of Dortmund) filling the air with polluting smoke. The ruins assume a nearly human quality, of broken humanity, whereas the factory appears anonymous and inhuman, the symbol of ruthless exploitation of the natural environment by man (what a modern "tower of Babel" project would be? Perhaps, an environmental catastrophe?). On the other hand, we can feel deeply moved in front of the ruins of the industrial age: old, abandoned factories, solitary chimneys and bricktowers with an ugliness somehow transfigured by Time and made more poetical.[18]

74   *The Towers of Babel*, 1999
         Pastel, sepia, watercolour and tempera on paper prepared with pigments
         50x70 cm

> I am moved by ruins because I see them as wounds civilization has sustained in a losing war against nature. On the other hand, I am full of respect, and even reverence, for the wisdom of the wild and I am equally moved by the wounds inflicted on nature by man.[19]

Would we appreciate in the same way the ancient Roman architecture if it were not a ruin? How much of the awesome feeling we have for such remnants is due to the fact that they are mere fragments, vestiges of a glorious past that will never come back? How much of the fascination for the rest of the Colosseum resides in the holes on the wall and the missing stones and the perception of general decay no less than in what is still standing?

To consider the Tower – as well as a city – from the point of view of the ruin has the power of freeing our imagination: we are allowed and even invited to complete the picture when we can only see a fragment. We are able to create all sorts of images in our mind when there is a void, a missing part, a mystery in the form that we see (L.2ol).

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[18] Cf. Michelangelo Antonioni's movie *Il Deserto Rosso*, in which this estrangement is expressed through the awkward relationship between the female protagonist of his film and the industrial landscape in which the action takes place.

We have seen already, with reference to the babelian myth how the Tower could be considered the "project of a ruin" (A.1), and how the original text itself is but a fragment in a colossal text. Nothing else remains of the supposed mythical Tower other than a pool of water contained within a square pit. The city of Baghdad (the ancient Babylon), once – and not so long ago – one of the most prosperous cities of the Middle East, is today facing one of the biggest crisis of its history.

> Whether because Nebuchadnezzar overreached himself, or because the dynasty could produce no more dynamic leaders, Babylon never again experienced an era of greatness. In 539, it was overrun by invaders from Persia without a battle. Thereafter, no native dynasty ever resumed power. By the time the geographer Strabo came to reflect on Babylon's ruins in the early years of the Christian era, it had been 'turned to waste' by the blows of invaders and the indifference of rulers. 'The great city', he reflected, 'has become a great desert'. Civilization in Mesopotamia had, however, been remarkably durable. It had outlasted its sister-civilization across the Arabian Sea in the Indus Valley, where the cities had been unoccupied for more than a millennium and a half [...].[20]

A similar lot was reserved for Rome: as Christopher Woodward writes,

> In AD 400 Rome was a city of eight hundred thousand people glittering with 3,785 statues of gold, marble and bronze. Its encircling walls were 10 miles in length with 376 towers, and vaulted by nineteen acqueducts carrying fresh spring-water to 1,212 drinking fountains and 926 public baths. There is no evidence that any writer or painter imagined its future ruin, and the poet Rutilius Namatianus expressed his contemporaries' view that Rome was as eternal as the universe itself:
>
> *No man will ever be safe if he forgets you;*
> *May I praise you still when the sun is dark.*
> *To count up the glories of Rome is like counting*
> *The stars in the sky.*
>
> In AD 410 the Visigoths sized and plundered the city, and in 455 the Ostrogoths. By the end of that century only a hundred thousand citizens remained in Rome, and the rich had fled to Constantinople or joined the Goths in their new capital at Ravenna. In the sixth century the Byzantines and the Goths contested the city three times and the population fell to thirty thousand, clustered in poverty beside the River Tiber now that the aqueducts had been destroyed and the drinking fountains were dry. The fall of Rome came to be seen by many as the greatest catastrophe in the history of western civilization.[21]

Perhaps because of this parallel and because the ancients often compared the Rome of the Golden Age with once powerful Babylon (and none the less for the supposed laxity of the inhabitant's customs and political corruption in the declining phase of both city-states), so many artists in the past took Rome as a paradigm, and particularly the Colosseum as a model for their representation of the Tower of Babel.

In *Rome, le livre des fondations*, Michel Serres opens the book with a painting by Antoine Caron (1521-1599) called *Les massacres du Triumvirat*, 1566 (fig. 75).

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[19] Felipe Fernández Armesto, *Civilizations* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000), p. xii.
[20] Ibid., p. 224.
[21] Woodward, op.cit. p. 6.

It depicts what Serres describes as "a building, perhaps the Colosseum…a colossal circus, a Roman tower of Babel." Both the painting and the book greatly influenced the work I was doing at the time (cf. **Appendix**, "You are Not Here", pp. 24-26). In fact, I came to Serres' book via Caron's painting, which I was studying, after a friend's suggestion during a studio visit. There is a common characteristic in both works: the emphasis on the foundations of the city, which Caron represents by means of a stage-like construction as if the city, with the Colosseum-tower in its middle, were built upon a higher level than the ground; we can see the dark cavities and the pillars that sustain the upper level, and perceive the city weighing upon them. Rome is a solid, heavy city, a *city-object* as Serres points out, a city that was able to build stone upon stone bridges, streets, squares, arches, whole cities, a durable empire, therefore it was able to *found.* Rome as "the book of foundations," and it is not by chance, perhaps, that it follows his previous work: *Genesis*, the book of multiplicity. According to Serres, Rome concretely shows this multiplicity, by telling us stories of Roman crowds in turmoil, legions spread all over the plain, farmers scattered around the crops, charging enemy cavalry, and so on.

The use that Serres makes of the black and white symbolic colours to describe opposite qualities of the city (often juxtaposing the legendary city of the origins – Albalonga, white – with the city of stone and earth, Rome, black) finds an echo in my own perception of the city as a place of stunning contrasts, unresolved millenary contradictions, simultaneous presence, layers of meaning.

The Colosseum was taken as a model of inspiration for many other famous Towers of Babel, Bruegel's one included, as is evident by comparing the structure of two buildings. In spite of the hints in the sacred texts and in their numerous interpretations of the actual form of the original tower ("as tall as wide", "square at the base"), which archaeological investigation was later to attribute to a description of a Sumeric multi-storied zigurrat,[22] for many painters (past and present). The tower was to be circular, with arches all around its perimeter, built up in terraces that grow narrower at the top.

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[22] Cf. Jacques Vicari, "Nouvelle Image de la Tour de Babel", in *Dossier d'Histoire et Archeologie* (No.103, March 1986): pp. 44-47.
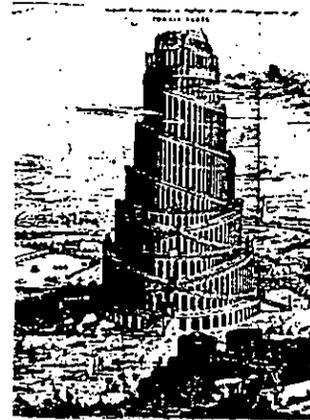
76 G. B. Piranesi, reconstruction view of
    Hadrian's complex around the Mole and
    the Ponte Elio (from *Il Campo Marzio*,
    1762), etching

77 Athanasius Kircher, *Turris
    Babel*, etching 1679

An etching by Giovanni Battista Piranesi from his series of reconstructing views of *Campo Marzio* (fig. 76) at the time of the Roman Empire, shows the Mausoleum of Hadrian as a tall cylindrical tower, modeled on the *Turris Babel* of Athanasius Kircher (fig. 77), against all antiquary evidence that was available at the time: the monument appears to be more than 100 meters high, becoming the central pole of the abnormal composition.[23] Conceived around 1755 and finished in 1761, the reconstructions of the *Campo Marzio* by Piranesi are definitely the most spectacular "antiquary invention" of any time, exercised on an urban sector that was considered the symbol of the imperial power of Rome. The *Campo Marzio* is a bridge cast between the past of archaeology memory and the future of the "revolutionary city" that will be elaborated by the protagonists of the architecture of the Enlightenment, Ledoux and Boullée[24] (A.2d).

In 1771 Walpole observed that Piranesi in his densest reconstructions of the antique used to put "palaces upon bridges and temples upon palaces, and he climbed the sky with heaps of buildings."[25] The concentration and accumulation method in real architectural "dark holes" that magnetize ancient values and modern stimuli has been interpreted in different ways. Tafuri emphasizes the theme of the dissolution of the architectural and urban form: "The *Campo Marzio* is composed like a shapeless pile of fragments clashing one against the other. The whole area is configured according to a method of arbitrary associations, whose aggregation principles exclude any organic quality [...]. The 'triumph of the fragment' dominates the shapeless overlapping of the organisms [...], the result is a sort of *typological negation*, of 'architectural banquet of the nausea,' of semantic void for excess of visual noise [...]. The

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[23] Marcello Fagiolo, *Roma Antica* (Cavallino di Lecce: Capone, 1991). From ch. 6, "La ri-progettazione della città antica" (the book has no page numbers). My translation.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

82 .

clash of the organisms dipped in a sea of formal fragments dissolves even the furthest memory of the city as accomplished formal structure."[26]

Piranesi was a Venetian who fell in love with Rome at the beginning of his architectural career when he, like many of his colleagues, went to the Eternal City to study the vestiges of its past. He would dedicate the rest of his life to the study and reconstruction of ancient Roman architecture.

He was a strange kind of architect, one who never built much in his life: his only realized building is the church of the Maltese Knights on the Aventine in Rome, a standing encyclopaedia of eighteenth century neoclassical architecture. He was first and foremost a printmaker and a draughtsman, but he kept signing his etchings and drawings with the appellative: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Venetian Architect.

[...] At the other extreme stands his series of Prisons ("Carceri"), a menacing sinister vision of free-floating interiors where there are no columnar orders of any kind to articulate the space, no fixed architectural climaxes, no boundaries described or implied. These dark inventions that borrowed from the theatre, and from underground ruins which Piranesi knew so well, were filled with drawbridges, chains, gaping arched passages, and all sorts of engines and machinery, to create a destabilized world that is the very opposite of classical order – befitting Burke's definition of those terrible and danger-filled sensations that characterize the sublime.[27]

78   Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Smoking Fire*
      (Plate VI, Second Edition), 1749-60
      Etching, engraving, and sulfur tint on open bite
      with burnishing, c. 54x39 cm

79   *Towers of Babel (The Dream of Piranesi)*, 1998
      Etching on copper
      70x50 cm
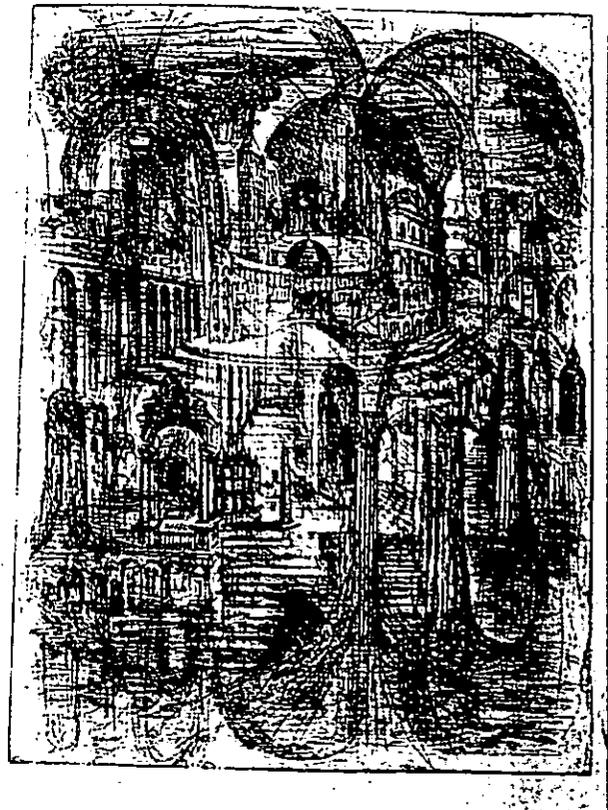
[26] Ibid.
[27] Kostof, *A History of Architecture*, p. 561.

It is interesting to notice that in Piranesi's interpretation of the Campo Marzio the relationship with the Colosseum is inverted: whilst in the other cases the Colosseum (or, broadly speaking, monumental Rome) acts like a model or a source of inspiration for representations of the Tower of Babel, in Piranesi's etching it's the traditional (fictitious) image of the Tower that works as a model for an hypothetical reconstruction of an ancient Roman monument.

Probably this recurrent merging of reality into fiction and vice versa is the most compelling aspect of Piranesi's work, which explains why it plays a central role in the paintings, prints and drawings I produced in Rome.

The main issue of these works is the city under construction as a metaphor of building process, and its relationship with the city in ruins. These two moments find an echo in the transitory state of the Tower: we actually never see the tower completed, it is either being built or in decay after its abandonment.

*I must produce grand ideas, and if I were asked to make plans for a new world I would be
mad enough to untertake the task.*
G. B. Piranesi

80   The Roman studio at the American Academy in Rome, 2000.
   Photo Mimmo Capone.

Architect Grumbach recently said that the new city he wanted to
build shall be "the ruin of a city that already existed before the
actual city". That would be the ruins of a city that never existed,
the traces of a memory that does not belong to a specific place.
Every true city corresponds in fact to this project. It is
mythical.[28]

I am going to introduce a group of works in which I explore the theme of the city, and notably the city
of Rome and imaginary-mythical places, of construction and legacy of the past, with the image of the
studio at the American Academy in Rome, where I was working in the year 1999-2000.

I am also going to consider these works as a unique piece: notwithstanding the heterogeneity of styles
and media, the works realized in the space of a year in Rome in that particular context are a whole, a
project whose code name is: "Building the city".

The main issue is the city under construction as a metaphor of building process, and its relationship
with the city in ruins. These two moments find an echo in the transitory state of the Tower: we actually
never see the tower completed, it is either being built or in decay after its abandonment.

When I was making these paintings, Rome was going through a major face-lift in preparation for the
Catholic Jubilee celebrations that would take place during 2000. Many historic buildings were acquiring a
new façade, bridges were renovated and lit at night, walls were cleaned and brought back to their
supposed ancient splendour; a new and very controversial underground car park was under construction
near the Vatican; scaffolding filled the urban landscape, like an intricate forest of steel and timber. The
transformation of the city was a fascinating phenomenon to observe day-by-day, and to record in the form
of sketches, notes and photographs. Some of the sketches became studies for paintings, some would
become part of larger compositions; photographs and slides would constitute raw material for future work
with projections and models (cf. **M.5b**, *De-Tour*).

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[28] Michel de Certeau, "Les Revenants de la ville," *Traverses 40* (1987). Quoted in À la recherche de la cité idéale
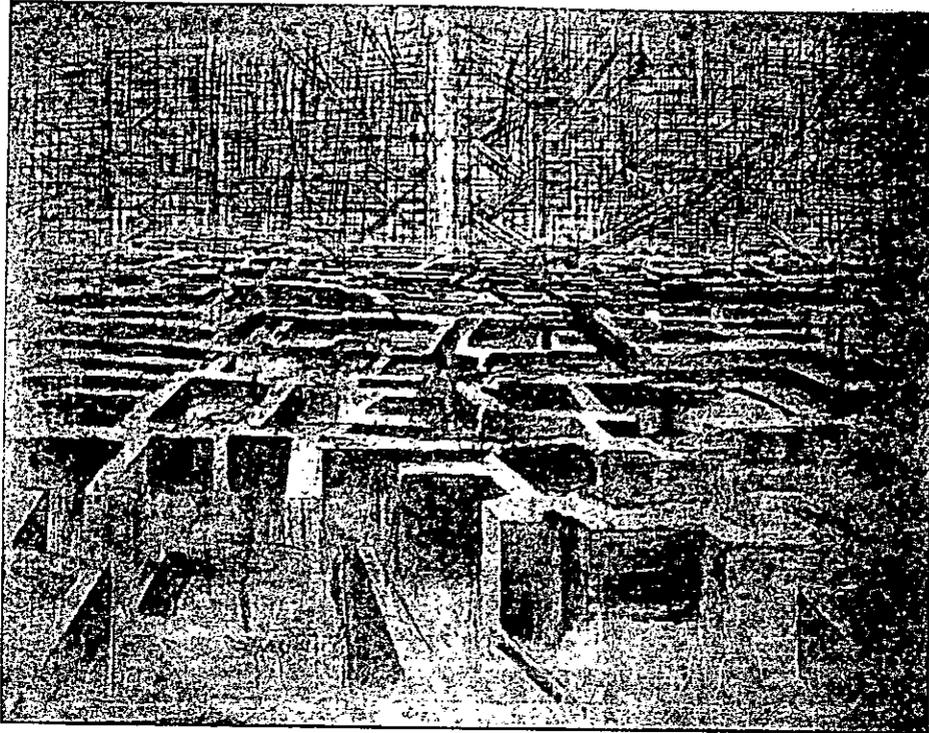
81 *Labyrinthia*, 2000
Oil and graphite on canvas prepared with paper
115x145 cm

The three paintings (fig. 80) are of three different panoramic views: and the "panorama" as a genre has been at the centre of a series of work, as I shall illustrate later.

The central painting (fig. 82) represents a city: *The Lost City*, the disappeared city, the city that is no longer there. It plays with transparency and superimposition of planes. Underneath there is the net of almost invisible labyrinthine ruins, a reference to the archaeological site of Ostia Antica, the ancient Roman harbour. Above, hovering like a ghost, leaden and shimmering in silver-violet hues we see the city in fragments as it may have looked like in the age of Constantine, one of the last Roman emperors. At closer inspection, an idiosyncratic element in the painting emerges, the nuclear factories in the background filling the sky with silvery smoke, the only hint of the modern age. The city looks like a group of floating islands on a watery ground: almost a series of stone-rafts.

(Arc et Senans: Institut Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, 2000), p. 162. My translation.
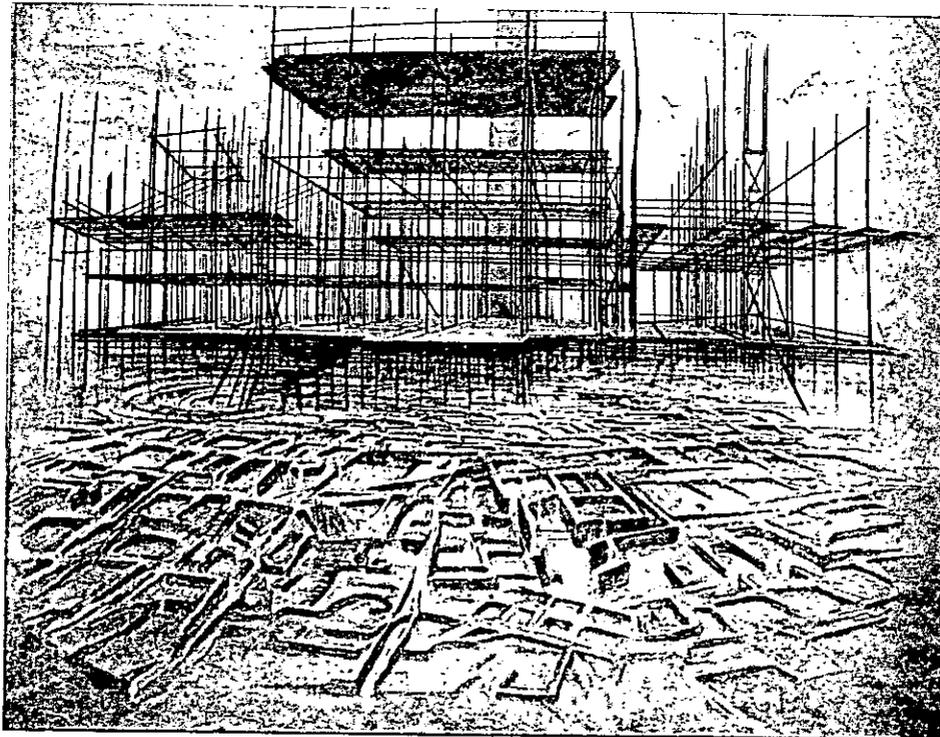
82 *The Lost City*, 2000
Acrylic, oil and graphite on canvas prepared with paper
115x150 cm

83 *The Big Jubilee*, 2000
Oil and graphite on canvas prepared with paper
115x145 cm

The dominant hue is given by the pink background, a mix of iron oxide, yellow ochre and zinc and titanium white, bound with acrylic medium. On this base the first sketch (the ruins at Ostia) was painted with black and white acrylic, in quick strokes. Subsequently, layers of tissue paper were glued to the surface and coated with graphite powder, on which a second drawing was traced with an eraser, thus creating lights by subtracting the graphite from the paper. A coat of transparent acrylic medium was then added; this surface was then to be painted with the city in fragments, in oil paint. Ready made colours were used in combination with pigments and binders: red oxide, mars red, vine black, ultramarine blue, lead white and graphite are the main ones. The painting is made of very thin washes and glazes, built on top of one another: as a result the painted city seems to appear and disappear at the same time, suggesting a virtually infinite space expanding behind it. The city vanishes at the edges, nearly describing a curve space, so that the viewer might have the illusion of looking at the round surface of a globe.

The painting on the left (fig. 83) is a painting of a large scaffold that fills the upper half of the canvas, while underneath we see the ruins of an ancient city (the archaeological site of Cosa near Rome) where a few instruments were left by the workers. The title, *The Big Jubilee*, is ironically referring to the "Giubileo" of the Catholic Church; the scaffolding is an empty structure perfectly crafted, a mere wrapping, a high-sounding statement behind which there is nothing: no building, no monument, just the pale shadow of an obelisk that cuts the space in two and thus could be read as a fissure in the sky. Just like the Tower this is the project of a ruin, an empty case, a void, a gap; the mere act of building predominates on what is actually built.

The canvas has been prepared with several layers of tissue paper on a base of light yellowish primer, on which the preliminary sketch was traced with natural charcoal and a brush dipped in oil and turpentine. The paper was then given another wash of yellowish oil paint, leaving the white of the paper to show through in some areas to mark the zig-zag lines of the archaeological ruins. The scaffold was entirely painted in oil using earth colours (raw and burnt umber, yellow ochre, red ochre, Sienna, Naples yellow), ultramarine blue and graphite. This painting is the most descriptive of the three: the execution is accurate and flat, brushstrokes do not show hurry or any particular expressivity; everything is made clear and visible. The scene is a central perspective, in the tradition of Paolo Uccello's Battles, in which every sword, every lance or body on the ground follows a precise vanishing point; in this case we do not see lances or bodies but scaffolding beams (and the shadow lines that they cast).

Moving to the right (fig. 81), we see a labyrinth, with intricate lines that delineate a scaffold, or a Piranesi-like structure on top of it. The scaffolding, unlikely the preceding one, is less defined and entirely drawn with graphite on the surface of the canvas previously prepared with paper, and graphite is visible all over the painting. The labyrinth is another view of Ostia Antica (fig. 84), from a lower angle than in the central cityscape painting. It also reminds the Chaco constructions in Aztec (New Mexico), built according to a symmetric plan (fig. 85).

Colours are subdued, mostly white, grey, silvery and pink tones. Drawing plays the major role here, with oil paint being used sparingly to give depth and shadow to the maze in the foreground. The light areas are given by the background paper left untouched; the scaffolding hovers above from the distance, its elements indistinguishable like in a cobweb, made of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines, with only \ a thin gap in the middle, where the vanishing point is located. This prevents the eye from being stopped at the scaffold, suggesting an open space behind it.

One has the feeling of staring into a landscape hit by a dazzling light, the kind of diurnal light Pasolini used in his black and white Roman movies of the 1960s, or as someone suggested, the light that radiates from the cracked concrete of Burri's *Cretto* at Gibellina.
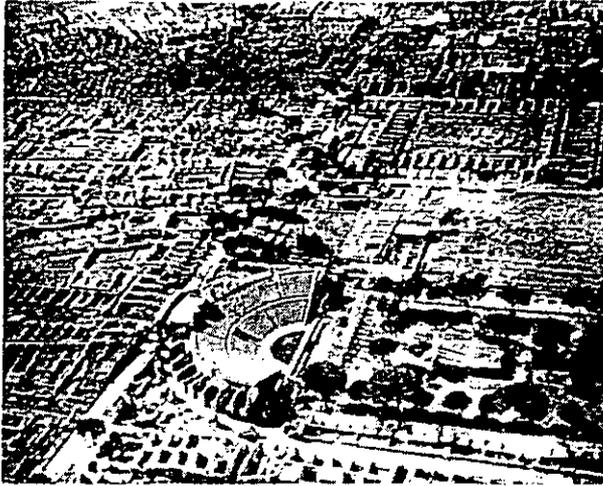
White city   sunny (gessoed surface) overexposed, blinding blaze, vision in the desert *(ghost)*

Black city   dark, nocturnal (graphite surface), dangerous, mysterious, vision in the dark, cave, mountain dwelling *(immanent presence)*

84 Aerial view of Ostia; the central part of the city is crossed by the *decumanus maximus*; in the foreground, the amphitheatre
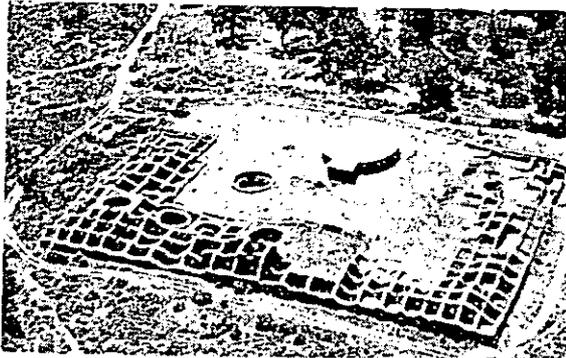
85 Aztec (New Mexico), Chaco construction

M.4a2 - City Drawings And Monoprints
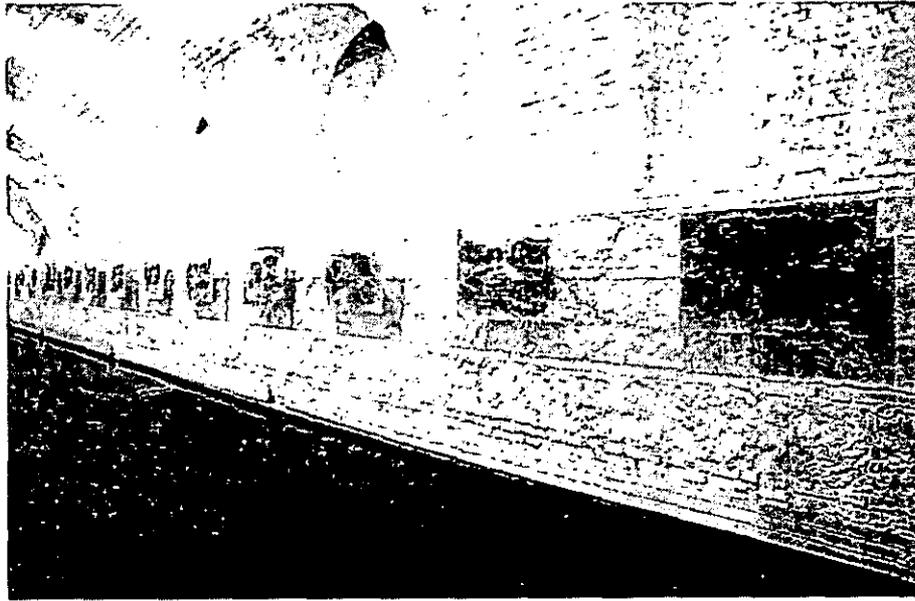
86   *14 Invisible cities*, 2000
     Mixed media on paper, 70x100 cm. each.
     View of the exhibition at the American Academy in Rome
     Photo Mimmo Capone

The work is about *im-possible, in-visible* cities, that is, imaginary places that I build upon an idea of Rome. It is not the city itself, it is rather the idea of it. All these works have an intangible quality, of a place that is neither here nor there, but somewhere in between, a space between the real and the imaginative. These cities are necessarily fragmented because they have been reconstructed after a mnemonic process, and memory works in fragments, in islands. The fragment refers also to the remaining traces from the past, as one can experience while walking through the streets of Rome, archaeological site coexisting with the modern city and heterogeneous elements from different times creating a unique dialogue between past and present. *Heterotopia* is the key word: it defines the coexistence of many places in one.

Although the fourteen cities are conceived as a series and painted all at once, they retain a distinct character among one another. I could broadly sort them in two groups: the colorful, pigmented ones, and the black and white ones. The cities with pigments are the first of the series, and comprehend at least five of them. They are mostly painted with earth colours: two of them explicitly evoke a desert landscape. One depicts a labyrinth in the middle; another recalls a scene I witnessed in Salzburg, from the top of a mountain, during the total solar eclypse in the summer 1999. It was precisely the moment when sun was obscured by the shadow of the moon and in the city below, the traffic lights turned red (fig. 85).
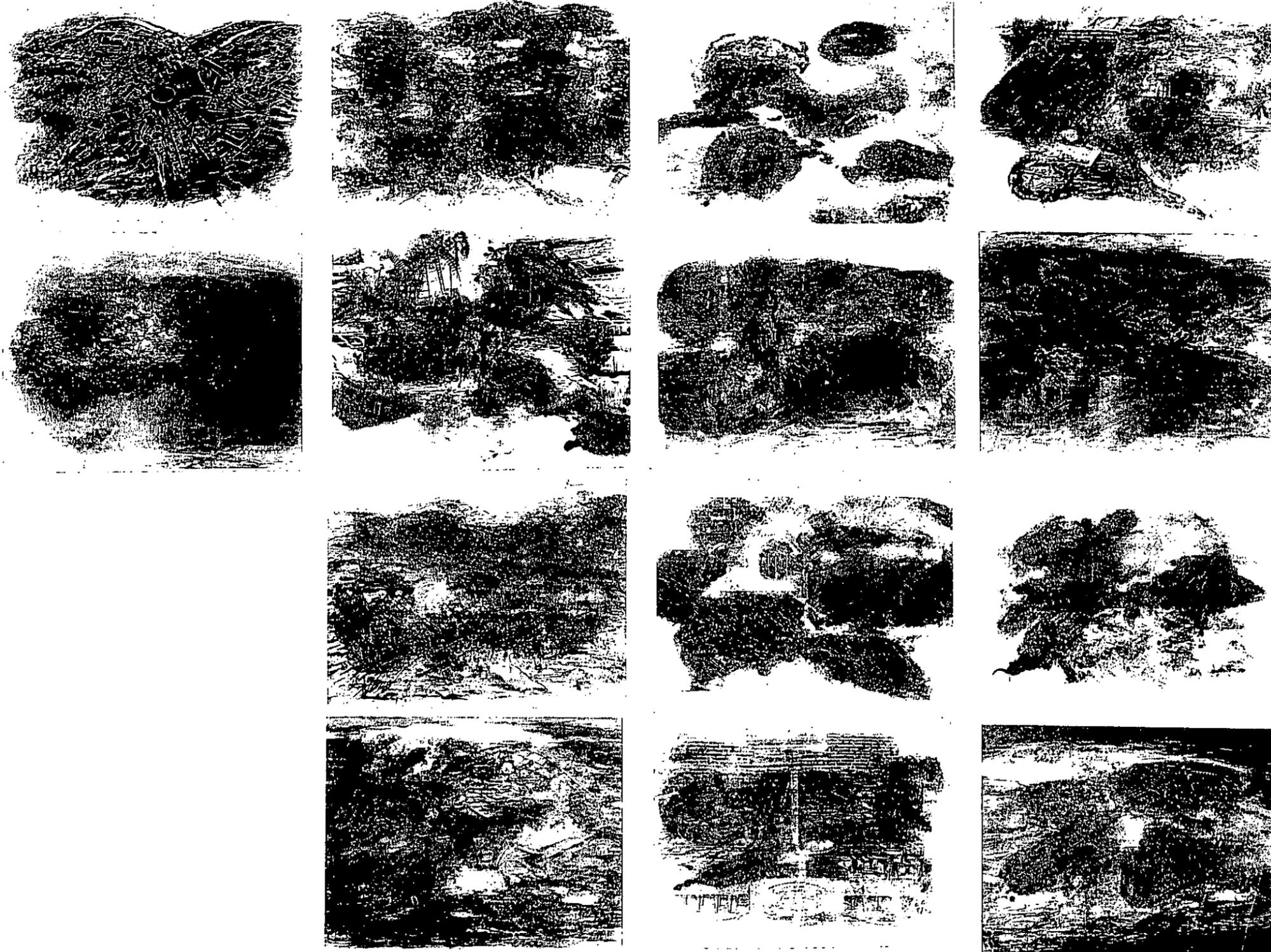
87 Complete series of *14 In-visible Cities*, 2000
Mixed media on paper
70x100 cm each
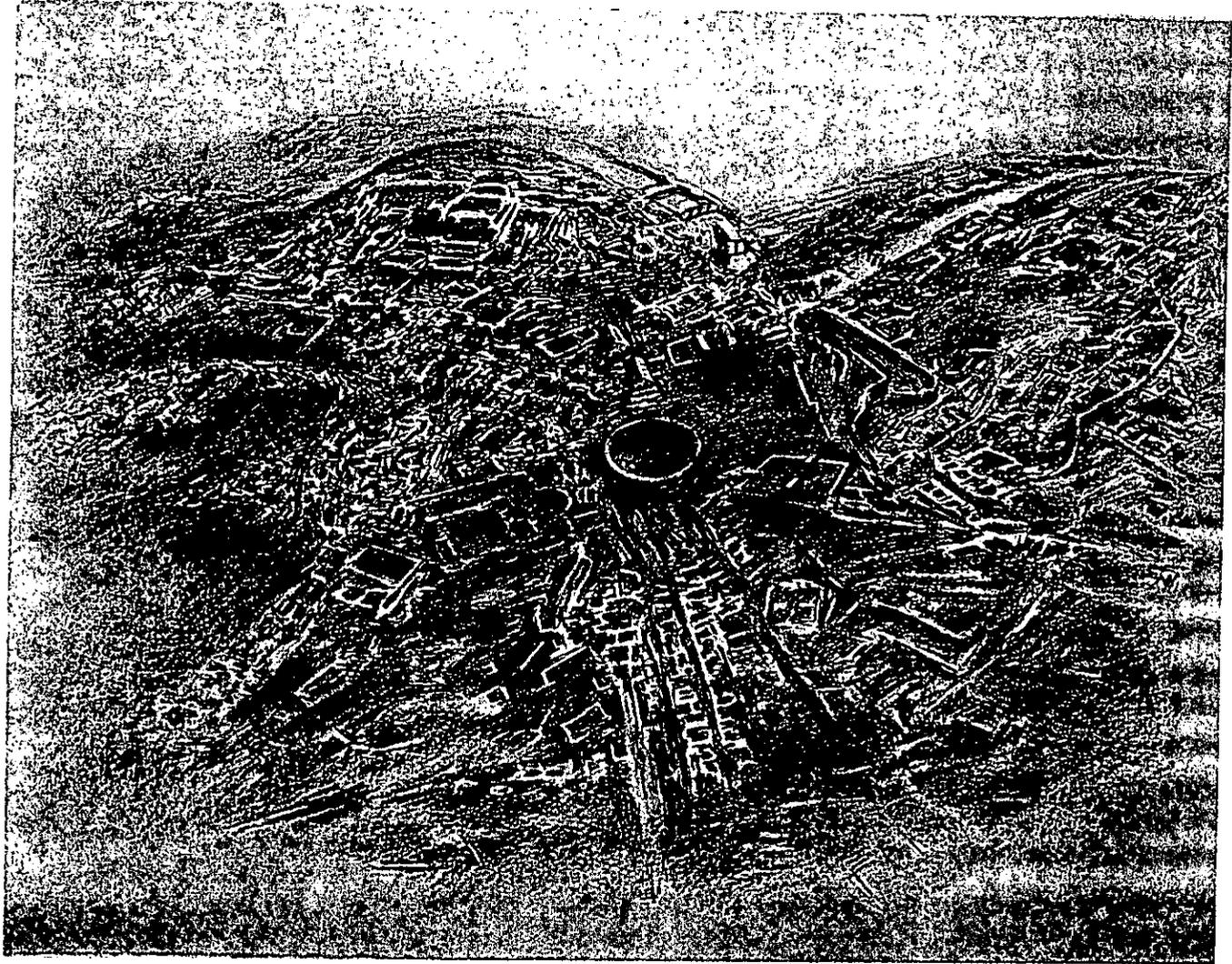
88 Bird's eye view of the area around the Colosseum, 2000
Charcoal on paper
50x70 cm
(not part of the *Invisible Cities*)

89   *Invisible City* No. 9, 2000
Mixed media on paper
70x100 cm
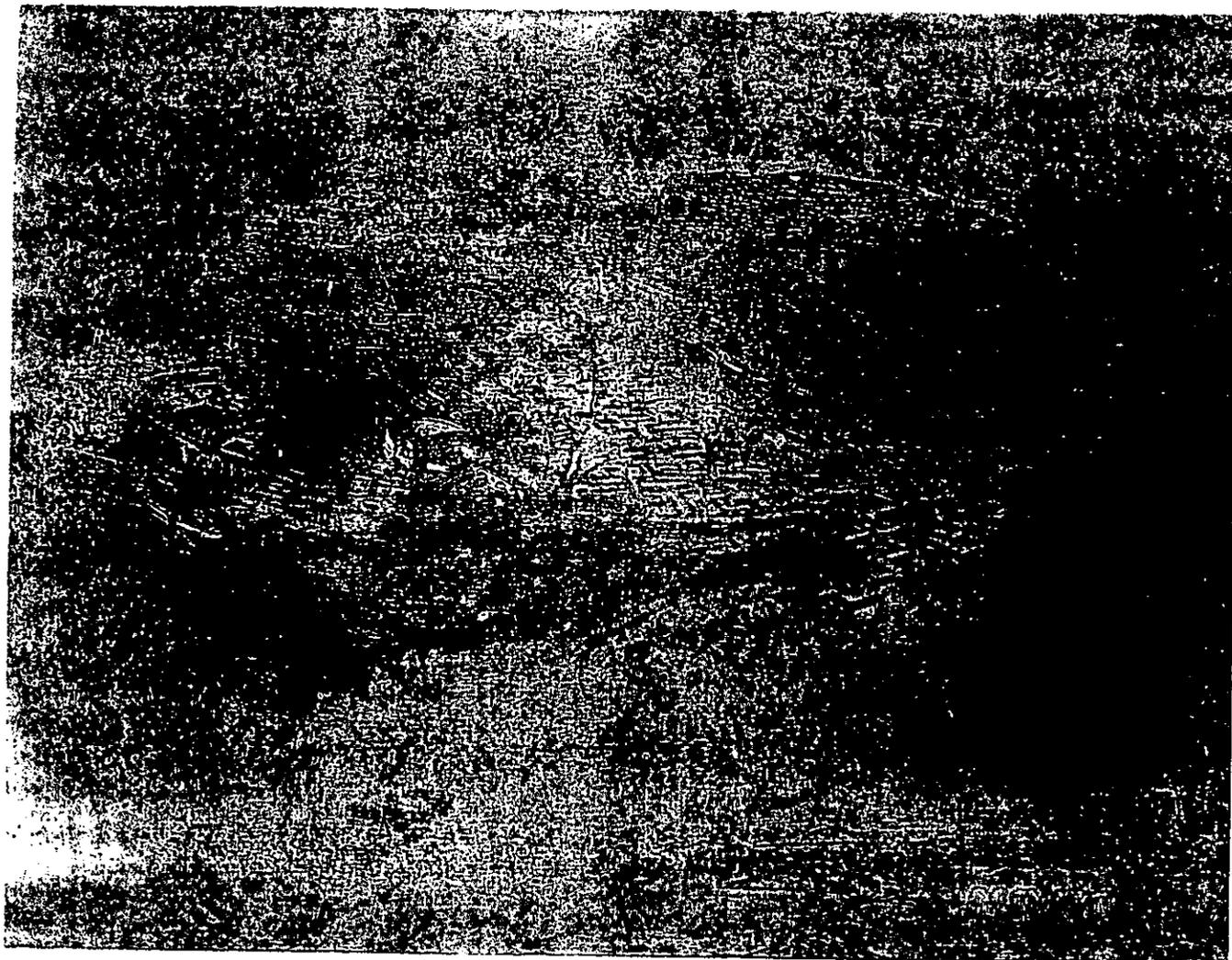
90   *Invisible City* No. 3 (The eclipse day),
      2000
      Mixed media on paper
      70x100 cm

The black and white cities are the majority of the group; the manual interventions on the transferred image get simplified as the series progresses, until it completely disappears in the last city, suggested by a few fragments floating in the white space of the paper. They recall the views of Rome drawn and etched by Piranesi at the half of the eighteenth century.

It would probably not be far from truth saying that the fourteen *Invisible Cities* drawings, whose title cites the homonymous novel by Italo Calvino (*Le Città Invisibili*), are not so much a tribute to the city of Rome, as much as to the way Piranesi looked at Rome. In other words, my perception of Rome was already mediated by the black and white vision of massive ruins depicted by Piranesi, which overlapped the modern and ancient city and created imaginary cities that, like Calvino's cities, are manifold and one at the same time. Whereas the cities described by Marco Polo to the Khan, Calvino tells us, in the end reflect his memory and nostalgia for Venice, these "invisible cities" of mine appear as many different cities but ultimately are just different faces of the same city, Rome.

Q&A

- What is common to all these works, apart from the theme of the city?

- One thing is the 'panoramic cut' of most of the paintings, from the very small ones to the largest; the use of perspective, particularly the 'bird's eye' perspective that allows me to show the thing in its structure, from a detached point of view, a position, according to Barthes, "whose great power is precisely to hold together in a simultaneous perception, moments, events, men and causes that are humanly dispersed through time, space and other orders."[29] (see **Appendix**, "Perspective", p. 28)

- Does it explain the absence of people, of a human presence? Looking at the paintings one has the impression of witnessing an abandoned place, a place that was once inhabited and was suddenly left to become a ruin.

91   *Songs from the desert*, 2001
     Acrylic on board
     18x24 cm each

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[29] Quoted in Bernard Comment, *The Panorama* (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 142.

- According to the story of the Tower of Babel, we have to imagine a city that is first built and then abandoned. Like an archaeologist who arrives on the spot and tries to reconstruct something out from what she finds, I was interested in this moment of transition, when the fact has taken place and we are confronted with what is left, its traces. It could also be a city that was bombed or devastated by a natural catastrophe (think of Pompeii today, the empty houses, streets and people forever trapped in volcanic lava), or eroded by economical and political crisis. The myth of Babel becomes synonymous with destruction and human destructive potential. It is the same idea behind the *Songs from the desert* paintings (fig. 91). - In this series we see different cities in the desert, or desert-cities; even the Colosseum looks as if it is made of sand, and so do the skyscrapers in another painting...

- Babel was supposed to be built in the middle of the desert, on a plain. And I have always been fascinated by the existing relationship between city and desert, two apparently opposite items, and yet so often related to one another. All paintings show views from a very high vantage point: even if people were down below, you probably wouldn't be able to see them.

- Another point of connection among the works is the idea of simultaneous presence of something archaic, and something contemporary in the same picture.

- This reflects the idea that things never appear to us as homogeneous, linear and separate, but rather as overlapping, merging into one another, parallel and multiple. A city like Rome is a macroscopic example. This double presence is evoked by building the image with layers of paint and semi-transparent paper (such as tissue or Japanese paper on canvas and tracing paper for the drawings), or by using contrasting media such as mechanical reproduction (monoprint, etching) in combination with freehand drawing and painting.

- These works seem to share another quality, that is their unfinishedness; the figure in the painting does not reach the edge of the canvas, for instance, or is voluntary left in a state of vagueness and ambiguity.

- That's right, and there are other forms by which 'unfinishedness' is suggested: the scaffolfing project, for instance, is left half done: the two paintings look like fragments of a bigger plan. Every piece evokes the idea of the fragment, which is peculiar to the Tower, as well as the concept of incomplete, unachieved project (cf. **L.21**).

- Finally, why fourteen cities? Is there any symbolical reference - I am thinking for instance to the stations of the cross, often a subject of contemporary painting cycles - in the number fourteen?

- No. I chose fourteen drawings out of a larger number because it fitted well in the cryptoporticus at the American Academy in Rome where part of the exhibtion was installed (fig. 104). The drawings were displayed in a row, with a gap of about 80 cm. in between, corresponding to a series of arched windows above. Within these proportions, fourteen was just the perfect number. And it sounds good, too.

M.5 - FROM THE TOP OF THE TOWER
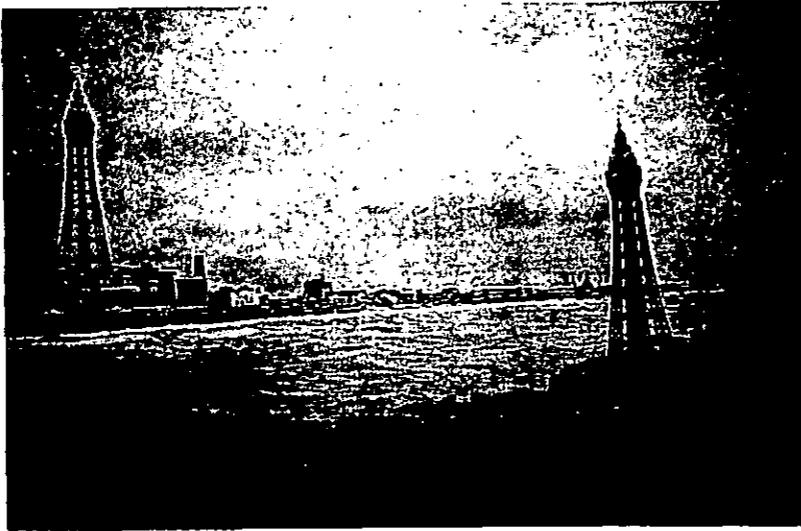
92   Blackpool Tower looking at herself, 2002
      Photomontage, b/w cibachrome

This pure – virtually empty – sign – is ineluctable, *because it means everything*. In order to negate the Eiffel Tower (though the temptation to do so is rare, for this symbol offends nothing in us), you must, like Maupassant, get up on it and, so to speak, identify yourself with it. Like man himself, who is the only one not to know his own glance, the Tower is the only blind point of the total optical system of which it is the centre and Paris the circumference. [...] This radiant position in the order of perception gives it a prodigious propensity to meaning: the Tower attracts meaning, the way a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts; for all lovers of signification, it plays a glamorous part, that of a pure signifier, i.e., of a form in which men unceasingly put *meaning* (which they extract at will from their knowledge, their dreams, their history), without this meaning thereby ever being finite and fixed: who can say what the Tower will be for humanity tomorrow?[30]

In 1964 Roland Barthes wrote his essay *The Eiffel Tower*, a few years before Luis Malle offered an amusing and delightful account of a day in Paris viewed through the eyes of a ten year old girl in his film *Zazie dans le Metro*; a long sequence from the Eiffel Tower is one of the most exhilarating moments of the movie. The adult protagonist of the film let himself be carried away by the great view of Paris visible from the top of the Tower and, in a sort of *delirium tremens*, takes the chance to digress upon philosophical fundamentals.

I wish to adopt Barthes' reading of the Eiffel Tower as a paradigm for a more general discourse on other towers – of which the Blackpool Tower is one emblematic case, for as 'minor' as it is – and a series of issues related with the *use* of the Tower as a privileged observatory: hence the concepts of *panoramism, panopticism*, simultaneous and reconstructed views, as we shall see in the following pages.

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[30] Roland Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower", in: *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 237-238.

Blackpool Tower

An English summer day at Blackpool, the major beach resort of the Northwest. The season is officially open, but we had better forget about sunbathing. The beach is deserted and cold; the water-line is covered by innumerable dead jellyfish left in by the tide. The town at our back is a little more than a long road pin-pointed with entertainment places, neon signs, colourful banners, kitsch decorations… a sort of minor Las Vegas. The Eighth Wonder seems to be a mutilated replica of the *Tour Eiffel*, that is, the Eiffel Tower minus its lower quarter and basement, slapped into the middle of a nondescript block of buildings. It has recently been The Tower's hundredth birthday, and at a closer look, while climbing by elevator to the panoramic terrace, you can see the rust beneath the layer of red paint that covers her. Once at the top, the usual souvenirs and various merchandising paraphernalia welcome you, to declare that you are now on the top of the tallest tower in the whole United Kingdom.

The Blackpool Tower is part of the "World Federation of Great Towers" (*Federation des Grandes Tours du Monde*). Members include:

1. Toronto, Canada
2. Vienna, Austria
3. Moscow, Russia
4. Seoul, South Korea
5. New York, USA
6. Cancun, Mexico
7. Tashkent, Uzbekistan
8. Canberra, Australia
9. Tokyo, Japan
10. London, England
11. Paris, France
12. Rotterdam, Holland
13. Sidney, Australia
14. Mexico City, Mexico
15. Munich, Germany
16. Montréal, Canada
17. Barcelona, Spain
18. Blackpool, England

(From an information poster at the Tower entrance).

The naïve utilitarianism of the enterprise is not separate from the oneiric, infinitely powerful function which, actually, inspires its creation: use never does anything but shelter meaning. Hence we might speak, among men, of a true Babel complex: Babel was supposed to serve to communicate with God, and yet Babel is a dream which touches much greater depths than that of the theological project; and just as this great ascensional dream, released from its utilitarian prop, is finally what remains in the countless Babels represented by the painters, as if the function of art were to reveal the profound uselessness of objects, just so The tower, almost immediately disengaged from the scientific considerations which had authorized its birth (it matters very little here that the Tower should be in fact useful), has arisen from a great human dream in which movable and infinite meanings are mingled: it has reconquered the basic uselessness which makes it live in man's imagination.
(Barthes, op. cit., p. 240)

A thick glass plate, by approximately one square meter, covers a hole in the floor. When you walk over it you feel suspended in the void. Some children are having fun jumping on top of it, as if they were testing the resistance of the glass, and so do their pachyderm fathers. Through the glass we observe the intricate net of iron beams that form the body of the Tower, the complex system of cables and pulleys that drive the elevator, the emergency stair winding around one of the legs, and everything seems so close and

so touchable, the ground itself seems so close. But we are more than 518 feet above the earth (518,9 ft. to be precise).

The view from the Tower terrace is not bad at all: this is one of the very few places, maybe the only one, from which you can see the city and the territory around it from such a high vantage. You can follow the sea to an imaginary Ireland; a bit more to the left is the panoramic ·Viennese wheel and the big switchback of the *Pleasure Beach*. Besides it, the giant curve of the "Big One" is recognizable, the original Victorian carousels with its horses, their legs stretched out parallel in front and behind, just like a late nineteenth century painting. We move around the terrace, to view the scene from four cardinal points, taking black and white pictures, fighting against the wind that keeps throwing my hair onto the camera lens.

> He opened his eyes and found that he was looking away from the Tower and out into the world: and it had changed in nature. It had bent itself into a sort of bowl, detailed here, sweeping up beyond that to a blue rim.[31]

What is the use of this tower? There is no use apart from its attraction-tourist function. Was the original tower of any practical use? All we know is that they wanted to build a name for themselves. Is that enough to be considered a concrete function?

"Even before it was built, it was blamed for being useless, which, it was believed at the time, was sufficient to condemn it..." - writes Roland Barthes analysing one of the main characteristics of the Eiffel Tower ("this kind of total monument"): its *uselessness*.

A condemnation which provoked the passionate answer of its creator, Gustave Eiffel, in defence of the supposedly scientific use of the Tower: "aerodynamic measurements, studies of the resistance of substances, physiology of the climber, radio-electric research," etc. In reality, the uselessness of the monument is precisely its real "use", that is a mythical, *imaginific* one. The utilitarian pretext is "nothing in comparison to the great imaginary function which enables man to be strictly human. [...] This double movement is a profound one: architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of convenience."[32]

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[31] Koohlaas (OMA), *S, M, L...*, p. 1094.
[32] Barthes, op. cit., p. 239.
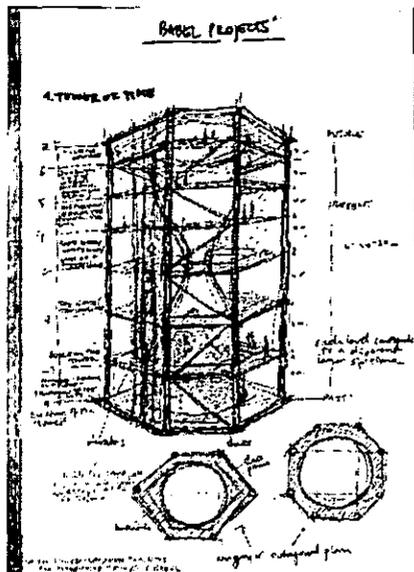
Panorama*: a building in which a painting referred to as a panorama is exhibited, that is to say painted on the inside wall of a rotunda, covered by a cupola or cone-shaped roof. These paintings are faithful reproductions of what a place looks like when viewed from all angles and from as far as the eye can see. To that end, the spectator is placed on a platform or circular gallery that simulates a tower and that is located at the centre of the rotunda; the light flows in from above, through an area of frosted glass fitted to the lower part of the roof so that it falls onto the painting. A huge parasol, suspended from the timbers above the platform, which is greater than in diameter, keeps the spectator in the dark and at the same time conceals the sources of light.[33]

*Derived from the Greek, it literally means "see all".

93   Sketch for a panorama building, from
      the *Red Books* imaginary projects, 2001
      Ink on paper, 29x21 cm

I realized that my painting *You Are Not Here* (**Appendix**, p. 24) was acting as a panorama when I noticed that people would point out places they knew or thought they recognized in the painted urban fabric of Rome. Hence the title, an ironic reference to the street map indication "you are here" to suggest that supposedly recognizable places are, in fact, deceptive: the image of Rome taken as a model is that of an eighteenth century city, when it was still a harbour on the River Tiber and the area around the Vatican was countryside. Nevertheless, the major monuments are still visible in quite the same way as they were three hundred years ago; I suspect, then, that most of the viewer's pleasure of searching for reference points consists precisely in his or her ability to find what is left from the past.

> [...] This activity of the mind, conveyed by the tourist's modest glance, has a name: decipherment. What, in fact, is a *panorama*? An image we attempt to decipher, in which we try to recognize known sites, to identify landmarks. Take some views of Paris taken from the Eiffel Tower; here you make out the hill sloping down from Chaillot, there the Bois de Boulogne; but where is the Arc de Triomphe? You don't see it, and this absence compels you to inspect the panorama once again, to look for this point which is missing in your structure; your knowledge (the knowledge you may have of Parisian topography) struggles with your perception, and in a sense, that is what intelligence is: to *reconstitute*, to make memory and sensation cooperate so as to produce in your mind a simulacrum of Paris, of which the elements are in front of you, real, ancestral, but nonetheless disoriented by the total space in which they are given to you, for this space was unknown to you. (...) we must find signs within it, a familiarity proceeding from history and from myth.[34]

One of the requisites of the traditional nineteenth century panorama was its illusionistic character: what the viewer saw in those representations of cities had to be as close as possible to reality; everything, from the lighting to the set up of the circular room designed to contain the painting, had to create the illusion of a real city, complete and unquestionable. But I would like to focus on another, more conceptual aspect of panoramas, and specifically what is known as *panopticism*, which designates a particular view of the city: an all-embracing, comprehensive, totalising view from above, as the terms *Rundblick* (circular gaze) and *Überblick* (gaze from above) suggest.

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[33] *Dictionary of Building Terms*, vol.III (Paris, 1881-2), quoted in Comment, *The Panorama*, p. 7.
[34] Barthes, op.cit., pp. 243-244.
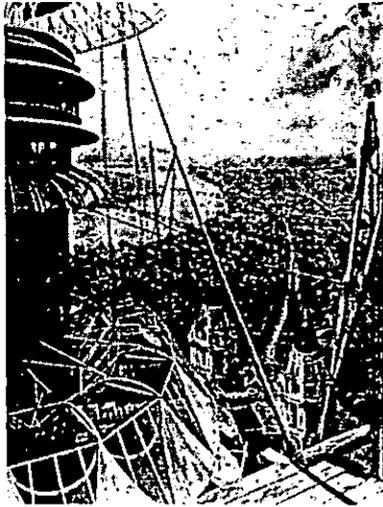
The word *panorama* was soon used to designate an elevated, overarching position. The notion of the *Rundblick* was extended or passed on to that of the *Überblick*, the gaze from above. The year 1783 saw the first flight in a hot-air balloon; it was to have a profound effect on how the individual perceived the world. Furthermore, there was a reversal in the fortunes of *towers*: they were no longer or not only *awesome symbol's of God's power, but became raised vantage-points.* The appearance of vertiginous towers allowed individuals to discover a territorial totality of which they had nothing but a fragmented idea from the ground.[35]

94   Thomas Hornor's view of London from the painter's platform, from Rudolph Ackerman's *Graphic Illustrations of the Colosseum, Regent's Park,* 1829[1]

Not only the spectator is able to see everything from above, but s/he is able to see all from one point. We may think here of the gaze of God or the angels onto the Tower and the city of Babel, or the gaze of the builders from the Tower onto the city.
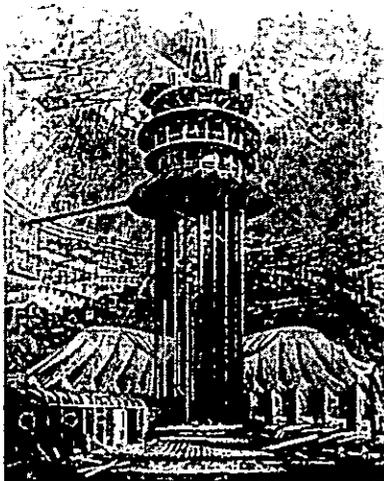
To visit the Tower, then, is to enter into contact not with a historical Sacred, as it is the case for the majority of monuments, but rather with a new Nature, that of human space: the Tower is not a trace, a souvenir, in short a culture; but rather an immediate consumption of a humanity made natural by that glance which transforms it into space.[36]

95   The London Coliseum Tower for the multi-storey panorama, from Ackerman's *Graphic Illustrations*

Barthes goes on saying that "the Tower materializes an imagination which has had its first expression in literature." In fact, much before technology allowed the construction of vanguard towers (of which the Eiffel is precursor and symbol), in nineteenth century literature we find a number of examples of powerful fantasies on panoramic views, or views from above, like the bird's eye view of Paris evoked by Victor Hugo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Michelet's *Tableau Chronologique* and Edgar Allan Poe's *Landscaped Garden*, in which the narrator assumes precisely the point of view of God, "as if we could imagine the scene viewed as a whole from some point way above the heavens."[37]

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[35] Comment, op. cit., p. 141. My italics.
[36] Barthes, op. cit., pp. 141-142.
[37] Comment, op. cit., p. 142.
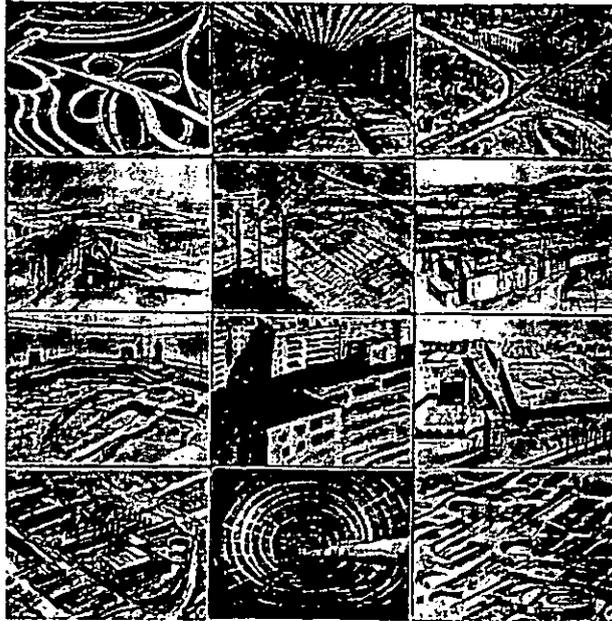
96 *Heaven is a Stranger on Earth*, 2001
Acrylic and felt pen on canvas (12 pieces)
72x72 cm (whole)

Parallel passage to the ode on the Arc de Triomphe. Humanity is apostrophised:
As for your cities, Babels of monuments
Where all events clamor at once,
How substantial are they? Arches, towers, pyramids-
I would not be surprised if, in its humid incandescence,
The dawn one morning suddenly dissolved them,
Along with the dewdrops on sage and thyme.
And all your noble dwellings, many-tiered,
End up as heaps of stone and grass
Where, in the sunlight, the subtle serpent hisses.[38]

The panoptic point of view was the typical expression of a particular political utopia, as Michel Foucault described in *Surveiller et punir*: from the logic of spectacle passed down to us from Antiquity (temples, theatres, circuses where "the inspection of a small number of objects is made available to a multitude of men") we arrive at modern logic, in which, at the other extreme, it is a question of "procuring for a small number of people, or just one person, the simultaneous view of a great multitude."[39]

> The plan of the Panopticon prison is circular. At the periphery there is an annular building. At the centre is a tower, pierced with many windows. The building consists of cells. Each cell has two windows: one in the outer wall of the cell allows daylight to pass into it; another in the inner wall looks into the tower – or rather is looked upon by the tower, for the windows of the tower are dark, and the occupants of the cells cannot know who watches, or if anyone watches. Feeling watched at all times, each prisoner internalizes a jailor who never sleeps.[40]

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[38] Victor Hugo, "Dieu-L'Ange," in *La Fin de Satan: Dieu* (Paris, 1911), pp.475-476. Cited in Benjamin, *Arcades*, [C9,3].
[39] Comment, op. cit., p. 140.
[40] Victor Burgin, *Some Cities* (London: Reaktion, 1996), p. 88.

103
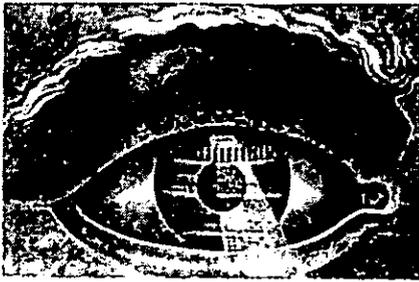
97 Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, "Coup d'Oeil de
    Théâtre du Besançon," from *L'Architecture
    considerée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs
    et de la législation* (Paris, 1804)., engraving,
    25.7x38.7 cm.
    Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

This particular milieu reached its zenith in the latter half of the eighteenth century – that is, the period during which the panorama was born – when a profusion of utopian and circular architecture was populating the dreams of town planners.

The most notable examples are to be found in France: the architectural plans of Claude Nicolas-Ledoux for the Salines Royals d'Arc-et-Senans and the city of Chaux (fig.98), "which borrow from the circle or sphere in order to assert a symbolic system that represents power, order and control ('placed at the centre of the spokes, frame, nothing escapes surveillance'),"[41] a perfect blend of autarchic community, city-state and *cité imaginaire*. A poetic counterpart can be found in his engraving of an eye in which the pupil and iris contain a circular theatre (fig. 97): is the eye the source of the theatre or is it a mirror of it? Probably both things, thus leaving the artist-viewer in an ambiguous position. His colleague Etienne-Louis Boullée commented on his *Cenotaph to Newton*, thinking of the imaginary spectator: "He is obliged, as though by a hundred great forces, to stay in the place assigned to him, which, occupying the centre, keeps him at a distance that favours the illusion. He can enjoy it *without coming to any harm* by going too close out of desire to satisfy a vain curiosity."[42]
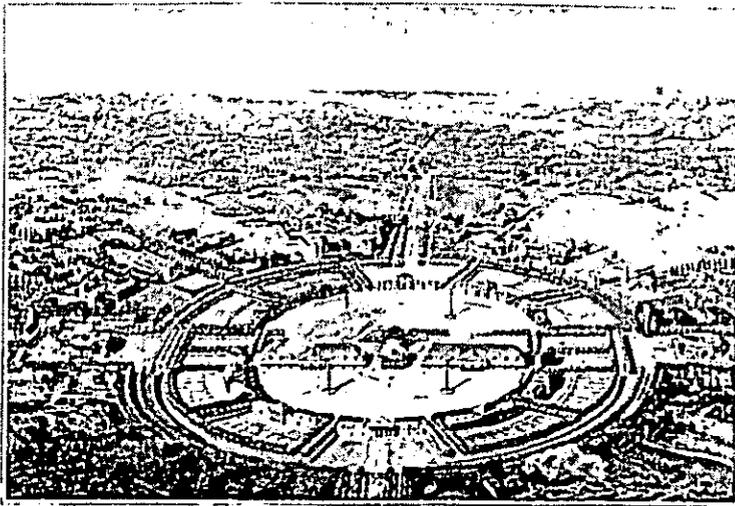
98 Claude-Nicoals Ledoux, perspective
    view of Chaux: la Saline royale,
    Arc-et-Senans, 1804

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[41] Comment, op. cit., p. 139.
[42] Ibid.

Circular panoramas, globe towers and spherical constructions, mostly ephemeral, were popular in the nineteenth and twentieth century, often in conjunction with Universal Exhibitions and similar giant fairs: among them were the Manhattan Crystal Palace containing the Latting Observatory (350 feet high), 1853; the Trylon and Perisphere, theme exhibit of 1939 World's Fair; the Globe Tower, 1906 (fig. 99), artful mix of the two archetypes of tower and sphere; and more recently, *La Géode* in the Parc de La Villette in Paris.

99   Globe Tower, second version.
     Advertisement in the *New York Herald*,
     May 6, 1906

100 *The Panorama of the City of New York*,
     Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows
     Corona Park, New York

The panorama of New York City (fig. 100) is an example of the broad sense acquired by the word *panorama* today: in this case the panorama is a plastic tri-dimensional model (cf. also the model of ancient Rome, 1935, Museo della Civiltà Romana, fig. 101), visible from a platform running all around the huge area where the model is displayed. The light in the room changes approximately every five minutes to give the impression of time passing; when darkness falls, the miniature city turns its lights, offering a view that is comparable to that seen from a plane taking off at night.

The Panorama of the
City of New York
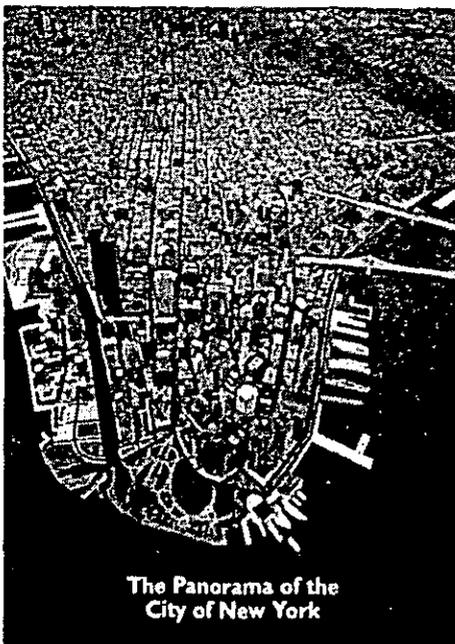
101 Italo Gismondi, reconstruction model of ancient
     Rome as it might have appeared in 6th century
     A.D., Museo della Civiltà Romana, Rome, 1937-
     1973 (alabaster plaster)

Is a panoptic view of the world still proposable nowadays? It has been suggested that after Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (the literary work that ideally opens the twentieth century; along with Joyce's *Ulysses*) such a view has been forever compromised, yielding to the supremacy of the *fragment over the whole*: "The panoramic vision is of course suggested or promised on more than one occasion, but for the narrator-hero it is always the *occasion for failure*; he neither visits nor experiences any of the elevated sites [...] that would have given him a view of the whole expanse from a fixed, anchored position. [...] From then on [the world depicted] was presented in an incomplete, variable and contradictory way, through the accumulation of points of view that shifted and sometimes inverted themselves, in a kind of dance that knew no other truth than that of juxtaposition in time."[43]

The "Panorama room" I presented in Preston in 2001 could be read as a tentative answer to this question; not being a panorama in its proper sense, but merely a fragment of it, or rather the *possibility of a panorama*. Whether failed panorama or potential panorama it questions the practicability of a panoptic view.
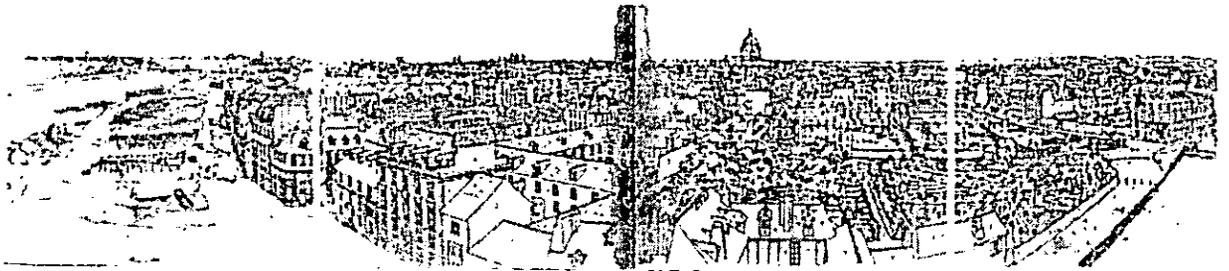
102   Henry Aston Barker, preliminary drawing for the *Panorama of Paris between the Pont-Neuf and the Louvre*, 1802, pencil with red, blue and white high-lights, eight sheets, 36.5x426.5 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London
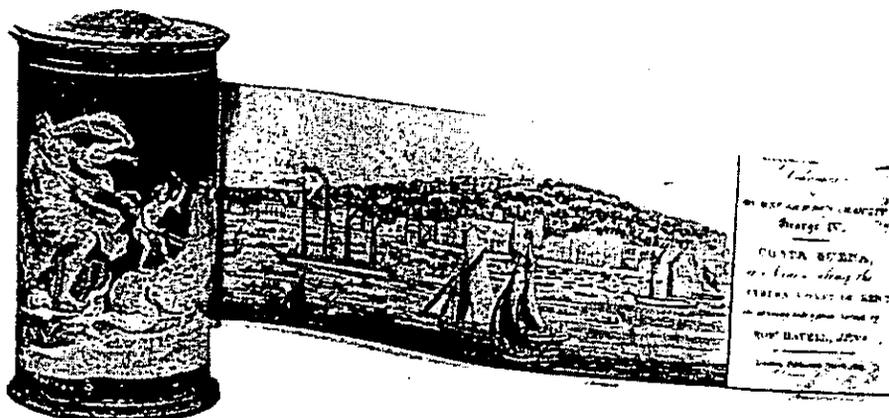
103   Robert Havell Jr, *Costa Scena, or a Cruise along the Southern coast of Kent*, 1823, portable moving panorama, coloured aquatint in laquered case, 8.3x554 cm. Guildhall Library, Corporation of London

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[43] Ibid., p.143. My italics.
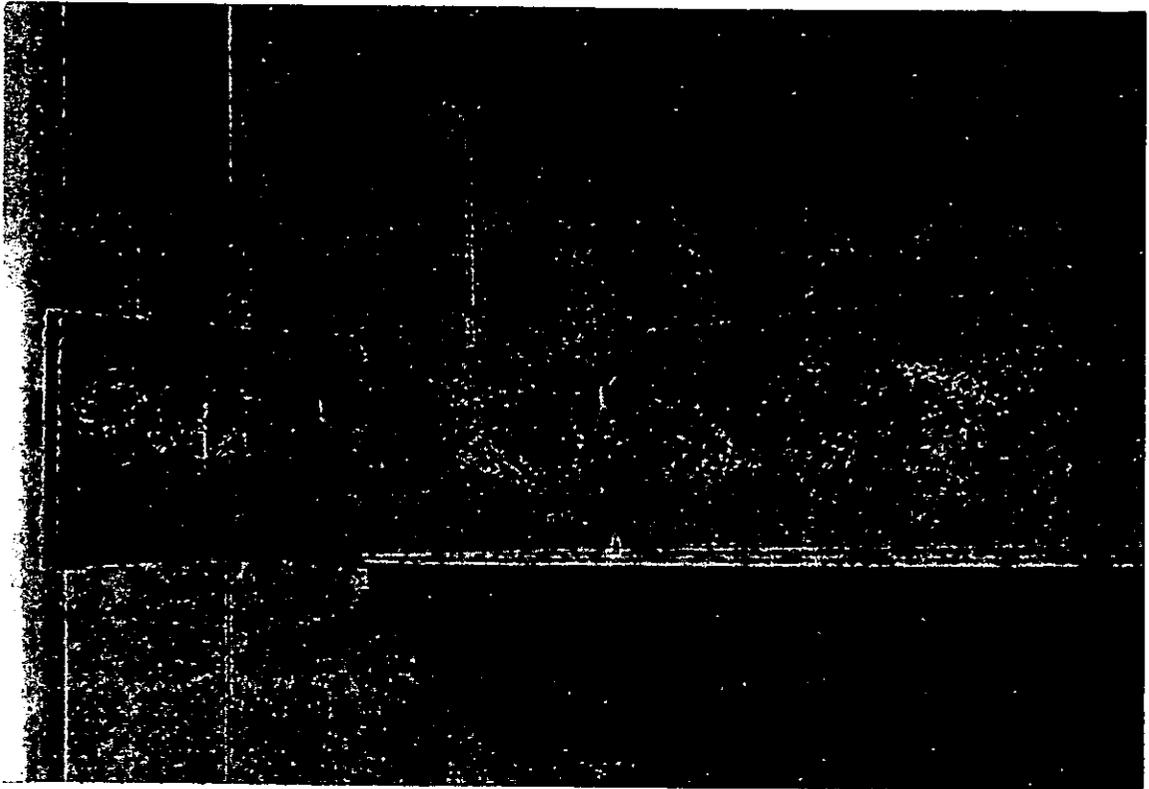
104 *Panorama model,* Detail of the
installation, University of Central
Lancashire, 2001

Description of the installation

     The panorama consists of a long strip of yellow tracing paper, the kind used by American architects: one of the extremities is fixed to a wooden beam at the entrance of the room; the other end is rolled up like a scroll, revealing that the drawing continues inside. From the outside, before entering the room, the viewer can see the first piece of the panorama within the gap between the beam and the wall; as the panorama is drawn on semi-transparent paper it can be viewed by both sides. Inside the room it follows the wall, slightly curving at the corners; running along a shelf and ending at the other end, thus not forming a complete circle but only an irregular semi-circle. It is located at an average eye level. This is actually a *model* for a bigger panorama (it does not matter here whether the project will be realized or not), suggested by the presence of two tiny human-like figures made of black cardboard, which give the piece an unexpected, gigantic scale.

     The subject of the panorama is a city seen from a very high vantage point: it's a city in fragments,[44] divided into regular fields that are constantly repeated with different colours and marks. At the end of the panorama, two small cardboard pieces pinned to the wall display a reference text (see **Appendix**, pp. 31-32).

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[44] From the tri-dimensional panoramic reconstruction of ancient Rome by Gismondi, Museo della Civiltà Romana (Museum of Roman Civilization) in Rome, fig. 101.
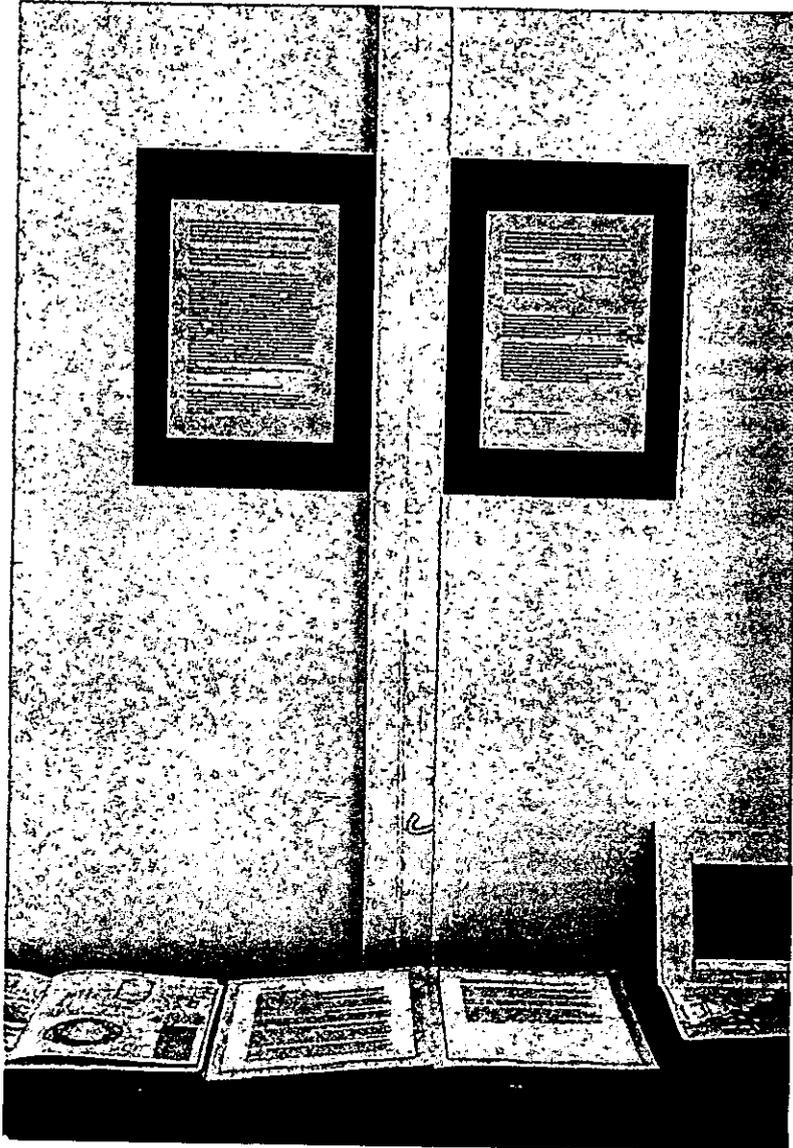
105 Detail of the installation, UCLAN, Preston, 2001

A table is placed next to the panorama and below the text; on top of it, red covered books illustrate projects for imaginary panorama settings. On the same wall to the right, a bigger panorama is displayed: it consists of silkscreens on paper and canvas assembled together (fig. 106). There are scenes of scaffolding, bombed cities, modern towers and a brick wall pattern inferred by an ancient cuneiform Babylonian table. The colours are sombre, in the tones of black, grey and brown. Outside the room, a sequence of postcard-size acrylic paintings runs along the wall beside the entrance: the paintings are called "Postcards from Babel", and each of them is accompanied by a small text underneath like a message written on the back of the (hypothetical) postcard (fig. 107).
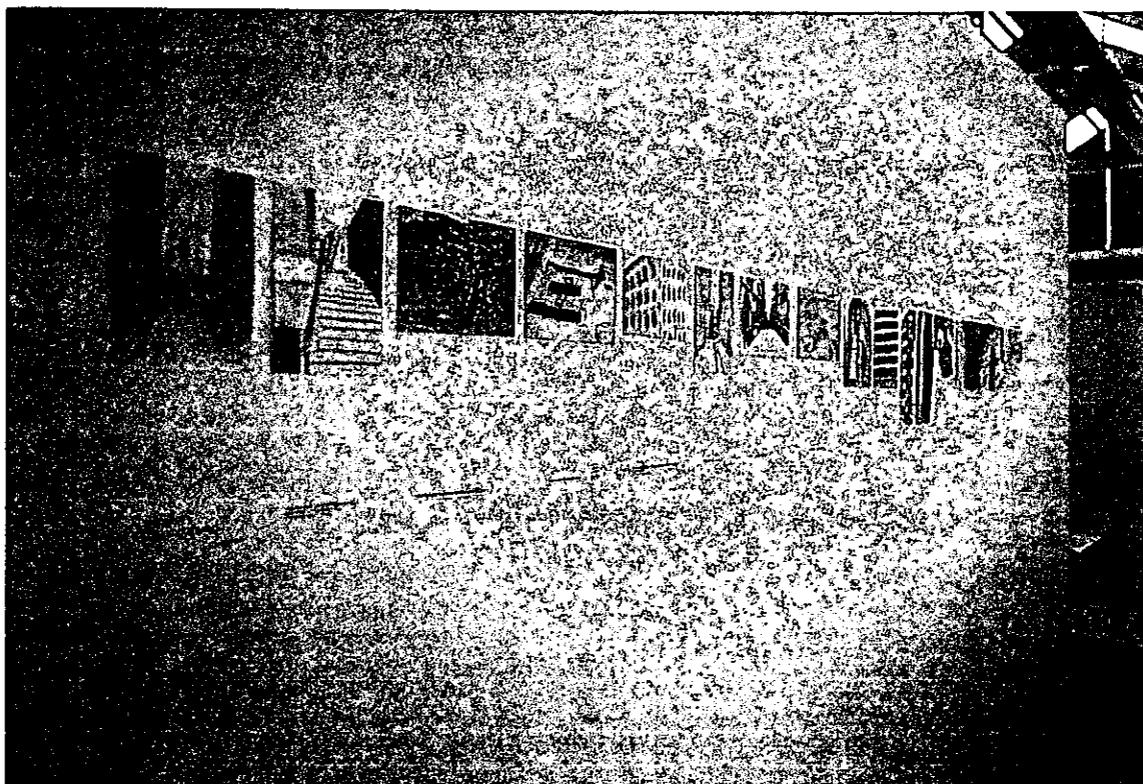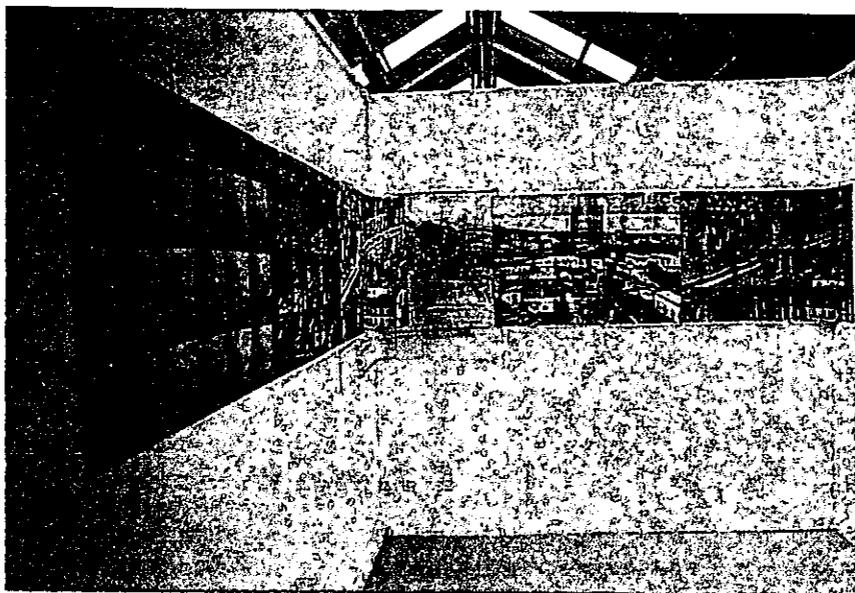
106   Study for a large panorama, 2001
       Silkscreen on paper and canvas
       Assemblage on two walls, c. 70x400 cm

107   *Postcards from Babel*, 2001
       Acrylic on paper
       Series of 15 postcard-size paintings
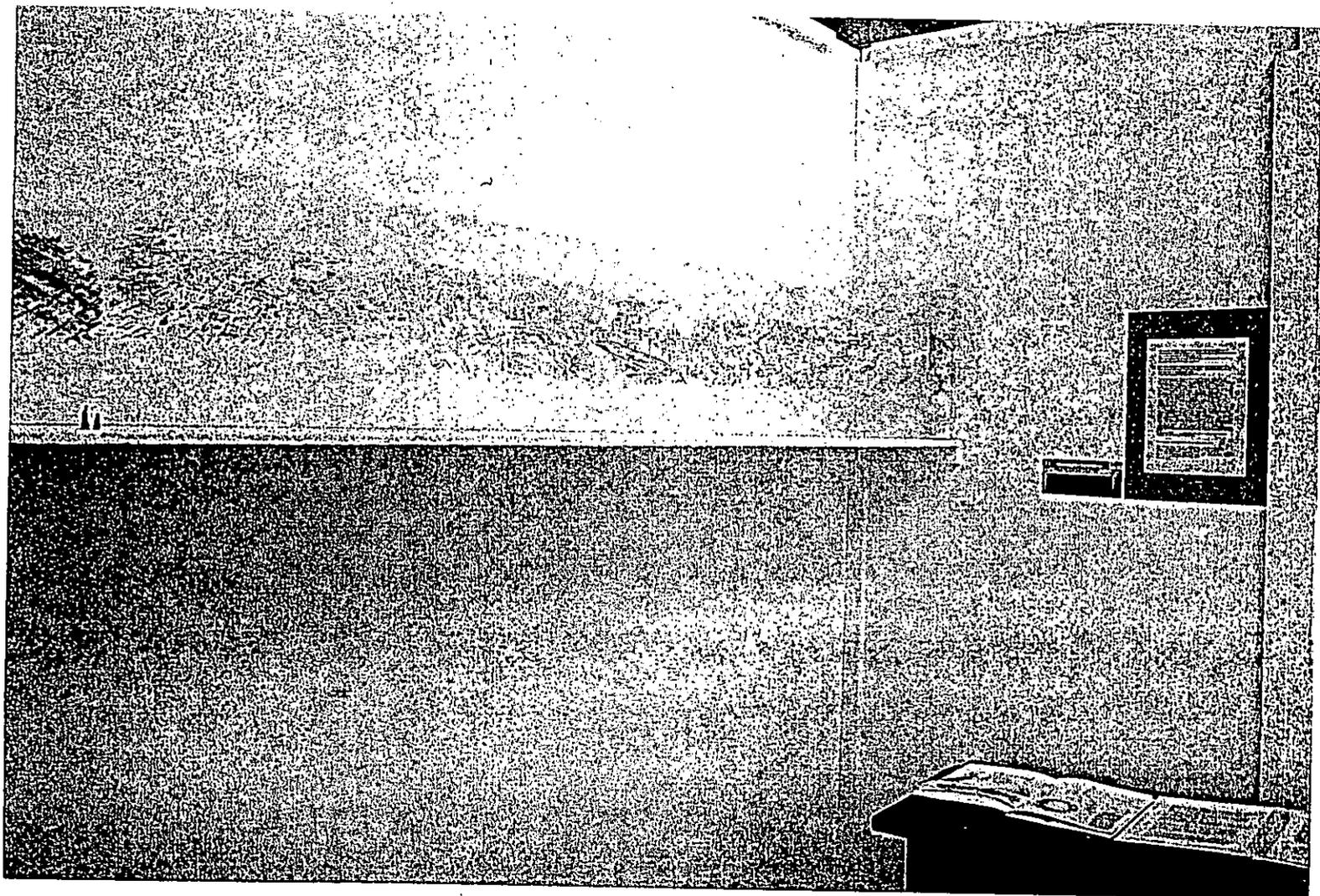
108 Panorama model, 2001
     Graphite, ink, red chalk, charcoal, white gouache on yellow tracing paper in a scroll.
     30x500 cm
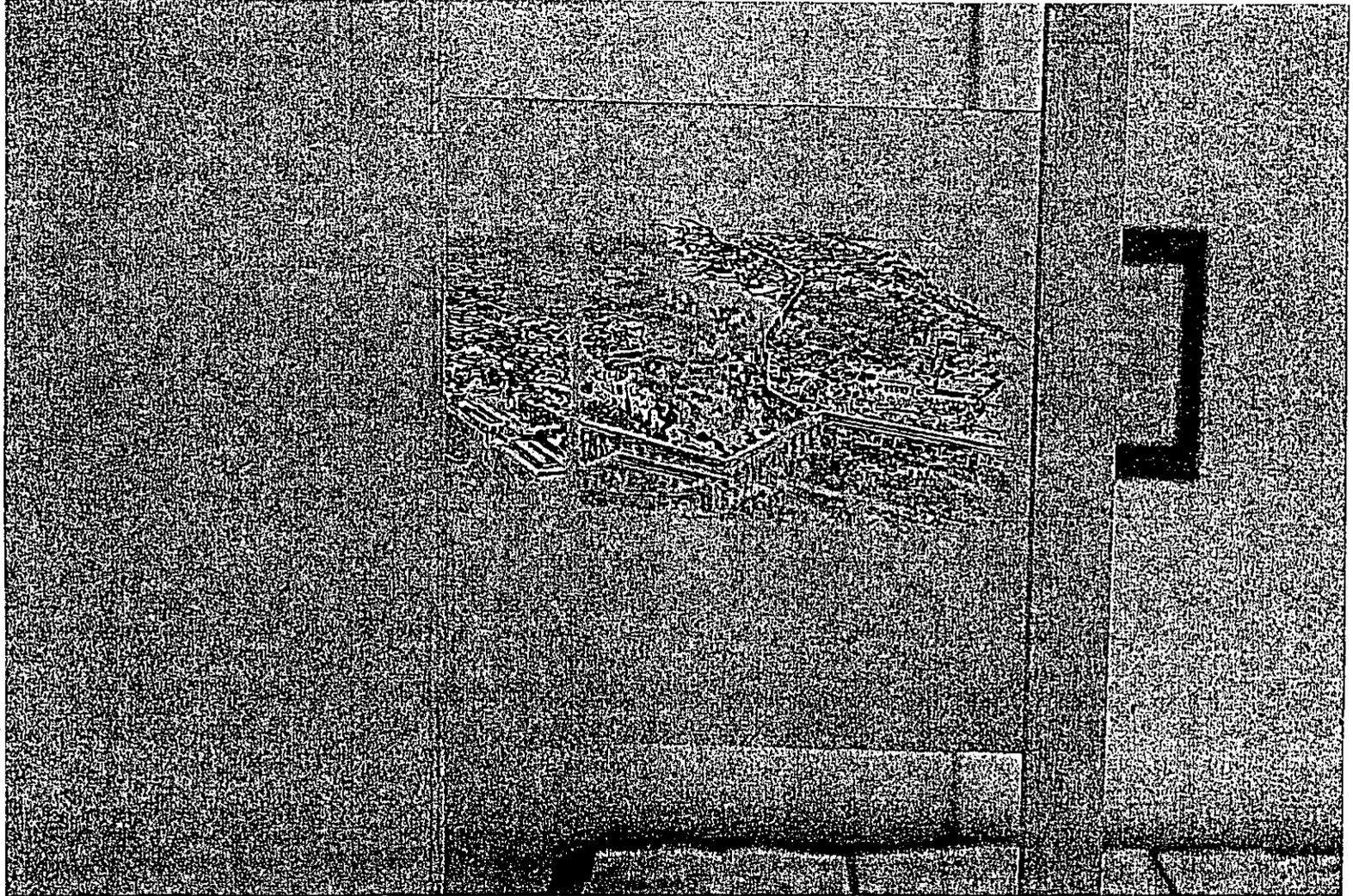
109   Detail of the Panorama, University of Central Lancashire, 2001
      Wood, drawing on tracing paper, dimensions variable

This is an anomalous panorama for at least three reasons: first, it is not circular but only curved along three walls, resembling more an unrolled scroll than a continuous, illusionist window on reality; it is closer to the nature of text than to the nature of painting.

Second, the transparent quality of the surface on which the cityscape is drawn brings to mind a younger brother of the panorama, the *diorama*, which was the direct rival when not the opposite of the conventional panorama. The original diorama (launched by Luis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and Charles-Marie Bouton in 1822) consisted of a slightly curved calico canvas made transparent with oil; this would sometimes be illuminated from the back and other times from the front, with the aid of coloured filters to create the impression of a changing natural light on its cityscape or landscape.

Third, its thorough lack of realism or illusionist detail does not deceive the eye to suggest that one is facing a real city. In fact, the contrary is true: what we see is an imaginary city, a city in fragments, an *idea* of a city. It does not show a singular point of view either: at each segment of city the vantage point shifts, and is different from the preceding one. The drawing, although meticulous and fastidious, only outlines the buildings, the bridges and the river: there are no shadows, no volumes, the signs are hollow and the figures transparent like the support on which they are drawn. The ancient city is merely a trace in the sky, a floating ghost.

This panorama is easily transportable once is rolled inside a proper case, like the portable moving panorama by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878), *Costa Scena, or a Cruise along the Southern Coast of Kent* (fig. 103).

M.5b - De-*Tour* (Variation On A Moving Diorama)

Construction: Nomadisme épique exploratorisme urbain art des voyages et des promenades.
Apollinaire, *L'Antitradition Futuriste*, 1913

Construction: *Epical nomadism urban exploratorism art of journeys and walks.*

To understand the city is to recognize a unity that is bound together on many levels. This symbolic city, although dependent on and embedded in the physical city, exists on a different plane. It is a simultaneous city consisting of the connections between its people, institutions, historical events, and places. In considering the representation of such an experience, we have used the idea of a theatre as a model for the city as a collective psyche.[45]
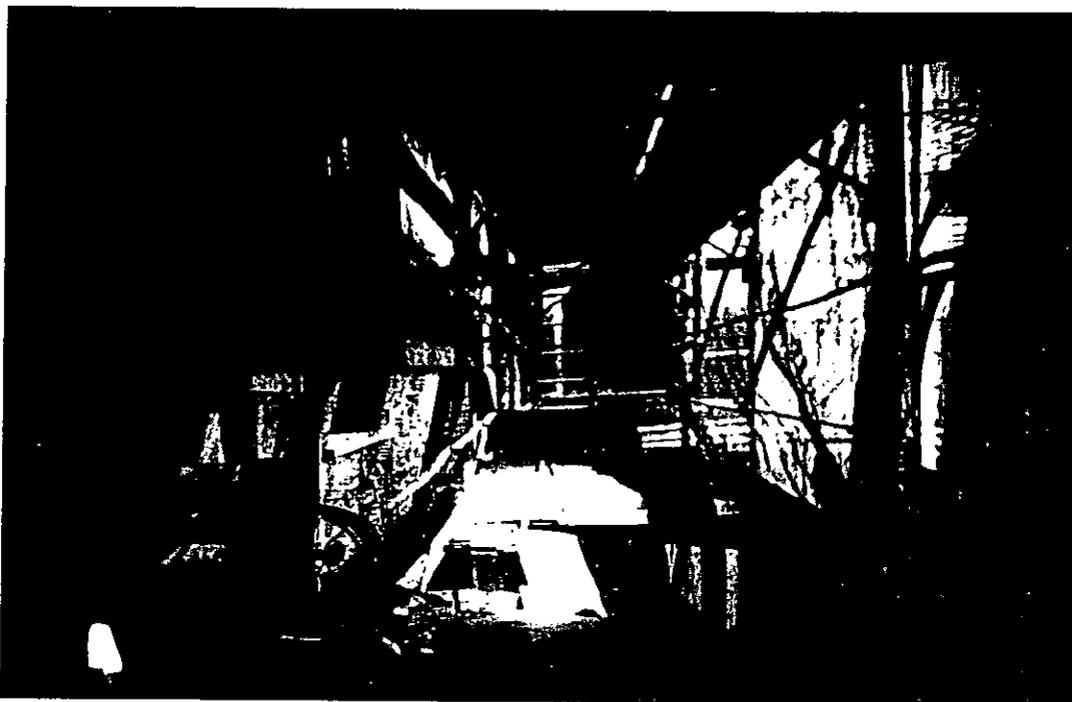
110   Still image from *De-tour*, 2001
B/w projection on a table-size mixed media installation

Text at the entrance of the room

Somewhere in the Tower there is a room where painting upon painting is stacked against the walls. It is called the "picture gallery" even though hardly anyone knows what the paintings represent. It has also been said that the picture gallery in certain hours of the day becomes a real window on the world outside and inside: then, it discloses the many faces of the Tower to those wandering visitors who hapazardly find it in the midst of the labyrinthine rooms. The grandiose, cavernous spaces where people suddenly disappear in their smallness; the low and dark dwellings of the basements; the series of bookshelves in the infinite library; the open spaces of the higher levels, where glass panels substitute for the heavy walls of the lower floors; the upper floor terraces where the population of Babel contemplates the city at the feet of the Tower, feeling like eagles on the top of an impenetrable mountain.

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[45] Newark Metametrics, "The Hidden city", from *City Speculations*, p. 61

Inside the room

(whispering voices)

What is it? It's a building.
What sort of building? It's hard to tell. It's as tall as deep, circular and square, still and yet mobile.
It looks like a city to me. It's a city, too.
Is it inhabited? Oh yes, thousands, hundreds of thousands of people are living there.
Where are they? I don't see them. Many have gone already.
Are they born there? No. They all come from different places, they all speak different languages. It was them who built it.
What for? Apparently, to make a name for themselves.
Did they succeed? It was a wreck. They realized they were all different. Different names, different ways of naming things. They couldn't stand it. They hated each other.
And now? Now…they are going to rebuild it.

111   Six stills from *De-Tour*, 2001
      B/w slide projection on mixed media installation

Description of the installation

The room is dark; the only source of light comes from a slide projector that hits a small installation arranged on a suspended surface, about one meter above floor level. A series of black/white slide projections of buildings taken in various cities establishes a moving narrative within the framework of the displayed objects.

The projector stands at about 45° and two meters from the installation. There are eighty slides running on a loop, each of which is visible for three seconds. The slides are mostly taken in Preston, Manchester, London, Rome and Paris. The images are modern, often impersonal and 'ugly' buildings, ancient ruins and underground places.

They produce the awkward impression of an interior that sometimes changes into an outside place and vice versa. It is like someone is making a journey, moving from an underground, cave-like and claustrophobic room to lofty, open spaces and back again into dark interiors, through stairs, passageways, doors, corridors, tunnels.

The presence of the objects against which the slides are projected gives a tri-dimensional quality to the pictures and emphasizes their architecture turning them into 'virtual places.'

The original installation is a table-size model looking like a theatre set. Paintings, objects and clay figures are arranged on a flat surface in a dark room. The paintings are stacked against the background wall as if waiting to be displayed or stored. The biggest canvas is a miniature version of the *Vertical City* painting (**Appendix - M.5c1**, pp. 33-37), an image of buildings falling from a broken wall.
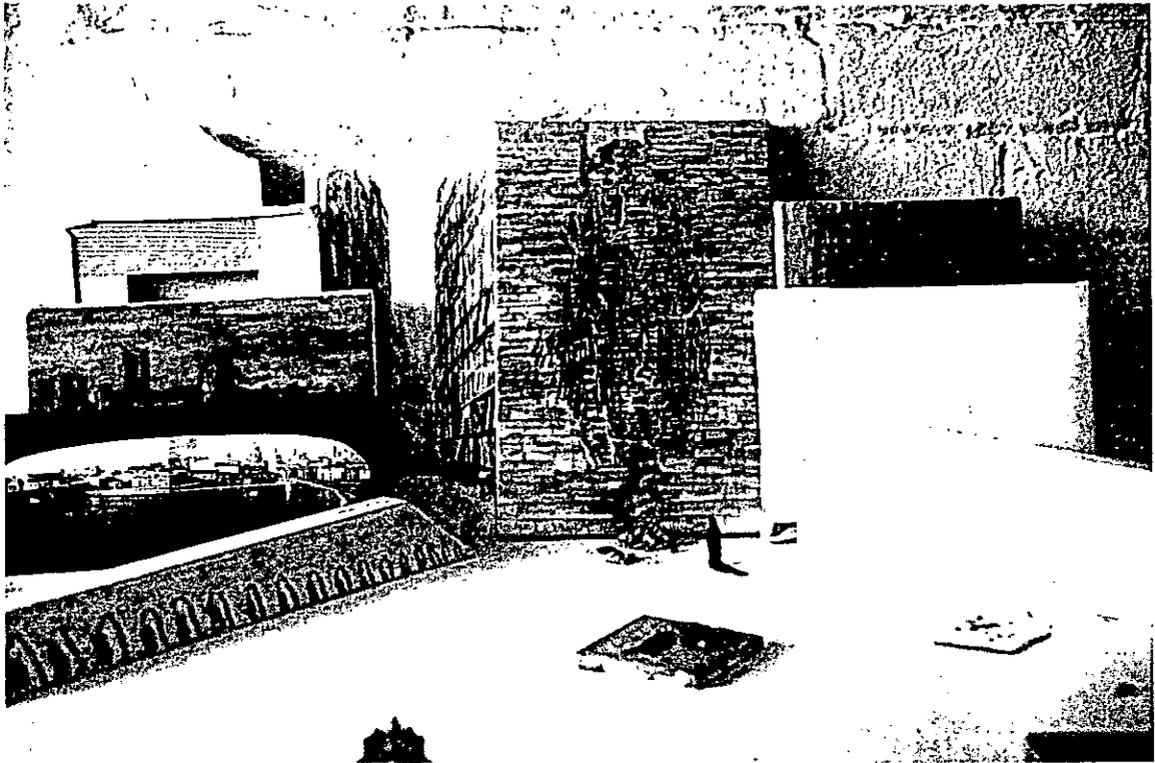
112 The table installation as it looks without slide
     projections, 2001

Other canvases are leaning with their faces against the wall, one over other. I am alluding to those paintings of imaginary picture galleries crammed with all sort of views and antiquary objects that were in vogue in the late eighteenth century (like the painting by Zoffany at the National Gallery in London, or the numerous representations by John Gandy at the John Soane Museum – fig. 113).

A panoramic photographic view of London taken from Southwark Bank emerges behind a white panel on the left. Next to it, a long piece of wood painted white with black arches suggest a long passageway seen in perspective like in a De Chirico 'metaphysical' painting. A central perspective is reinforced by another white panel on the opposite side converging towards the painting behind. In the middle of this 'square' a few figures modelled in clay are standing among small piles of bricks and rubble, also made of clay. This is how the installation would appear in daylight, without the simultaneous projections. In this case it would look a little more than a ruin, a nonexistent place, a site from which all life has been taken, or in which life is suspended; a deserted place.
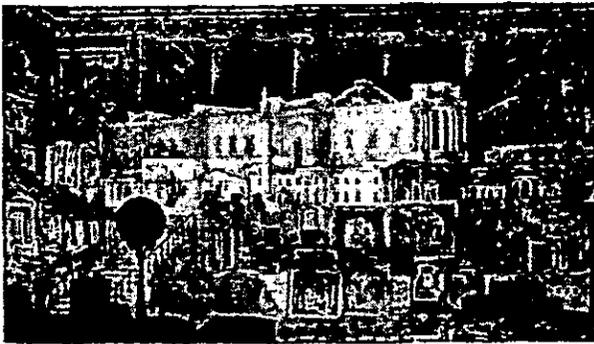
113   Joseph Michael Gandy, *Public and Private
      Buildings Executed by Sir John Soane between
      1780 and 1815*, 1818, detail

Q&A

- It seems to me that this work is particularly emblematic, in light of your research. It could be considered a summary of a series of concerns: the half-built, the unfinished, the inside-outside relationship, the historical layers, the ruin, the representation of the unrepresentable, mobility and transiency. With particular reference to the latter terms, I would use the term "magic lantern" to describe the effect that this installation produces; as a viewer I am witnessing the transformation of the place recreated in front of me by the quick succession of images evoking a movement not only in space, but in time as well. Archaic structures are mixed with modern buildings, Roman sites are juxtaposed to English suburban areas, abandoned dwellings are followed by crowded squares and so on.

- The use of the term "magic lantern" relates to a particular way of building the space of the diorama, a variation of the panorama and a predecessor of the movie theatre. Although I wasn't thinking of building a kind of diorama at first, the reference was quite obvious once the piece was finished. My method was quite intuitive: I begun by building a small installation on the table against the wall, using paintings, canvases and foam board pieces arranged one against the other. I wanted to create a narrative in an urban context. My first idea was to lay text strips under the little clay figures, such as: "He was waiting by the Tower corner", "the ruins were there too, who knows for how long" and so on. But I wanted the narrative to be visual, so then I started experimenting with the projector and the hundreds of black and white slides I had accumulated in these last three years. I was fascinated by the way the light hit objects and made them visible in different ways, according to the image projected upon, and by the magical way the slide pictures made of light take on a physical body when projected on the model. And like the Tower, when the show is over (that is, when the light of the projector is off) we are left with just a heap of ruins: nothing remains of the buildings, the towers, the places we have seen. The sequence of slides mimics the building process, and the immateriality of the projected images recalls the transient nature of the Tower.

-One moment it is there, and the next moment it is no longer there: all we have is an absence, or the presence of a memory. When the light (of the projector's lamp) is ōn, the Tower is there, you are in it; when the light is off, the Tower is gone, it's a void or a ruin. And a kind of tatty, cheap ruin, made of cardboard...

-Yes, all materials are ephemeral and extremely simple, almost ironic when compared with the grandiosity of the projected places and with the idea of the Tower itself. It's like I am saying: look, this is just a façade, there's nothing behind it, just a pile of cardboard rubble!

- Most of the places projected on the model are passages: railway stations, markets, tunnels, airport lounges, streets; the buildings are huge and anonymous office tower blocks, suburban house blocks or demolition sites. It matters little where these places are or what they represent. What matters is the

presence of all these places at the same time, and the overlapping quality they acquire in relationship to the model underneath; a stratification of data that recalls an overlay of historical events. Moreover, what is suggested here is perhaps a kind of 'tourism of non-places' where, as in Marc Augé reference to a definition by Michel de Certeau, "is to allude to a sort of negative quality of place, an absence of the place from itself [...]."[46] In this view, the slide projection becomes almost a parody of the slide show that the traveller/tourist freshly back from his/her journey delivers to friends and family.

> Space, as frequentation of *places* rather than a place, stems in effect from a double movement: the traveller's movement, of course, but also a parallel movement of the landscape which he catches only in partial glimpses, a series of 'snapshots' piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives of them, the sequencing of slides in the commentary he imposes on his entourage when he returns.[47]

- It is probably appropriate to see the piece as a journey and the Tower as a non-place, as it is suggested by the title *De-Tour*.

Tour, De-Tour
Détournement = literally displacing and reinscribing meaning in objects and texts.[48]

I have chosen the word de-tour for at least two reasons: first, because in French 'tour' means both 'tower' and 'journey.' Second, a detour evokes a going astray, a lateral movement, a diversion from the established route: that is, the possibility of surprise and chance can arise during the journey. After a series of similar 'non-places' we may see, for three seconds, an old gravestone; an *oculus* in the ceiling; a white room with a chair; a crowded city square, as if they were intruders, or mistakes in the process – when in fact, they constitute the real pleasure of wandering.

- Wandering evokes nomadism, and this is effectively a transportable piece; an artwork that once dismantled fits into a small bag and once set up can be as large or small as you like, for the parts are not fixed and the projection can be enlarged to virtually any size.

-This can be said of most installation art, and perhaps the fact that it is so popular today tells something about a particular contemporary lifestyle: that is, a new kind of nomadism, cultural, psychological as well as physical. Not only the transportability of the piece is at stake, but its flexibility too. It is important to perceive that the installation's actual form is temporary, as if the objects were laid down on the table at random (when in fact the process is quite accurate). And it is true that the idea of *De-Tour* can be transposed on a larger scale: this is what I have actually planned for the painting store-room in the Harris Museum's [see **Appendix**, Harris Project]. There, the model is replaced by a real stack of paintings contained in approximately nine square meters of storage space, and the projections fill the background wall. It is a real room, in which you can walk, not simply contemplate the scene from afar and above. You are not experiencing a bird's eye view anymore, as in the model; you are *in* the space that is projected on the wall, and part of the installation exactly as the clay figures were part of the model.

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[46] Marc Augé, *Non-places*, p. 85.
[47] Ibid., p .68.
[48] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass. – London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 212.

117

M.5c - The Cleft: a guided visit to a vertical panorama
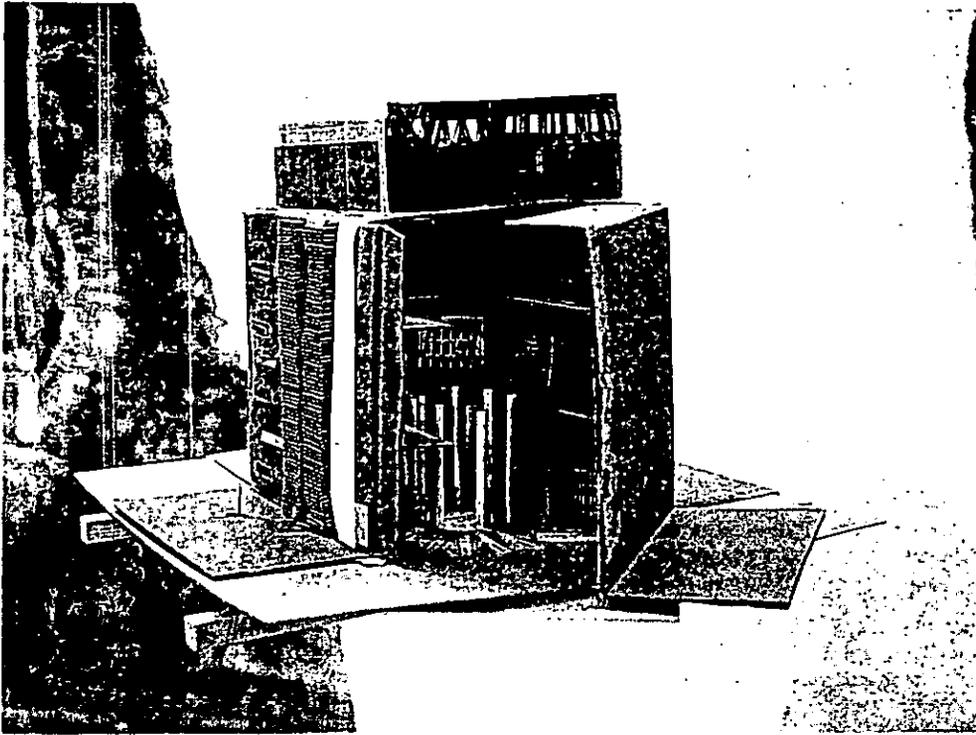
114   Maquette of *The Cleft*, modelled
       after the Harris Museum, 2001
       Cardboard, paper and acetate paper
       25x25x25 cm

Genesis of the project

The Cleft was first conceived as an outdoor painting for the Harris Museum in Preston. The process took place in Salzburg during the summer 2001, at the Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst in Jacobo Borges' class. I began making plans and sketches and building a cardboard maquette resembling the tower-like, square shape of the Harris (fig. 114). On one of the outer walls of the maquette I planned a 15 meter high painting, surrounded by broken bricks, as if the painting represented something happening inside the building.

I then made a preliminary study of the painting on a strip of paper 250 cm. tall and 50 cm. wide (fig. 116), using archival material such as photographs and prints; from this study I drew the main outline for the large canvases.

Because of the demanding size of the project and the exiguity of the working space in Salzburg, the painting had to be cut into five pieces, each measuring 250x160 cm. For the same reason, the final installation had to be adjusted to the actual size of the room; it was decided then to display four of the five canvases in two parallel vertical rows, with two canvases lying on the floor as an extension of the other two hanging on the wall (fig. 117).

(see **Appendix**, "A Small 'Tractatus' on Painting" for painting process description)

Description of the installation

Two long canvases (made of four pieces) are hanging from the wall, at a distance of approximately 50 cm. from each other. Half of each canvas covers the floor by 250 cm. A cardboard model of a building is hanging in between at eye level: it has the shape of a box open on one side to allow the structure of the building to be visible. On the outer side of the maquette, small-scale replica of the painting's outline is reproduced. A plan of the painting is displayed on the right hand wall.

The painting appears like a narrow and irregular strip densely worked in the middle of the canvas; the edges, apart from a coat of white primer, are left untouched. Looking at the parallel canvases, white space in between appears alternatively as empty full, according to which of the two areas one focuses his/her attention. Black and grey in various shades predominate, with ultramarine and cobalt blue, olive green, reds and cadmium yellow. The colours are not mixed together, but appear as if they are superimposed on top of each other, maintaining a certain freshness. There are no signs of brushstrokes: the canvas seems to be worked in layers as if the colour had been printed with rags and sponges, or applied directly with one's fingers. Occasionally it is possible to spot marks created by paint squeezed out of the tube and left untouched. The edge around the painted area is defined by masking tape applied irregularly, as if to suggest a crack, and left in place.

One feels as if s/he is confronting some kind of construction, a patchwork of architectural elements, scaffolding, fragments of buildings and cityscapes. Ruins, perhaps - one remembers Walter Benjamin's comment on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* giving an interpretation of history and progress (cf. I. Overview, fig. 2) - an accumulation of emblematic signs from the two thousand year tradition of Western architecture, waving a virtual thread (the Wittgensteinian rope, or *Seilmetapher* mentioned in I. Overview) across the different ages of a relatively small portion of humanity's history. The Tower of which we see part of the inside through a fissure, or a crack in the hypothetical wall, has a distant, archaic past (a Roman amphitheatre) for foundations and a modern city's skyscrapers forming its roof.

115   Work in progress on *The Cleft*, SOAK, Salzburg, 2001
On the floor: the second piece of *The Cleft*, acrylic on canvas, 250x160 cm; on the wall the preliminary study, acrylic and photocollage on paper, 250x50 cm
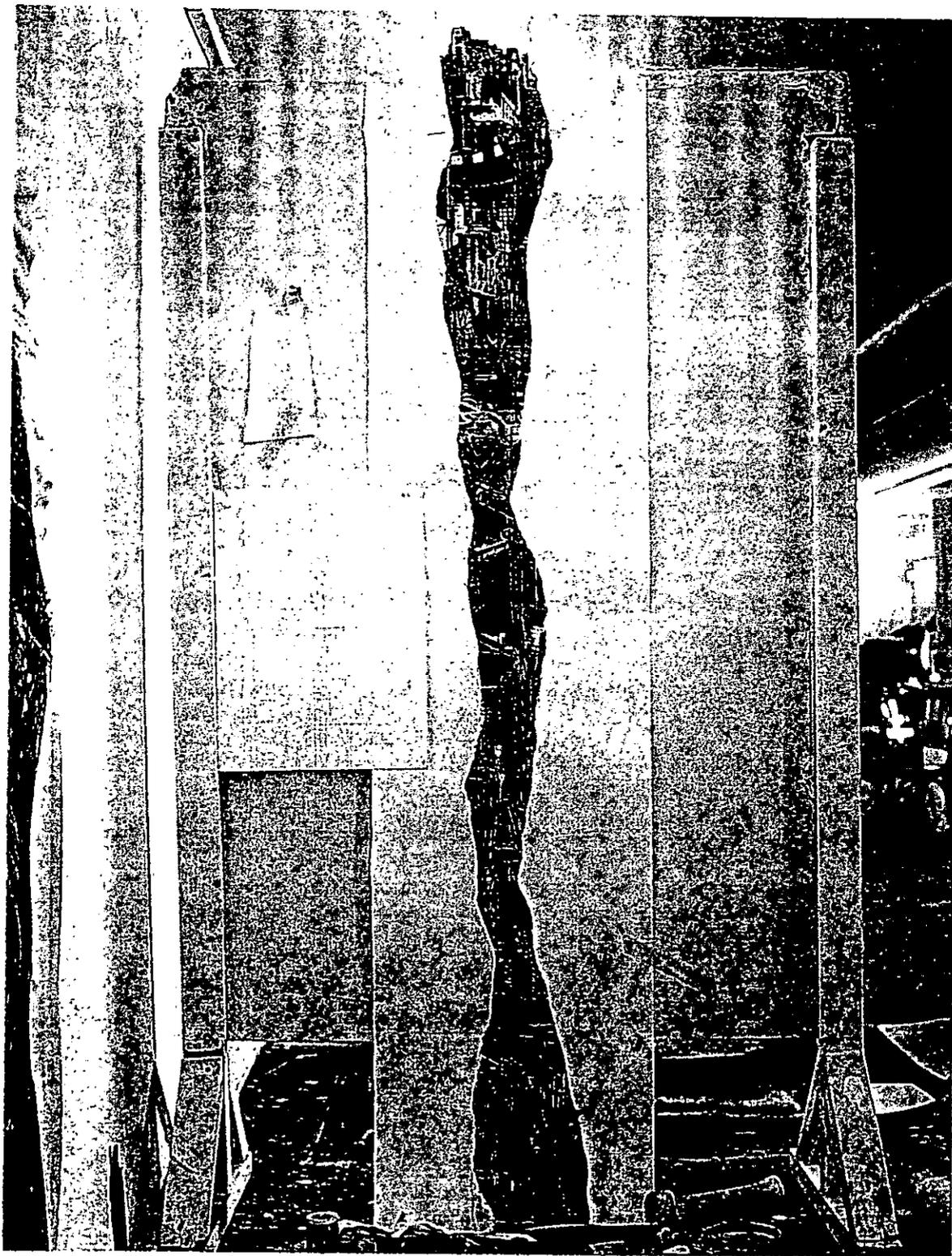
116   Preliminary study for *The Cleft*, 2001
      Acrylic and photocollage on paper
      250x50 cm
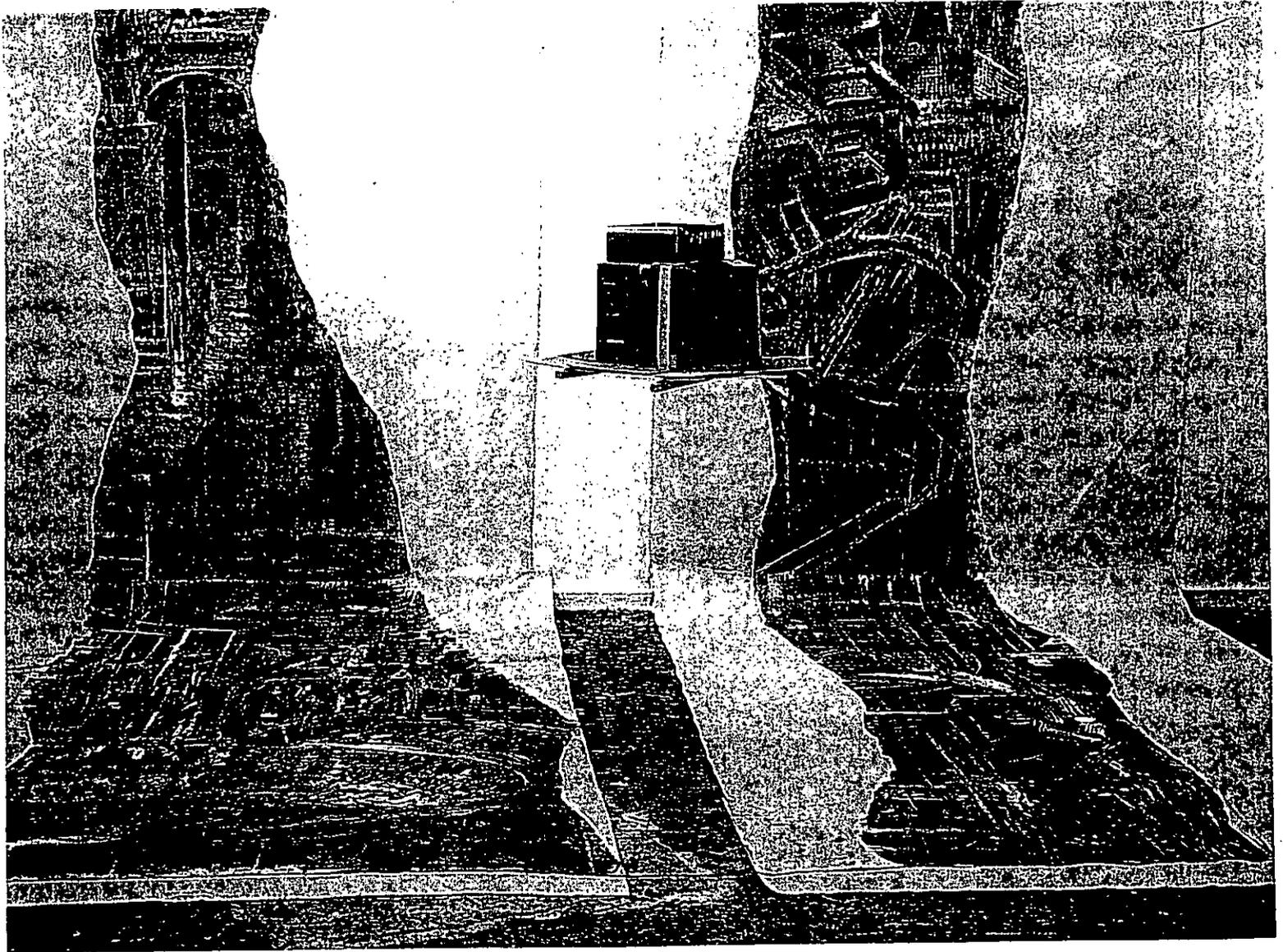
117   The *Cleft*, installation view, SOAK, Salzburg, 2001
      Acrylic on canvas (4 pieces), cardboard model, drawing
      c.250x400x250 cm

118 *The Cleft* - part 1, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
250x160 cm
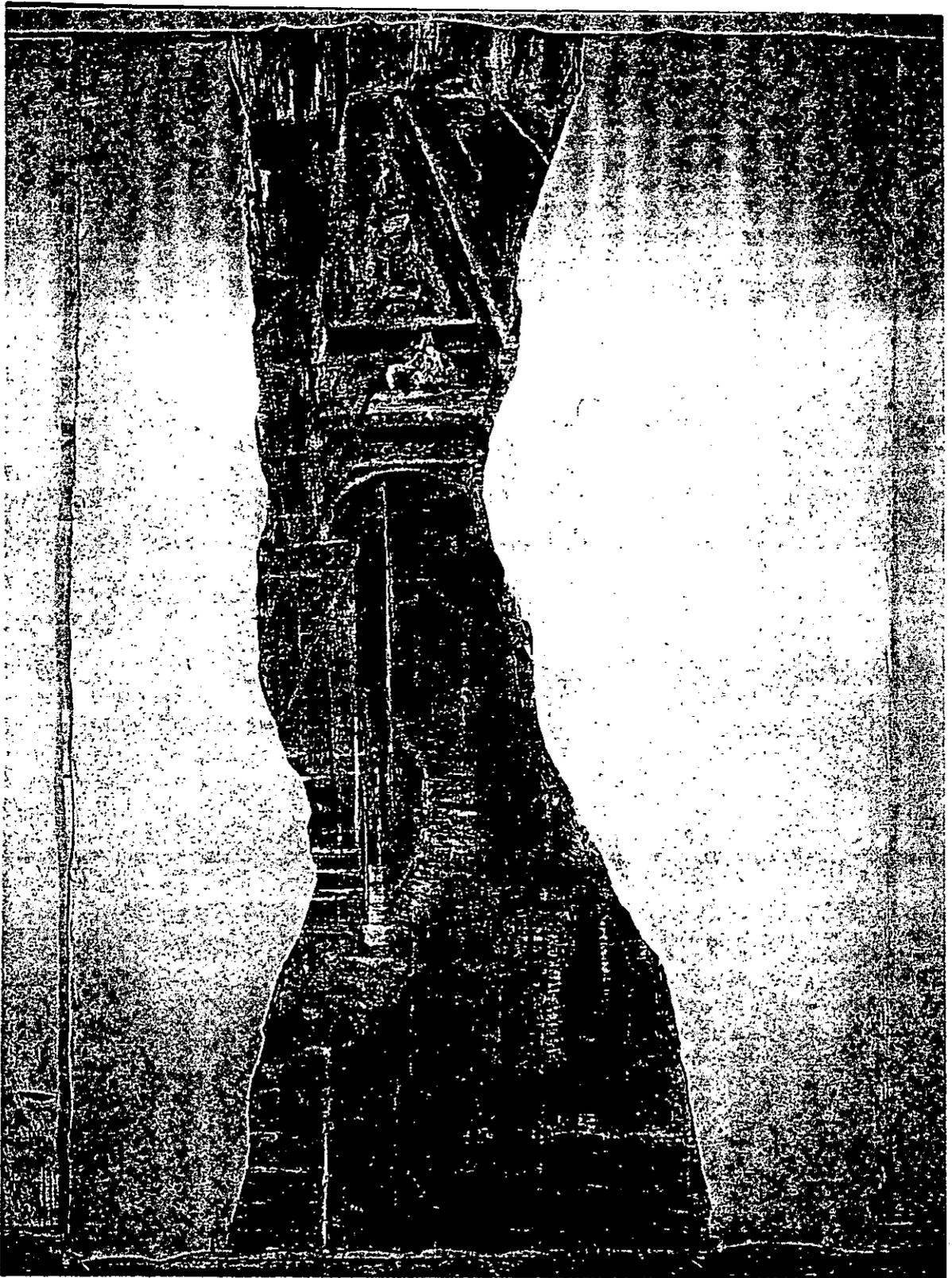
119   *The Cleft* - part 2, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
250x160 cm

120   *The Cleft* - part 3, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
250x160 cm
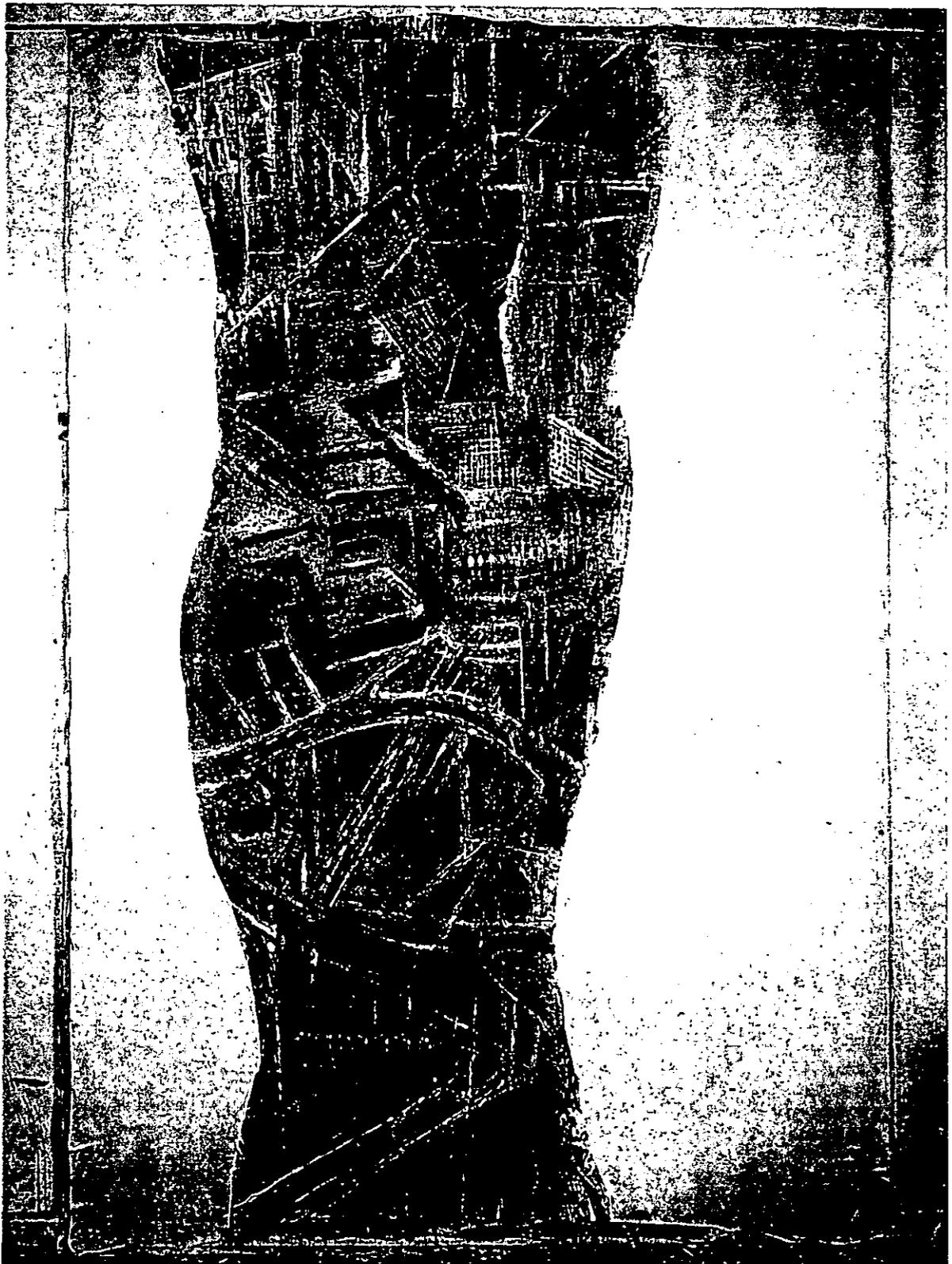
121 *The Cleft* - part 4, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
250x160 cm

122　*The Cleft* - part 5, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
250x160 cm

Text written for *The Cleft*

Here we are, in front of the huge building. Nobody remembers when the work began, it must have been ages ago.
In the beginning it was perfect. A sealed cube, as tall as it is wide, with no windows, no doors. Only one entrance, perhaps, invisible, through a subterrean staircase. Was there any light inside the building?
In the beginning there were the noises of people at work. We could hear them in the valley, in our tents. We could hear the hammer, the saw, the crane, the shouts of the workers while lifting up massive stones.
We could feel the heat coming from the kilns in which the builders used to bake their bricks.
The voices spoke many languages. People called each other by name. Then, one day there was silence all over the land. Every activity had ceased inside the building. No sign of life was heard. Some of us saw groups of people leaving the building in the night, carrying their property. Some going North, others heading South.
The second day we noticed a thin crack on the facade of the building, running from the bottom to the top. The third day the crack was a little wider. By the end of the week the cleft was so wide that we could look inside the building.
And here we are.
What we see is a pile of debris. A mountain of ruins and rubbish, in the middle of an amphitheatre. Scaffolding. Doors, stairs made of stone. A marble frame with sculpted figures. Arches. Crumbling columns. Brick stairs. Burnt villages. Houses. Metal stairs. Platforms, passageways. Arcades. Sliding doors. Bombed cities. More doors. Skylights, elevators, escalators. Skyscrapers. Scaffolding.

(the sky is filled with smoke)

Slowly, we return to our tents.

(Sept. 10th, 2001)

N.B.: the following dialogue is based on a conversation with philosopher Armin Vilars (Salzburg, August 2001).

- In the painting the views are multiple: first is the view from below that has been adopted, when we identify with the people looking through the cleft in the wall from the ground level. It is not the position of the gaze that can to comprehend everything from a distance, but a gaze that can only catch fragments of reality in an ideal progressive order. And because what we see is the result of a collective gaze, the fragments appear from different angles, a negation of the view from one point only.

- This painting looks like a series of segments repeating each other in a way that reminds me the above mentioned metaphor of Wittgenstein's rope, in which the segments that form the rope cling to one another without there being a single thread that runs through the whole length of the rope. What keeps them together is the interweaving of the segments, not a unifying one.

- What you say fits even better with the preparatory studies for The Cleft, which started as a single drawing of a street scene seen from above through the gap created by the houses' roofs, which I appropriated from a postcard of Salzburg. Subsequently I repeated the shape of the fissure (without drawing the roofs) and multiplied the same shape for a number of times, drawing each time a different scene inside. Then I put all the 'segments' in a row, as if it were a long, vertical scene viewed through a crack in a wall. In further elaborations, the cleft became less obviously a repetition of the same fragment

and more like a single fragment blown up to a larger scale. But the sequence of segments is still visible to a certain extent.

- The rope could provide a clue to the idea of history that is so much part of your work. In other words, we could attempt a reading of history as a series of interwoven segments or events, smoothly blending into each other – in contrast with the idea of abrupt interruptions and sudden passages between events – in which there is no 'essential' element or 'main idea' (Historicism's Geist) that holds all together and makes 'sense' of the historical facts. What holds it together is the relationship between the parts, that is always changing, and not one single permanent element.

- It is a fascinating theory, and I can see a connection with the way my painted images are combined on the picture plane: you can still distinguish individual elements but they form a continuous line. A possible confutation of this idea: scaffolding is a unifying element that runs through the whole painting, that is, the symbol of the unfinished process , a possible 'essence' of the Tower. But in fact, the scaffolding itself could be compared to a rope, as its parts are held together by joints and not by a unifying beam running from the bottom to the top; moreover, the idea of the tower's 'essence' contradicts her supposedly multiple/pluralistic character.

(see **Appendix**, pp. 33-37, **M.5c1** for additional work with the same theme)
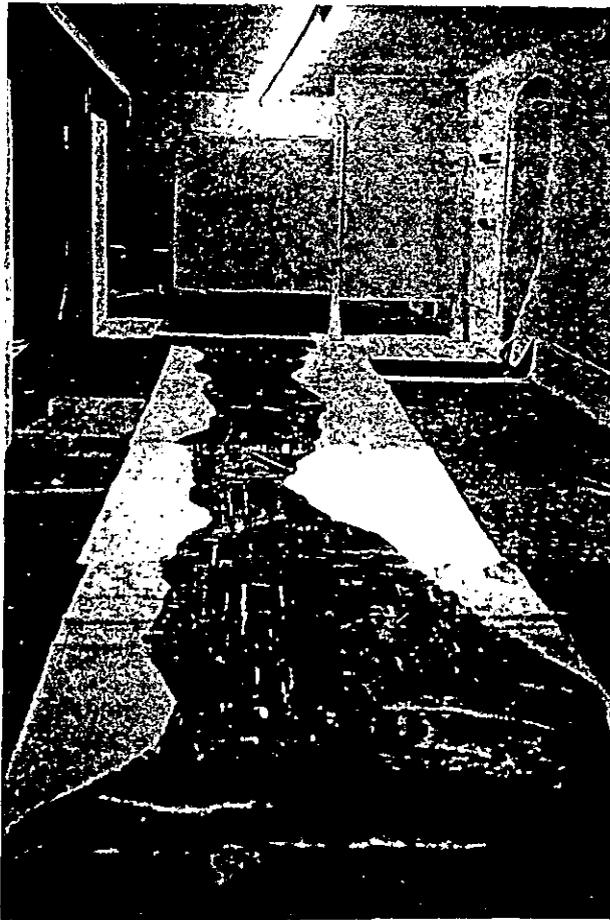
123 *The Cleft*: reconstruction of the whole length , 2001
Acrylic on canvas
1500x160 cm

M.6 MODELS AND MINIATURES

Make great plans, realize small ones.
Lebbeus Woods[49]

One should do the little things as if they were big.
Adele H.[50]

Une philosophie doit être portative.
Paul Valery

Manifesto for a 3D Model for a Portable Tower (MPT)

A model is the result of a process that is based on the following premises:

1- To be portable
2- To be composite in the nature of its elements
3- To be tri-dimensional
4- To be handcrafted
5- To use text and visuals

The model recreates a monument dedicated to the memory of the manifold features the Tower represents. In making models, the artist assumes the attitude of the artisan, getting closer to the notion of the artist as it was in the middle age. The execution is as important as the concept: by directly constructing the model the artist can transform the initial idea in the process; her aim is not perfection (in fact, a margin of imperfection is essential), but rather an exactitude of form (L, 21). The process requires time and a knowledge of materials and techniques. Through the making of the model the concept is developed by trial and error, until a satisfactory form is reached and established as more or less 'definitive.' The actual process of making regenerates and redefines thought (the mental process is intertwined with the manual process).

The text on the model should obey the 'law of contrast', that is, there have to be two kinds: the former poetical, evocative, imaginative, even lapidary. It should take the viewer into another dimension and evoke a view from above. This text is written in larger characters and is placed vertically on the upper part of the model. The latter is about something specific that happened at a precise time and space, but is taken out of its context so that it appears as a fragment of a bigger story (acquiring an estranged quality) - or a simple, down-to-earth statement that should be able to take the viewer back to the detail, the present moment, the close-up view. This text is written in small characters and placed horizontally on the model's basement.

The text can be written in different languages, although for practical reasons English has been the main language adopted in the following three models.

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[49] Woods, op.cit., p. 31
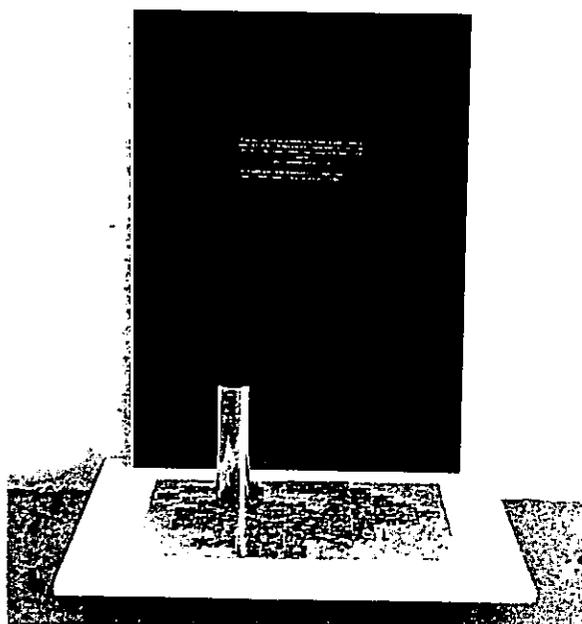
124   *Map model*, first prototype, 2001
Printed cardboard, foamboard, plywood, jigsaw
puzzle, steel cylinder
70x50x40 cm

On the map of the world, there must be room for the other – the little diorama, inside the city. This little one contains what is not accepted as necessary. The big one contains what is imagined as possible, and a moment later, is no longer possible.
Models, like dreams, are made of desires and fears: the thread of their discourse is ambiguous, their rules malleable, their perspective deceitful, and everything conceals something else.[51]

In a series of 'portable models' (see **Appendix**, pp. 43-45 for other examples) I explored notions of permanence/impermanence, micro/macrocosm, big ideas miniaturisation, ambition/understatement and ultimately irony/grandiose claims.

The main idea is that of portability and miniaturisation: to present a monument reduced to a toy-like scale, not exactly an architectural model (even though it refers to one) but rather a poetical model; a 'memorial,' as it were, or a tri-dimensional icon.

The idea of portability finds an echo in the image of the portable shrine that Jewish nomads were carrying along in their wanderings in the deserts of the Middle East; the ark or even the Torah, rolled into tower-like cases, often decorated with architectural motifs - a mobile architecture, not unlike Shinto temples in Japan, in which the 'foundation stone' is composed of four sticks in the ground, supporting a light structure of wooden beams, easily rebuildable in an adiacent area from one generation to the next. For as far from the idea of durability and stability that was at the core of the Tower, we should not forget that the ancestor of the skyscraper was the tent.

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[50] From the motion picture by François Truffaut.
[51] Anthony Kiendl, "City of artifice", in *Little Worlds*, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina Public Library (Regina, Saskatchevan, Canada, 2001), pp. 96-97.

There are two existing versions of the Giant Map model; the former following the general directions
of the others (fig. 124), the latter made in the form of a wooden box or suitcase (fig. 125). In both cases,
the main idea is to represent a city in fragments, seen from above like a map with missing parts.

A photograph of the plaster model of ancient Rome was turned into a jigsaw puzzle and recomposed
on a Perspex plate, leaving out some areas. In the former model, a steel cylinder was placed on top of the
jigsaw and a reflection of the map on its surface evoked the figure of a tower (the city, horizontal,
becomes the tower, vertical). In the latter model a second layer was added underneath the Perspex plate
holding the map: it contained another map, partially covered with paper pulp as if it were a city seen from
a plane, through the clouds. An imitation copper plate engraved with a map of Lancashire is placed on the
upper lid, beside the text.

This latter version of the model is a mix of found objects (the map of Lancashire, found in a Preston
flea market), previous work (the map underneath the Perspex plane) and purposely built elements (the
box, the piece of text, the jigsaw).

Text in model version no. 2:

In the deserts of the West there survive dilapidated relics of the Map,
inhabited by Animals and by Beggars; in all the Country
nothing else remains of the Geographical Disciplines.

(Jorge Luis Borges, *Del rigor en la ciencia*)

- Many a work of yours bears reference to Jorge Luis Borges' literature, from the simple quotation to
the construction of 'parallel fictions' to his narratives, such as *O Tower your Hexagons!* (see M.5). I
believe your work relates, in a structural way, to the way Borges recreates a very peculiar reality in his
fictions (especially in the short novels, such as "The Library of Babel" that you have taken as a starting
point for The Archaeologist's installation).

- Let us focus on one of Borges' postulates, one that is particularly relevant to this series of models,
namely the issue of scale. The problems of representation are ones of scale. The extremes between which
Borges develops his narrative are on the one hand, everything that can be said, and on the other hand, the
reduction of that sum of things to one single word. Obviously both these extremes are 'impossible' and
exist only in the poet's imagination.
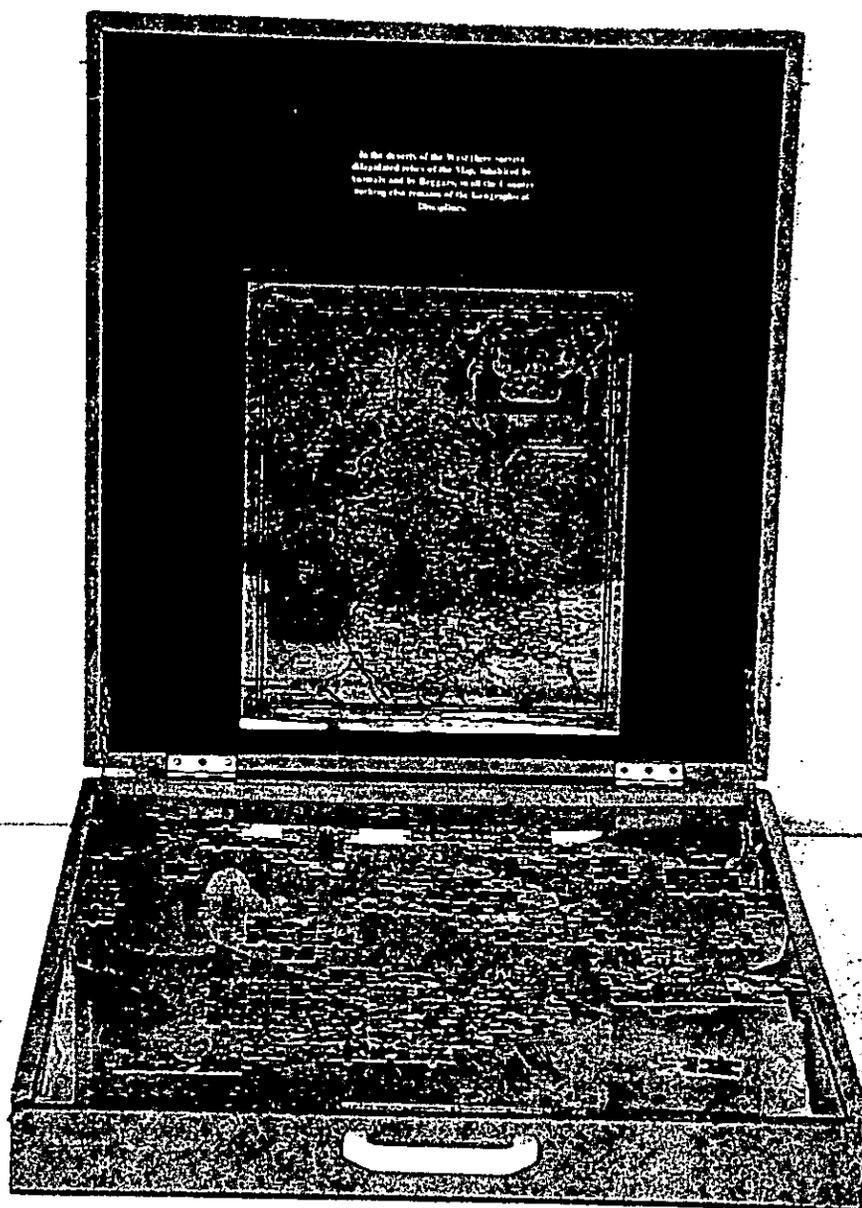
125 *The Giant Map*, version 2, 2001
Letraset on cardboard, simil-copper plate,
plywood, perspex, jigsaw puzzle, monoprint, paper
pulp, brass
55x75x56 cm (open), 55x10x56 cm (closed)

[52] Sontag, op.cit., p.124.

The quotation in the model has been extrapolated from the short section "Del rigor en la ciencia" (Of Rigour in Science), that concludes the *Historia Universal de la Infamia* as a kind of bibliographical spoof.[53]

A tri-dimensional account of the Empire is relayed through an impossible map that virtually covers the whole space of the Empire itself; its ruins can provide shelter for the underprivileged classes of animals and beggars.[54] But its gigantic size, coextensive with the area it represents, is a contradiction in terms, as we would need another smaller map to negotiate it. When you realize this, you perceive the self-defeat of this "monument of Realism," thus the impossibility of a total representation of reality, as "this would take up as much room as the real thing – it would replace the real thing."[55]

Representations of reality are part of reality themselves, they occupy space; like these models, they cannot be *reality in toto*. The Map of the Empire must be cut into pieces to exist in a particular space; all we have are fragments through which we can grasp a hint of that (immense) reality that it represents. Just think of those wonderful marble fragments of the ancient *Forma Urbis Romae* (fig. 126), which alone have the power to evoke a map extending beyond any imaginable limit; it is our imagination that bridges the gap between the detail and the whole, but we need an object to set that process in motion. This perception of the immensity in the infinitesimal, with the consequent action of the imagination to 'bridge the gap' created by the disbalance of scale leads us to the 'sublime' in a quite unexpected way; not through the grandiose or the extremely vast, but through the small and the *miniature*.
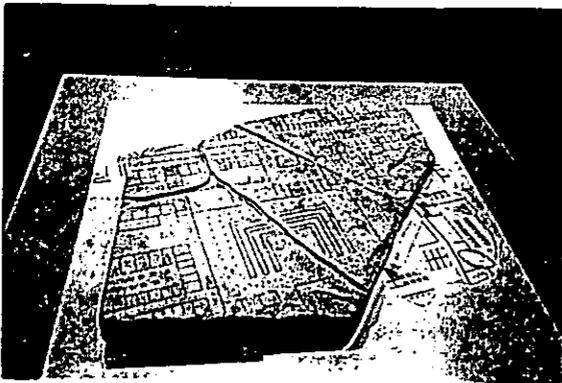
Can a miniature be sublime? When we get to a small enough scale so that we lose grasp of reality, we are unsure about the movement and texture of particles. Things get theoretical. This inability for a subject to conceive of something subatomic is not qualitatively different than the incomprehension of immense natural phenomena. The smallest known particle according to science, the smallest something that makes up everything, is called a neutrino. Travelling at the speed of light, and virtually massless, most neutrinos pass through the entire Earth -- and you and me -- without hitting a single atom.[56]

126 Fragment of the *Forma Urbis*, the large marble plan of Rome engraved between 203 and 211 A.D. (Severi age)

Like the Map of Borges, and like the marble *Forma Urbis*, this fragmented map (the jigsaw puzzle) is as much architecture as cartography; it can be lived in, it becomes city and tower in one, and it symbolizes the work and the urban basis of culture. It has been aptly said that for Borges, a civilization

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[53] In that Empire, the Art of Cartography reached such perfection that the map of a single Province occupied a whole city, and the Map of the Empire a whole Province. In time, these Disproportionate Maps failed to satisfy and the Colleges of Cartographers erected a Map of the Empire , which had the dimensions of the Empire and coincided with it point for point. Less Addicted to the Study of Cartography, the Succeeding Generations understood that this Protracted (*dilatado*) map was useless (*inútil*) and not without Impiety consigned to the Inclemencies of the Sun and of the Winter. In the deserts of the West there survive dilapidated relics of the Map, inhabited by Animals and by Beggars; in all the Country nothing else remains of the Geographical Disciplines.
[54] Cf. John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, p. 99.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Kiendl, *Little Worlds*, p. 101.

starts with the building of permanent buildings and the foundation of cities. He uses the construction of buildings as a metaphor for his making of fictions, and showing how both activities are an extension of culture into the territory of nature.[57]

- Duchamp's *bôite en valise* is one of the references that comes to mind when looking at the second version of the Map model, particularly for the idea of transportability that it conveys: Duchamp's suitcase is a compendium of all his work, a 'travelling museum,' as it were, in which every piece is reproduced as a miniature and classified (there are at least some forty boxes in collections worldwide, multiple of the original one). However, the *Models for a Portable Tower* are not so much a travelling museum as much as a microcosm in miniature; that is, the model of an idea. They do not represent miniaturized copies of existing works but they are works in themselves. Each piece is self contained and complete; each box or model is a *unicum*, while Duchamp's boxes are produced in a limited series.

- I agree, but perhaps even more than Duchamp's *bôites* a direct influence on these pieces comes from a series of works which Anne and Patrick Poirier produced in the beginning of the 1990's, namely the *Memoria Artificiosa* (Artificial Memory) and *Mnemosyne* models and the *Architect's archive*, besides the *Identification* suitcase of 1968 (fig. 127). The Poiriers make use of the fragment and hypothetical reconstructions that draw from a classic, Greco-Roman tradition in a way that is convincing and yet appealingly oneirical. There is also an anlogy with the "Portable Laboratory" of Francisco Varela, who was not an artist, but a neurophysic, and yet has been included in exhibitions. I came across one of his models once and I was amazed by the similarity with mine.
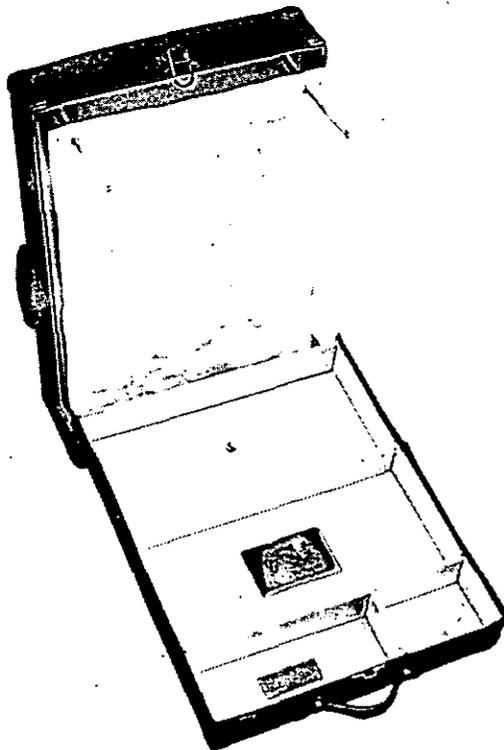
127 Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Identifcation*, 1968 briefcase, mixed media

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[57]Sturrock, op. cit., p. 100.
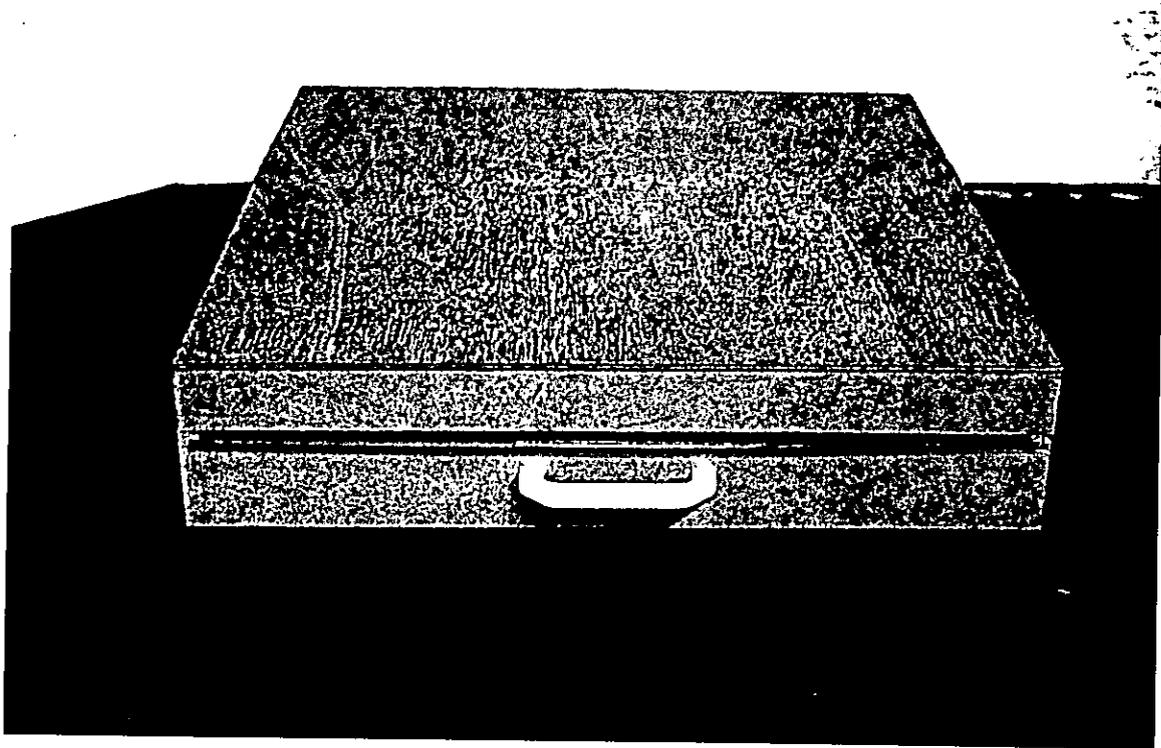
128   *The Giant Map* when closed, 2001

M.7 - FRAGMENTS OF A NEW BABEL: THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

Truth is stranger than fiction.
(Old saying)

Where has the disappeared one – who nevertheless leaves traces behind him/herself – gone? Hence the necessity to imagine his/her survival in another place. This need has a primordial psychic foundation, which can be better understood thanks to some mental illnesses emphasizing qualities that in healthy people are normally hidden in reserve. [...] The archaeologist is but the healthy professional who answers to this pathology and the most efficient interpreter of this universally human need to wonder about what has gone elsewhere, where the sun goes down. Elsewhere is the past, that is, the world in which the dead were alive. The present appears thus incomplete, insufficient in the search for human models to reinforce our identity. What is lacking to the present is the fullness of being, a unified and whole vision, the totality of the sacred that is to be found in the imaginary wholeness that myth offers. There is, in short, an unsuppressible desire to go out of our profane universe, contaminated by history and impoverished, and go back to a sacred primordial time. [58]

I was reading *Giornale di Scavo* (Excavation Journal) by Andrea Carandini during my stay in Salzburg, in the summer 2001. I bought the book, before leaving Rome, at the exhibition "Sangue e arena" at the Colosseum, displaying the history of the Flavian Amphitheatre through drawings, archaeological reconstructions and three-dimensional models. I have always been drawn to journals, and this one in particular attracted me because it was written by an archaeologist, one of the most competent on the Italian and international scene, who was also responsible for the exhibition, the year before, about the birth of Rome that acquainted me with the city's archaic mythology. I often thought of myself as an 'archaeologist of painting,' and I have already illustrated in other parts of this book how the metaphor of the excavation / reconstruction coincides with the research I have been conducting on my work and writings. Carandini often makes remarks on art and literature, drawing comparisons with his profession; in a similar way, I could relate to these analogies and appropriate them for myself.
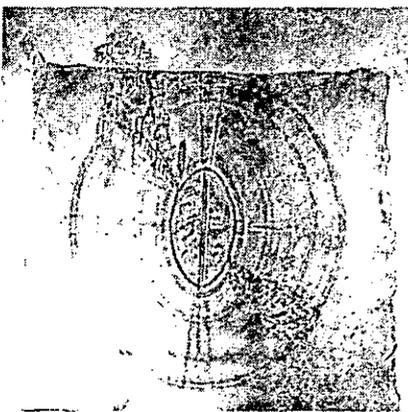
129 The Plan of the Tower of Babel
discovered by Zilt, 2001
Graphite, red chalk on hand made
yellow and white paper, tape.
60x60 cm

This fascination with archaeology was the impetus for a series of drawings that inspired my fictious story "A Roman Babel?",[59] written previously. The main character of the story is a rather elusive Prof. Zilt, who was interviewed by journalist Ufetta Crymes on one of his most recent and extraordinary discoveries, namely the lost plan for a Tower of Babel to be built on top of the Colosseum (fig. 129). Zilt is living in the future, therefore the plan relates to a secret project that should have been accomplished in our time (that is, during the 2000 Roman Catholic Jubilee celebrations). The story is presented as a newspaper article, an interview, complete with illustrations.

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[58] Andrea Carandini, *Giornale di scavo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), p. 138. My translation. Cf. also L. Coupe, *Myth* (London, 1997).
[59] Published with images at http://ebbs.expo.net

This account is relevant to an understanding of the installation "Oh Tower Your Hexagons!" that I was planning to make in Salzburg that summer, as part of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's class.

> The task [of the archaeologist] is to describe bit by bit, and above all, what he cannot finalise as a story or in use. Perhaps this will come later, or it will be obvious that the mere fact that such and such objects are to be found in a certain place – and not a motivation external to those objects - tells everything. Similarly, we wish that our task were to indicate and describe rather than explain: because, if we rush to give an explanation too soon, our starting point would become again what is not even an arrival point, that is, ourselves. [60]

The installation is presented as an exhibition of archaeological data, the imaginary collection of an equally imaginary museum in Rome dedicated to the late archaeologist Raimondo Corradini, an invented character whose name is obviously inspired to the actual Carandini (the similarity however ends here, and there is nowhere suggested a relationship with the real person).

The story focuses on Corradini's obsession with the mythical Library of Babel, whose traces he believes he has found in the basement of the Colosseum. This is presented as a fragment of a larger collection of found material belonging to the Tower of Babel, which the archaeologist tried for all his life to recompose into a unity without success. This shows, of course, a playful digression on the theme of the 'fragment within the fragment' and an allusion to the impossibility of seeing the totality of the object – the tower or one's own work – i.e., to reach a unity and a completeness.

The reconstruction of the Library of Babel is based on the homonymous novel by Jorge Luis Borges (*La Biblioteca de Babel*), who figures as a character himself and as a close friend of the archaeologist with whom he had a correspondence concerning the excavations. For the economy and credibility of the fiction, it is suggested that it was Borges who actually borrowed the idea of the Library for his book from Corradini, a forgery of historical truth that becomes evident once one realizes that the main character is pure invention.

According to Borges,

> This library, which some call the Universe, is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, separated by vast air shafts and surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable: 20 shelves, 5 long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two. One of the free sides leads in a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery, identical to the first and to all the others. [...]
>
> On each shelf are 35 books of identical format, 410 pages long. On each page are 40 lines, on each line 80 black letters. Because the orthographic symbols are 25 and because the library is infinite, all that can be said in any language is here on a printed page. Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, a faithful catalogue of the library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the true story of every man's death, the translation of every book in all languages. Generation after generation of librarians wander through the library in an attempt to find the Book. [61]

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[60] Italo Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* (Milano, 1995), quoted in Carandini, op. cit., p. 104. My translation.
[61] "La Biblioteca de Babel," in *El jardin de senderos que se bifurcan* (Buenos Aires,1941). The present quotation is taken from *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, ed. Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

Speaking to Georges Charbonnier in 1965 Borges said:

> In "The Library of Babel" I should say that there were two ideas. There is first of all an idea which isn't mine, which is a commonplace, the idea of a possibility of almost infinite variation beginning with a limited number of elements. Behind this abstract idea there is also (no doubt without my letting it bother me much) the idea of being lost in the universe, of not understanding it, the desire to find a precise solution, the feeling of not knowing the true solution. In this story, and I hope in all my stories, there is an intellectual part and another part – more important I think – the feeling of loneliness, of anguish, of futility, of the mystery of the universe, of time, what is more important still: of ourselves, I should say: of myself.[61]

In Borges' analysis there are at least three ways or techniques of postulating reality (*"la postulación de la realidad"*): the Classical way, through abstraction; the Romantic way, through particularization; and a third way, which "consists in imagining a reality more complex than the one declared to the reader and relating its derivations and effects."[62] This method Borges finds to be the most literary of the three (and therefore more artificial) because of its dependence on language and on the manipulation of syntax.

Borges' technique always leaves certain things unsaid; by choosing what and how something should be left unspoken he is able to create an utterly convincing context to his fictions, which impose themselves as self evident facts even when they are manifestly the fruit of the writer's imagination.

Here again we have a dream of totality: similarly to the Giant Map of the Empire (cf. **M.6a**, fig. 125), The Library of Babel contains all the verbal representations of reality possible to a given alphabet. And like the Map and the Tower of Babel itself, it is the story of a failure: the books it archives are meaningless; they contain all possible combinations of words that the human mind can conceive, without any limit or logic, sense or truth, so much so that the only sentence that any librarian has ever found by way of sense is the phrase "Oh time your pyramids." Like the Tower, the Library is an excess of scale and ambition, and needs to be reduced. Somewhere there is a catalogue, *the Book of Books*, "a book which is the cipher and compendium *of all the others*" (Borges' italics). This compendium is what any attempt at representation aims for, an unattainable ideal: the Library is not a representation of reality, but a representation of all the other representations, that is, a representation of the artificial universe of literature and, by extension, of art. And yet, it is even more alarming when it appears as a huge simplification of the actual universe.

> Two reductions are involved: a first reduction of reality to its representation, and a second reduction, of the representation. With Borges [...] it is the representation which serves as his reality. Both reductions are movements from the Many towards the One. The unity of the Book of Books is as impossible as the multiplicity of the library, but the urge to reduce the second to the first is a real one, and a specifically literary one.[63]

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[61] Quoted in John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: the ideal fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 96.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., p.103.

138

M.7a - "Oh Tower your hexagons!"[64]
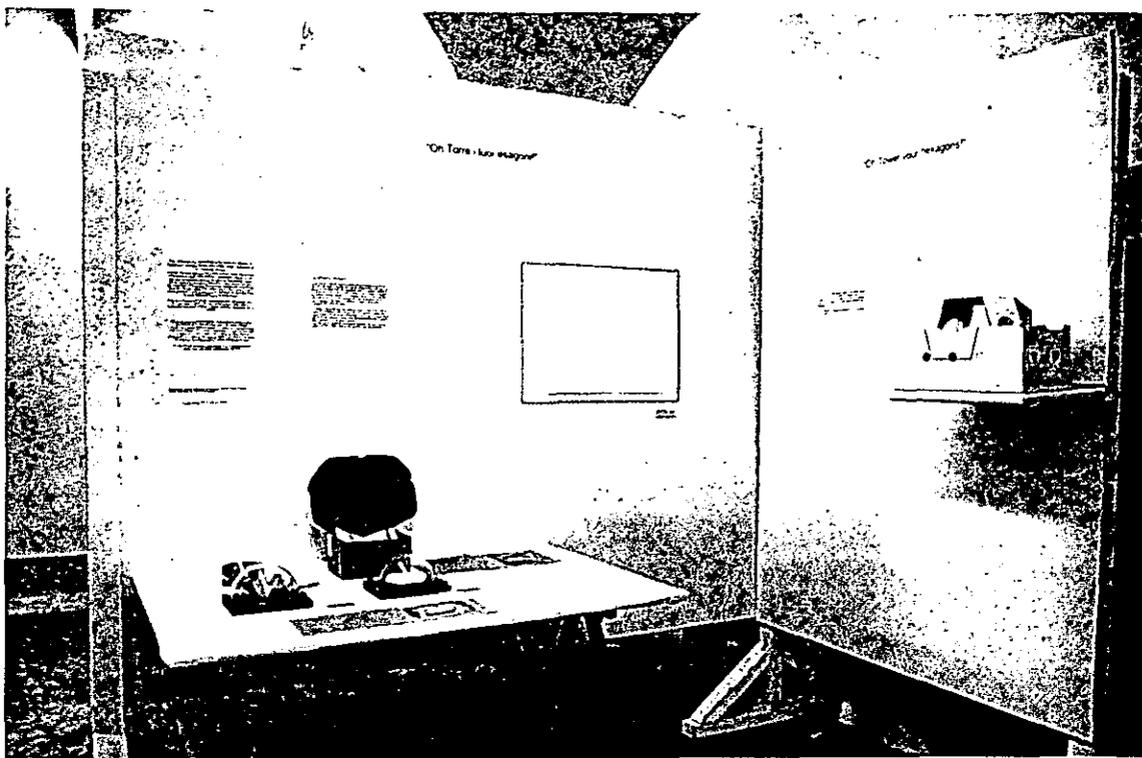
130 *Oh Tower your hexagons!* View of the
installation at the SOAK, Salzburg, 2001
Mixed media
300x250x150 cm

Description of the installation:

The installation takes the space of two walls that together form a 90° corner. The longer wall measures about 2 meters, the shorter one about 1.5 meters. On the longest, a wooden table covered in white paper holds a series of objects from the archaeologist's archive. There are three clear plastic domes under which are three fragments of the Library, each carefully labelled; a cardboard box containing a small notebook with a scheme of the hexagonal Library; two photographs from the excavation site mounted on brown paper, and a letter that Corradini wrote to Jorge Luis Borges referring to the Library he has discovered.

Further to the right on the same wall, hangs a drawing with a geometrical scheme of the Library, framed by four thin, wooden beams and no glass. On the other wall, a three-dimensional cardboard model reconstructs one of the Library's modules (the "matrix"), resting on a shelf at eye level. The viewer is invited to peer through one of the holes on the front face of the model to have a perspectival view of the hexagonal module's interior.

Two sheets with text are hanging on each wall, one above the table, the other next to the model.

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[64] An allusion to the sentence "O Tiempo tus piramides" (O Time your pyramids).
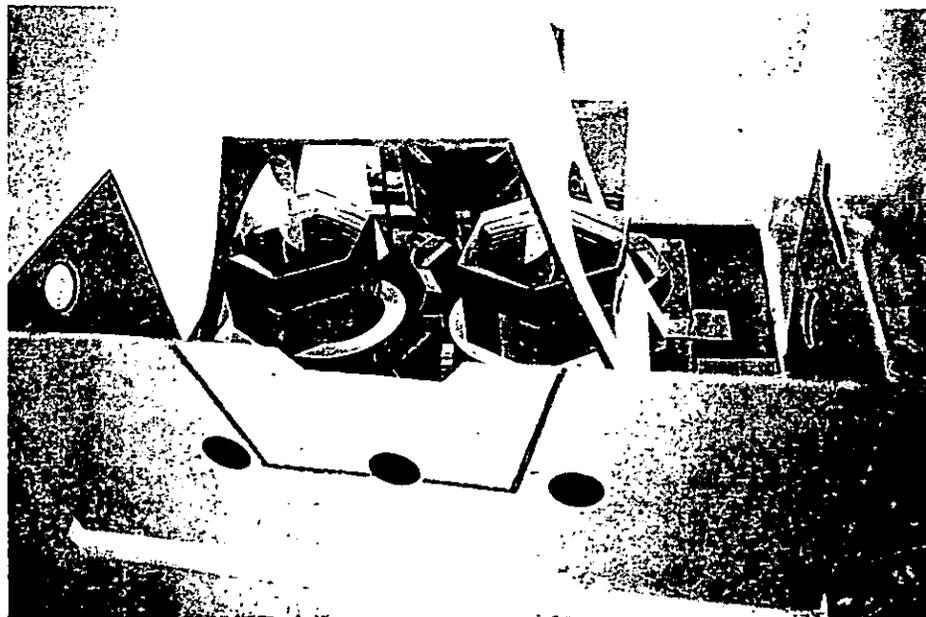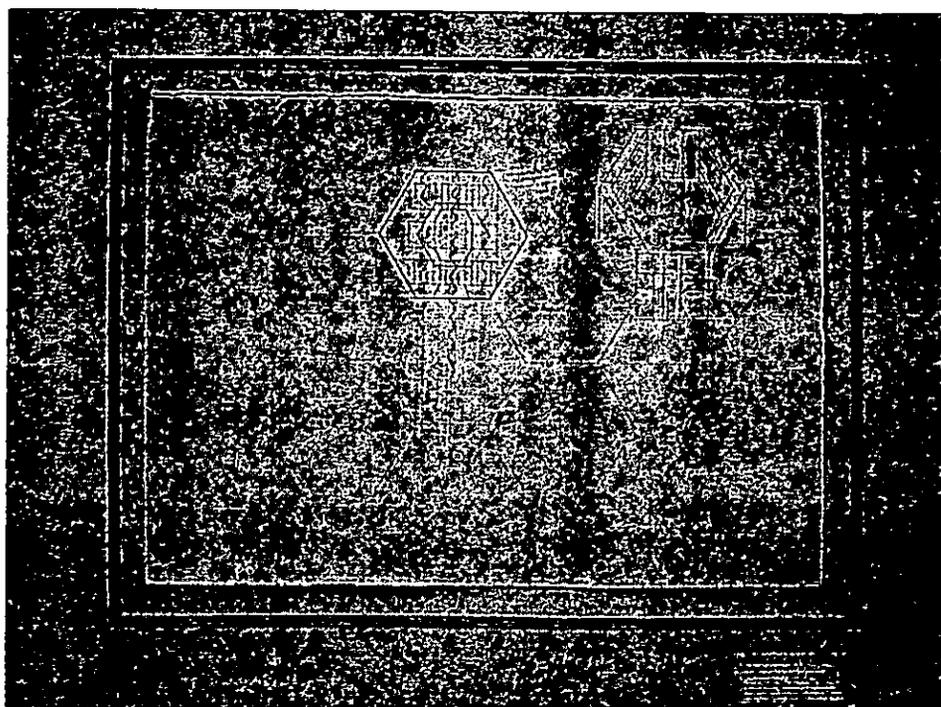
131 Reconstructive drawing of the
Library of Babel, 2001
Graphite, red chalk on paper, wood.
50x 70 cm

132 Reconstruction model of the
Library, 2001
Cardboard, balsa wood, postcards

text in the installation:

This exhibition is a right tribute to the work of a lifetime of Raimondo Corradini (Rome;1901-1964), in the celebration of his hundredth birthday.

Corradini has long been considered a bizarre figure in the archaeological world; often labelled a dreamer and a visionary, he was very early regarded with suspicion if not ostracised by academic society. His nonconformism and audacious theories were unprecedented in his time.
The central theme of his research, his passion and obsession that lasted throughout his life - brutally interrupted by a banal accident in the excavation yard* - reveals a profound commitment to his profession, but also made him the target of a ferocious irony by his sceptical peers.

Time has finally come for a complete rehabilitation of Corradini's life and work: forty-five years spent in search of the mythical Tower of Babel. He claimed it was located in Rome, in the area where the Colosseum was later to be built.

This is only a small part of the collection inherited from Corradini's studio. Here, we can admire the section dedicated to the Library of Babel.
Throughout his life Corradini pursued a dream: to reconstruct the complete building of the Tower of Babel in all its pieces. Unfortunately, he could only find proof of evidence of few separate parts of the building: the Library (his best achievement), the Auditorium and fragments of the Prison. What he was lacking was a fragment that could provide the missing link between parts.

We hope that this exhibition could stimulate in the young generation of archaeologists and scholars new, fruitful investigations in the field.

*(He stumbled on a 'sanpietrino' (typical Roman road stone) and fell fatally into a deep pit in the course of his excavation. His last words were: "OH TOWER YOUR HEXAGONS!")

text accompanying the model:

THE HEXAGONAL FRAGMENT

At the time of his crucial excavation underneath the Colosseum, during the late 1930s, Corradini was corresponding with Jorge Luis Borges, a close friend. The Argentinian writer was regularly informed about the progress of the research. When Corradini found the hexagonal fragment that marked a dramatic change in his investigation, Borges was one of the first to receive the news. A few years later the writer would publish one of his most compelling short stories, La Biblioteca de Babel, whose debts to Corradini's discoveries is evident.

According to the archaeologist the hexagonal fragment (dating back to the 11[th] century B.C.) belonged to the legendary relief that reproduced a plan of the Tower of Babel and was placed at the entrance of the Tower, similarly to the well-known marmoreal "Forma Urbis" that reproduced the plan of ancient Rome (see photo from Corradini's archive).
Corradini was able to identify the hexagonal fragment as the matrix, i.e. the basic form of the Babel Library, based on the numberless repetition of the original module.
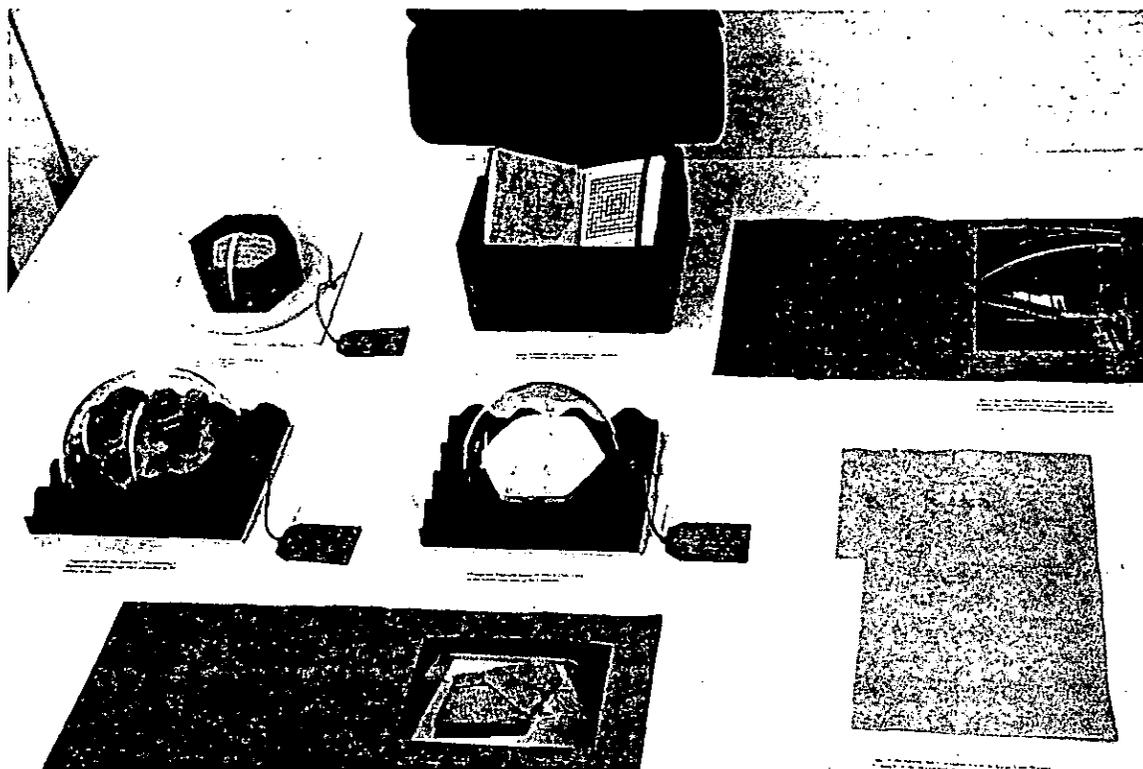
133 Detail of the table with fragments,
2001
Plaster, cardboard, balsa wood,
foam, plastic.
150x80x20 cm

Every human being has his shell [...]. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of
circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up
of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begins? Where
does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I
know a large part of myself in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*!
One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's
furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all
expressive. [65]

The archaeologist moves from the objects to the human. Objects are stations from
which one can depart to the spirit...Things (objects) have the power to awaken the
magic of feelings, and are by them revitalised. Invisible gestures and emotions linger
on the objects; sometimes we can reconstruct them and feel them again.
My relationship to the objects is not that of an empiricist ... where the empiricist sees
objects or ensembles of objects (and despises theory), the non-empiricist sees the
relationship between things. The empiricist seeks unquestionable truths, he believes
he can "prove" and "confute" something, while the other "explores" and truths for him
are always "uncertain."[66]

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[65] Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert D.Bamberg, Kent State University (New York – London: W. W.
Norton & Company, 1975), Vol. I: XIX, p. 175.
[66] Carandini, op. cit., p. 72. My Translation.

- What I find interesting about this installation is that each object on display looks absolutely *real* and yet the materials of which it is made are ordinary, even cheap materials you might have found in a dustbin, or in a *bricolage* shop... What looks like a glass dome is just plastic, the box that contains the notebook, as elegant as it may appear, is an ordinary cardboard postage box; the archaeological fragments are made of egg cases, plaster and paper, yet the whole is absolutely convincing and extremely refined.

- I wanted to keep the materials as simple and 'poor' as possible. I am fascinated by the banality of everyday objects and the degree of transformation they can acquire through my intervention, as subtly as possible, to the point of looking very precious. I don't make use of ready-mades as finished work; I always change something according to the needs of the piece, although I usually avoid changing the characteristics of the object too much. I like the quality of the material in itself, be it cardboard, paper or whatever else. This has nothing to do with an ideal 'purity' or 'plainness' of the form, but simply with a certain tactile, sensual relationship I have to certain materials. Working with found, simple or discarded objects, often the material itself suggests a new form. For example, the Library model was not planned. The actual form was partially suggested by the cardboard box – probably a can holder – which was modified by the hexagonal element that is central to the plot. But the overall shape was already in the piece of found cardboard, the reason I chose it in the first place – as usual, you don't know what you are looking for until you see it. The beauty, the 'elegance' of form is the result of a set of facts, which only partially rely on the object as such. Mostly it depends upon the way I manipulate, arrange and place things.

- In fact, what makes the installation effective is the way things are displayed, and particularly the space around things: each item is visible and readable, there is no visual confusion.

- The empty space between the objects is as important as the objects themselves. The viewer should be able to approach the exhibits and to observe them close-up. I was surprised and pleased when people asked me for information about Corradini, as if he had really existed. The fact that I have introduced an historical figure as Jorge Luis Borges probably backed up the fiction, creating a shortcut between the fake and the real. Another clue could be to regard this work as a parody of the archaeological (but also historical, or scientific) practice of reconstructing the whole from a detail, or fragment, i.e., inductive reasoning. We are not given enough elements though to confute or accept the theory, we are left with an act of faith, as for most of what we encounter in life.

3 – LABORATORY

L.1 - INTRODUCTION

> As a child, she used to play the "laboratory game" with her
> sister: in bed at night, before falling asleep, she would say:
> let's go into our laboratory and come back when we remember
> everything we have done today! So they plunged down to the bottom
> of their bed, and spent five or ten minutes under the covers in
> the darkness, recalling the events of the day. She remembers
> imagining (or visualizing, as it is custom in some psychological
> practices) a light above her head, as if there were a window in
> the warm, enclosed space. When they finally emerged from their
> diving, they would tell each other in detail what they had "seen"
> in their respective laboratories.

The Tower is a process. For the artist, it is the equivalent of the process of: building – coming to a certain stage – stopping the process – questioning one's direction – starting again – rebuilding – etc. The Tower is both the process and the laboratory in which this process occurs; the babelian myth is a metaphor for striving towards the goal, the risks of the unknown, the time of crisis and doubt that causes the interruption and the re-assessment of one's position, its reconsideration, reevaluation, and eventually the achievement of a new solution.

In this part of the text, which according to the metonymical structure adopted from the beginning constitutes the top floor of the edifice, I shall provide an insight into my art practice by (1) describing my creative process, with specific reference to existing work in section M and to other artists' practices; and (2) by exploring concepts that are implied in the original myth and are particularly relevant in relation to my artwork.

Concerning process, is I am going to frame the discourse as *painting process*, whereby I mean an expanded notion of the visual medium, which incorporates drawing, writing, assemblage of different materials and tri-dimensional objects.

I do not call it simply 'creative process' or 'visual process' because I want to maintain the peculiarity of painting practice as my starting point, while suggesting that a traditional reading of 'painting' is no longer adequate to make sense of the complexity of my visual expression.

James Turrel is significant in this respect; he always talks about his light based installations in terms of painting: that is, an enlarged concept of painting, although he never refuses traditional painting as such. In the same way, Joseph Beuys referred to his installations and performances as 'sculpture.'

In formal terms, to work as a painter means to deal with a two-dimensional surface and specifically to organize a narrative on a flat surface. Even a tri-dimensional work, or a site based installation can be regarded as painting, or have a painterly quality in its making and conception – for instance, in *Life, Death and Miracles of the Tower* (M.2a) the white walls and floor acted as a bare canvas on which the objects and cut out shapes functioned as signs or marks. There is also an analogy with writing, if we imagine the wall as a page and the marks as letters composing a codified text. The link between these different disciplines is *drawing*, intended as conceptual and practical activity, conveying in a gesture the fluidity of thought and volatile ideas.

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Every artwork can be regarded from at least two points of view: its formal characteristics (what is it aesthetically, as an art form?) and its meaning (what does it tell us?).

It is fallacious to consider the artwork as an isolated object idea: art is the object *plus all the rest*: metaphors, associations and memories it evokes. It would be pure illusion to think that art is *just* the object. One needs to have knowledge, not only about the work, but a knowledge that is part of the work itself.

The same can be said about the Tower as a subject: on the one hand we have an image of the object (or many images, as many as its representations), that tries to answer the question: how is (or was) it made? On the other hand we have an image, or a symbolic figure, that stands for a number of issues that try to communicate something about the wider implications of the story. The work that incorporates these two basic approaches represents a point of convergence between the ethic and the aesthetic, i.e., between two kinds of commitment: one in a philosophical, socio-political context, the other through visual appreciation and aesthetic pleasure.

Within the **process** section I have chosen to highlight the main concepts and elements that have come into my art practice as part of my elaboration of the babelian story. These may include items as diverse as 'colour' and 'infinite'; terms belonging to a specific artistic process are sharing the same room with terms that are more philosophical.

I wanted to demonstrate how the theoretical and practical investigation are in reality, strictly interconnected and sustain one another. Making art is an intellectual exercise, but of the creative kind; it is not intellectuality for its own sake. Intellectual rigour includes intuition, beauty and physical labour. The practice of analysing process as a logical construction does not take away the 'magic' from the artwork; critical analysis does not hamper the mystery of the creative process.

I would define this as the 'visualization of ideas,' into which I open up angles of imaginative exploration; it is a challenge, because the visual manifests itself all at once, and at the same time it is multilayered. There is a structure, a language, a history, an action and a consequence, and it is simultaneous in the artwork.

Here my theoretical considerations find expression through particular attributes of Babel, which my project focuses on, and their relationship with a wider context of thought.
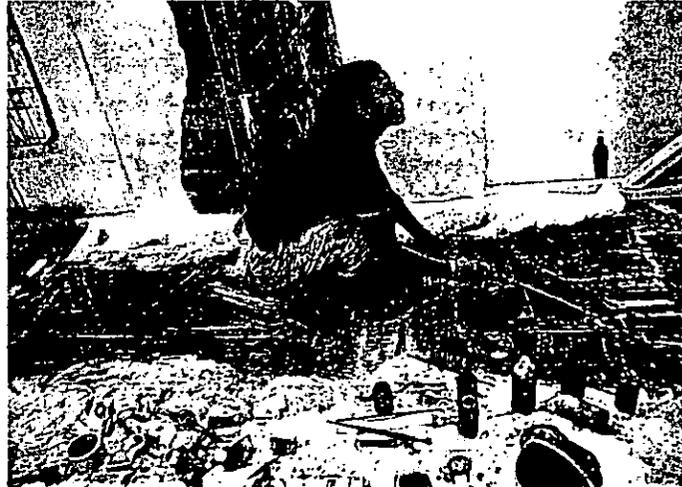
134-135-136   Working on *The Cleft*, SOAK,
              Salzburg, 2001 (self-taken
              photographs)

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L.2 - IN THE STUDIO

L'oeuvre modifie l'auteur.

the work modifies the author.

Paul Valery

L.2a - Freedom & Discipline

> I go the studio every day because I need to find an image that makes me wonder and outside there is nothing. To be there is a form of responsibility; at the end of the day, it's my life...[1]

Discipline: to limit oneself to *one* problem, or to *one part* of the work (in depth movement).

Freedom: to open up to a *new* problem or to a *new part* of the work (expansive, horizontal movement).

In the creative process both these conditions are present, at different times; a rigorous art practice requires a constant negotiation of the two, according to the state and nature of the work. This means that it is necessary to listen to oneself and listen to the *work* itself: as ultimately, through the process of making, it is the work that determines the artist's direction.

The first step is to collect material: to do so, I shall be open to coincidences and what I call 'synchronism'. Freedom plays the major role, allowing me to wander at random through disparate paths, to accumulate a variety of stimuli and to create my own archive of free associations.

The second step is to reduce and organize this material by an analytical process, which divides and separates things. This is the time of *discipline*. In this way I will be able to integrate the various elements in order to compose a *synthetic vision* that designates the work's definitive form.

> Inter-connectedness is an unmistakable, accelerating influence in almost all the countries and cultures of the world in all aspects of [...] life from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual, which change with the growing extensity, intensity and velocity of global interactions.[2]

It is part of my practice to understand the *interconnections* between the elements and the relationship between the whole and the detail. As nature is made of multiple relationships (a plant depends on an insect, which in turn depends on another plant and so on), likewise it is not possible to change one element of a painting without changing its whole structure. Every change to a single form has a consequence for the general form.[3]

Every decision I make is obviously conscious, but the way I execute it is intuitive. For instance, if I want to emphasise the linear structure of a painting, it is a rational decision; but this does not imply working from a

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[1] Enzo Cucchi, from an interview with Arianna Di Genova, *Il Manifesto* (4 July, 2002): p. 13. My translation.
[2] Armesto, *Civilizations*, p. 560.
[3] There is an analogy with the following passage from the *Zohar*: "You can see that I am now showing you a mystical meaning, in the same words where, previously, I showed you a literal meaning. Just as before, there is neither addition nor subtraction: *all the written words are necessary and not a single letter can be added or taken.*" My italics.

preordained scheme. I will not define *exactly* how I am going to make it beforehand as this is intuitive and is generated by the process itself (cf. **Appendix**, "A Small 'Tractatus' on Painting," pp. 46-53).

L.2b - Materials (on collecting)

There are basically two kinds of materials: the traditional art material such as oil and acrylic paint, clay, paper, canvas, wood and so on, and materials that are already objects or raw matter that does not belong specifically to the art material category. In the last three years of my research the latter has acquired more relevance in my art practice. The criteria for choosing this heterogeneous material lies in the ability of the objects to trigger my imagination; I let the materials speak to me, and try to understand what I can create with them (or, as it were, what they 'want' from me) and act consequently.

"Collectors are people with a tactical instinct – like courtiers" – Susan Sontag writes about Walter Benjamin's passion for collecting books. She also tells us that "he liked finding things where nobody was looking"; similarly, I happily accumulate materials that I find in my environment. The materials often dictate the language I will use: in the case of found objects, an installation or a series of models, usually accompanied by text. Otherwise the same found objects could work as models for drawings or paintings; I start with something already there, something physical, with a history of its own.

In Sontag's analysis of Benjamin's poetic the image of the ruin returns as a recurrent motif in his oeuvre, and is a powerful metaphor for his books collecting passion, a parallel to my own passion for collecting materials for future, potential works:

> If this melancholy temperament [the Saturnine one] is faithless to people, it has good reason to be faithful to things. Fidelity lies in *accumulating things* – which appear, mostly, in the form of *fragments* or *ruins*.
> ("It is common practice in baroque literature to pile up fragments incessantly", Benjamin writes.)
> Both the Baroque and the Surrealism, sensibilities with which Benjamin felt a strong affinity, see reality as things.
> Benjamin describes the Baroque as a world of things (emblem, ruins), and spiralized ideas ("Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things").
>
> The genius of Surrealism [was] to generalize [...] the baroque cult of ruins; to perceive that the nihilistic energies of the modern era *make everything a ruin or a fragment – and therefore collectible.* A world whose past has become (by definition) obsolete, and whose present churns out instant antiques, invites custodians, decoders, and collectors.
> As one kind of collector himself, Benjamin remained faithful to things (e.g. building his library, "his most enduring personal passion.")
> Books are for Benjamin privileged objects. Contemplative objects, not only for use (tools) but *stimuli for reverie*.[4]

Materials are relevant not by virtue of their preciousness or intrinsic value, but by being 'stimuli for reveries' - that is, generator of ideas, points of departures for imaginary journeys. In fact they can be banal, accidental, everyday: unpretentious like their constituent language. I purposely chose low tech media and almost archaic materials, although the concept can be quite sophisticated and contemporary. I even use video like a painting tool.

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4 Susan Sontag, op. cit., p. 120. Italics mine.

My media might go through several stages of complexity but the result would seldom have a finished, polished appearance: it is the opposite of perfectly packaged products coming out of '*de-souling machines*' (like so much fashionable art today). Given the categories of 'clean' and 'dirty' to classifying artworks, mine lingers between the two, leaning towards the dirty. I want the element of 'dirt' to be present in my work, although its presentation will be 'clean'. Even when the final object is neatly crafted there will be an element of *imperfection*, the raw edge that reveals a human touch. Imperfection also implies that the finished piece will retain that 'unfinished' quality [L.2o] and an ancient element, which evokes something of the past or rather, something of the present as seen from the future.

L.2c - Media, language, form

Media are not exchangeable; they all have specific qualities and produce particular *forms*: painting, photography, video, installation, from specific materials: paper, canvas, acrylic, pencil, resins, digital tapes etc. A *medium* is a vehicle, a mediator between the artist and the artwork; these are just tools that re-elaborate an image and turning it into an 'elsewhere', a place that belongs to the self, or rather to the many selves within the artist's consciousness. To convey an idea into a form with a consistency that can speak to the viewer in its own terms is still a fundamental challenge for the visual artist, one that current trends cannot dismiss. I am talking about form, which might sound obsolete in a time when much weight is placd on 'method,' often for its own sake, but I still believe that the 'end product' count as much as the process (for the Taoists, 'Tao' means both 'way' and 'goal'). Only when form embodies a concept can an 'object' survive time and communicate with others.

There is no hierarchy among the different languages I use; likewise there is no hierarchy among the languages in which I think and write. To keep a diary written exclusively in one language is to me an impossible task, like making work using only one visual language. This combined, manifold art practice could claim an historical relationship with the baroque fusing of different styles and materials, a mannerist and surrealist practice as well.

Although I would not consider myself a 'Surrealist,' I recognize in that historical movement a precedent for the exploration of freedom and free association and the relevance given to imagination and personal sources in the creation of an artwork.

L.2d - Colour, shadow, light

Colour is one of the main items in painting. However, in the work I have produced in the last three years colour is seldom central, at least not so much as light and shadow, or contrast and tone. Nevertheless, I painted with intense colours following a period of "Black paintings" (Barcelona, 1996) and recently in the series of *Tantric Towers* (**Appendix, pp. 40-42**).

However, if we examine the *Roman paintings* and drawings, which is *grosso modo* where my research begins (but the same could apply to previous work, see **M.1-M.2**), we shall notice that the palette is reduced to light tones of grey and earth pigments, often leaving the white ground and pencil drawing under a thin layer

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of oil, nearly untouched and visible. I mainly use blacks, greys, whites, red oxide, ochre and graphite powder, often mixing my own colours with pigments and resins. In this case, I wanted to focus more on the structure of the city without 'local colour'; I wanted to avoid options that would have distracted me from the main track. I am interested in the skeleton of things rather than their external appearance, form defined by structure.

My photographs of the city at the time were mostly black and white, which I still prefer over colour prints. My drawing tools include different gradations of graphite pencils (from very hard to very soft ones) black crayon and charcoals.

> Like black & white photography, the black pencil is the most suitable tool to explore the undefinable. The black of the pencil is a natural black: it is obtained through the calcination of ivory or bone, or the combustion of minerals and plants. The black that the pencil explores is the point of the prism where colours disappear; it has always been the symbol of mourning and death, of the chaos of the darkness before the beginning of time, of the obscure. In everyday language we associate black with melancholy (black mood, black thoughts, black bile), drunkenness, magic, and the pencil has interpreted these as forms. Since the time of Plotinus, and also in the words of Dürer and Rembrandt, black has been the refuge for spiritual light, the dark veil that turns the eye within, towards inner life and the dream, in contemplative rituals that begin with immersion in black, the first exorcism of darkness. It is a means of exploring a mystery that is central to art: black within colour; shade within light.[5]

I have been exploring the possibilities within charcoal drawing and the use of black in painting for a number of years now. I recognize myself well enough in the description of the 'Saturnine temperament,'[6] often associated with colour black and the melancholic character.

137 Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I*,
      1514, engraving

In the etching *Epilogue* (Table III) for the exhibition "The Fables Project" on the Fables by Jean de La Fontaine, I explicitly referred to the *Melancholia I* by Albrecht Dürer (fig. 137) in the figure of the angel (almost a self-portrait) with the architect's tools and the cubic stone in the foreground; a geometric form which we find also in one of Anselm Kiefer's sculptures with a lead model of a plane. I find Kiefer inspiring for his use of alchemic symbolism,[7] original mythology, colour range and unconventional materials. In *Tsimsum (the contraction of light* - fig. 138) part of a series of works inspired to the Jewish Kabbalah, Kiefer composes his 'pictorial archaeology' with lead, broken glass, clothes covered with the dust of time. Lead is associated with the planet Saturn, and is traditionally considered a matter of transmutation, besides being an extremely flexible material. The sensuality and intense physical presence of his paintings convey a sophisticate spiritual content.

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[5] Angelo Capasso, introduction to "Come tutto nella sera", Elvio Chiricozzi's exhibition catalogue.

[6] Cf. R.Wittkower, *Nati sotto Saturno*, and S. Sontag on Benjamin

[7] Alchemy and its main phases is associated with four or five colours (black, white, green, red, yellow or gold) has been the subject of a series of prints and paintings executed between 1994 and 1998. This colour scheme is recurrent in my subsequent work.

Charcoal and graphite are among my favourite tools and those that have always been part of my industry. These are essential instruments, much more than pigments and colour tubes. Even when I paint I do not use much pigmented matter: the layers of paint are thin washes on top of one another,

138 Anselm Kiefer, *Tsimtsum*, 2000, part of five paintings on canvas, mixed media, 940x510 cm, installed on the choir of the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, Paris

without much 'body'. If Santa Teresa d'Avila used to define her daily meditation as 'dry praying,' I might say that what I do is 'dry painting.'[8]

Charcoal and pencil have the advantage of immediacy, of translating an image quickly onto paper. But it is also the intensity of charcoal's black and graphite's silvery grey that draws me to them and also explains my fascination for etching.

I have talked elsewhere in this text (**M.2a**, *Life, Death and Miracles...*) about the shadow in my work, and how this element responds not to a structural need (the definition of volume) but rather to an emotional necessity, which finds expression in a particular atmosphere or character of place. Thus, the blackness of the shadow conveys the 'unknown,' the 'mysterious,' the 'unspoken,' the 'hidden,' which form a particular place, and conversely any kind of 'zone,' beginning with the self and including the artwork, either appealing, frightening, uncanny or unsettling or all these things together - in other words, emotionally stimulating and thought-provoking.

One cannot talk about shadow without mentioning its direct opposite, light: shadow (or darkness) is to light like the Romantic attitude relates to the Enlightened. One cannot exist without the other; their

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[8] The deepest meaning in this affirmation of Teresa d'Avila is that she would pray even in absence of inspiration, which draws a similarity with the artist who goes to her studio and considers her work as a daily practice, regardless of 'inspiration,' which will only come through the process.

relationship is dialectic. It is hard to talk about light without being trivial: light is either there, or not; light can be natural or artificial, incorporated into a work as lighting (for instance in an installation, in which the quality of lighting is one of the main elements to consider), or used as a tool during the execution during the process (such as drawing from projections), or translated into a painting through colours and materials. While the idea of shadow is somehow more material, i.e. connected with something physical, heavy, with a *body* (cf. **Appendix**, "Dialogue with a fragment of text," p. 14), light is elusive, transient, temporal: it disappears with a switch and cannot be fixed to any material, not even a colour (although the white background is the closest we get to the idea of light from 'behind' or 'within' – a modern equivalent to the golden background of ancient icons).

In museums and galleries we are actually witnessing a return to 'darkness' after decades of the 'white cube dogma' and impersonal, cool lightning, which unmercifully revealed every detail of the displayed object, usually conceived independently from the exhibition space.

Spaces in the major art events and biennales resembles more and more a dark tunnels or cinemas, because videos and other technological devices require total darkness or dim light. Visitors are getting used to moving about in hesitant steps, for fear of bumping into each other; space that was once assertive, positive, clear (white walls, grey floor, even light *everywhere*) is now progressively replaced by the dreamy, dislocating experience of walking blindfolded, by the expectation of thrill and pleasures (which will mostly end up in frustration – and this is also part of the 'new-romantic' revival). Even the idea of *sublime* is there, as now the visitor feels that he or she is not in control of the situation anymore, cannot master and measure the space of the gallery with a glance, does not know what is waiting behind the corner and feels overwhelmed by gigantic 'blue chip' images around the gallery, often accompanied by sounds and noises, preferably disturbing ones. Passage from darkness to light is at the core of the Harris Museum project (**Appendix**, "Harris Museum Project").

I often leave my materials in their original colour, cardboard, aluminium, steel etc. Otherwise I would use mainly black and white in a way that recalls the written text – black signs on a white page (see **M 2a**).

When drawing from projections I appropriate archival material: that is, images from magazine photographs to reference paintings, transferred onto transparent paper and projected onto the canvas or paper with an OHP projector, combining the images to form a pattern or chosen composition.

I organize the work into *'giornate'* like a fresco painter: that is, I divide the surface into areas to be completed in a given length of time. Usually each section corresponds to one projection. Through this method the drawing acquires a non-hierarchic and 'equal' character, independently from the subject; one line is not more important than another. The drawing presents every subject in the same way: a house, a face or a horse. I cannot be in control of every single line; the image is projected on the canvas or paper and when I follow the lines with pencil I do not know fully what I am actually drawing, as the projected image is a distorted and slightly blurred close up. In the large drawing *The Feasts of the Empire* (fig. 139-141) the canvas is covered with a dense net of graphite signs, over white areas of the bare canvas, reconstructing from a distance the shape of Bruegel's Tower of Babel. We see the ghost of the Tower emerging from a tangle of cobwebs; the closer we come to the canvas, the more we distinguish details of buildings, people, streets, writings etc. The

Tower is made of all that, without one image prevailing over another, without any structural difference between the subjects represented: the quality of mark making remains the same all over the canvas.

L.2e - Impersonality, multiple possibilities

> Let others speak. They fill up the room with their voices, their discordant noise sounds in one's ears, they can be heard from the outside and from within. They speak so loudly and so clearly, that it is possible to write down their words and entire phrases on separate sheets of paper. It's as though certain utterances were relevant to his "painting."[9]

I consider my heterogeneous material as subject matter for my paintings or drawings, as the 'others speaking' in my work. The drawing does not display any particular gesture. I prefer the miniature, the intricate arabesque of small signs to the singular, grandiose statement; the idea of a collective or anonymous marks to the individual signature (which paradoxically, may well become an individual signature). Working from projections or existing images, I assume a detached attitude, as if I were painting according to different personalities or no defined personality at all. I am consciously operating against my instinctive tendency to paint and draw in a expressionistically. This method restrains my expressiveness to present a subject in a more 'objective' or filtered way. However, this is not a ban on emotional content, as 'pathos' (co-participation, empathy) is an important part of my work.

In such a work the use and choice of references is crucial, for what is represented is not left to the imagination or 'pure invention' of the artist, but comes from a given image. The originality of the work stems my choices, how I arrange, organize and transform the components of the representation. Even by working with a few images the possibilities are unlimited.

> Someone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that unicum which is the *self* of the writer, his inner sincerity and the discovery of his own truth. But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an ecyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable. (...) Think what would be to have a work conceived from outside the *self*, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic...
> Was this not perhaps what Ovid was aiming at, when he wrote about the continuity of forms? And what Lucretius was aiming at when he identified himself with that nature common to each and every thing?[10]

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[9] Ilya Kabakov, excerpt of text from "The Man Who Flew Into His Painting," 1982, in *The Text as the Basis of Visual Expression* (Oktagon, 1999), p. 312.

[10] Calvino, *Six Memos*, p. 124.
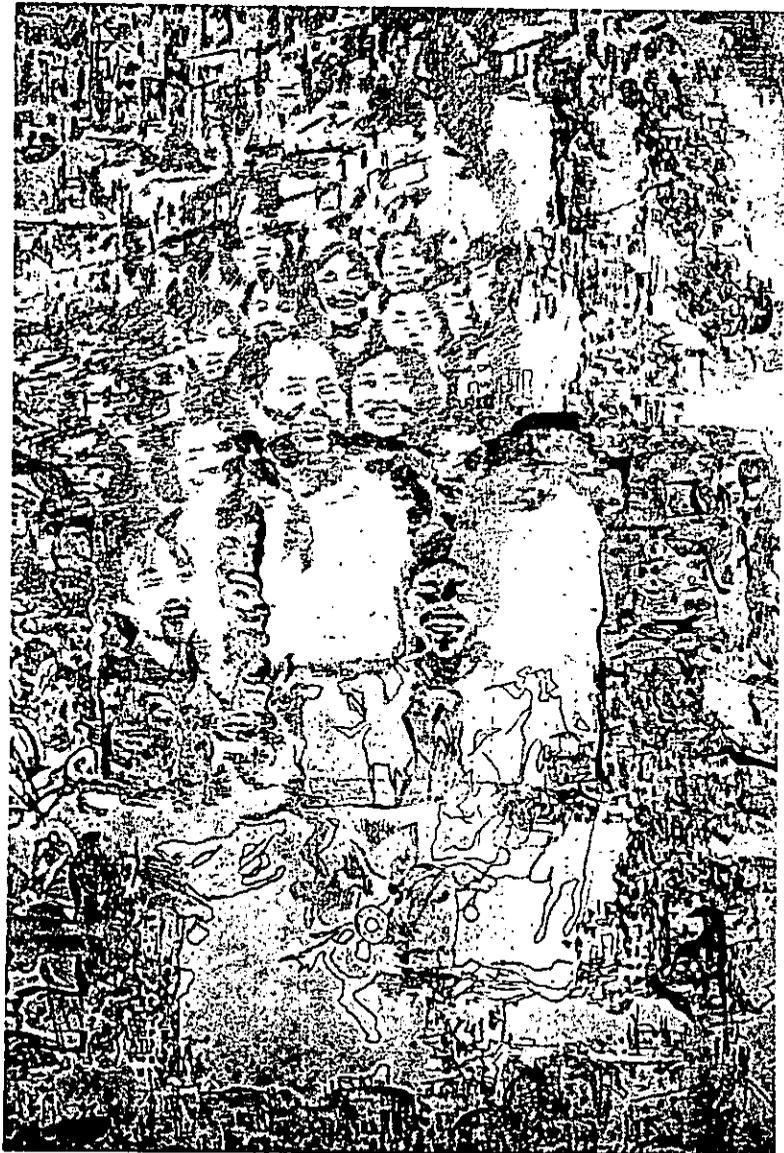
139 *The Feasts of the Empire*, 2002
Graphite on primed canvas
250x450 cm
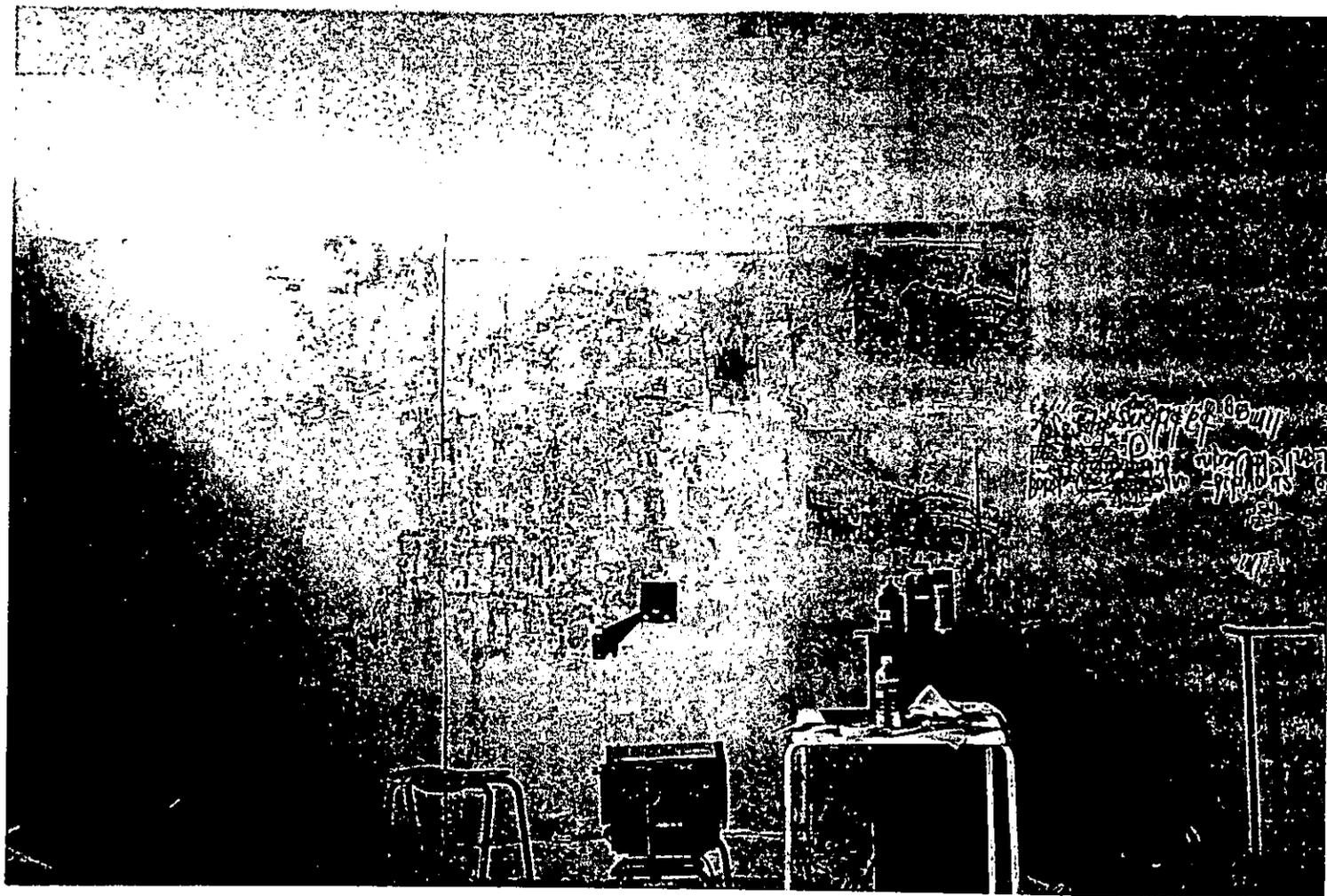
140-141   *The Feasts of the Empire*, details, 2002
           Graphite on canvas
           250x600 cm

L.2f - Text and visual

Writing and painting share a common archetypal gesture: each is executed with a flowing movement of the hand as it passes over an oblique plane on which it leaves a fluid sign that dries and remains imprinted. That first instinctive gesture is followed by others that pursue the same path, to return to trains of thought whose significance must be clarified; to bring to light forms of meanings; or simply to leap beyond the limits of the intelligible and to develop the primary sign as a continuous individual thread that follows a single, uninterrupted creative impulse. (...)The watershed that divides writing and painting lies in the work involved, which in the case of the latter has a more striking physical aspect, since painting entails total involvement both in the space it produces and in the time for the colour to settle on the canvas. Painting is work because it necessitates pauses and is executed by physically constructing the space through a process of subtraction, eliminating empty space from space. [11]

Writing has not the physicality of painting and does not require the same equipment. Although I do most of my writing on the computer, I still use pen and paper for quick notes, personal and extemporaneous annotations, travel reports, sketches. I could divide my writing in the following categories: .

Descriptive writing (communication function) – *writing notes for myself* (clarifying function) – *writing fiction* (poetic function) - *writing journals* (documentation function) – *writing as drawing* (expressive, aesthetic function)

This thesis ideally includes all these kinds of writing, giving priority to a narrative, essay-like prose. Conscious of the limitations of language to grasp a visual artwork, I have tried to keep the writings on a parallel with the visuals, not trying to explain or make sense of them through words. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto spoke of allusive writing, "to arouse associations deep in the reader's mind and feelings, not necessarily to communicate plainly."[12]

I extensively use lists and systems, although I do not write systematically; to an external viewer it would appear chaotic, disorganized, as I write and draw on every scrap piece of paper I find - or on different notebooks that have only a vague classification order, and often I forget where I wrote that particular text until I find it again when I clear up my working space. Piles of sheets, books and notes are spread beside my writing desk; the metaphor of the archaeologist is fitting, as I feel like I am constantly discovering some remote trace from my own archive, often unaware of how much is there.

I keep many notebooks: a small notebook is suitable for travelling, a heavier, bigger sketchbook for studio work or for small distances. It isn't too difficult to find a particular text by memorizing the notebook on which I have written it. The notebooks function as mnemonic places, each associated with a specific project, place, segment of time or subject (cf. A.1).

Dispersion and division are among the consequences of the Tower of Babel. The writing practice is nomadic *par excellence*: all that is required is a notebook and a pen. I often envy writers for the lightness of their equipment, as opposed to the heaviness of canvases, painting material, tools and the quantity of reference material that I ship from one place to another.

Writing is more a necessity than a poetic expression: it fixes ideas, sudden intuitions, words that might suggest a painting or relate to an earlier work. I sketch or scribble notes to myself. I like the sound of words

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[11] Capasso, op. cit.
[12] Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations*, p. xiii

and their infinite combinations, and the way one can play with them, creating puns, translating them into different languages, or combining words from different languages. By writing in English most of the time, I think directly in English although this is not my first language; nevertheless, I am conscious that my writing is conditioned by the structure of my mother tongue, Italian. Sentences are longer and less straightforward; in English the way from A to B is often a direct line, but in Italian it is involuted, turning on itself, meeting other thoughts half way and mentioning them between commas. I wonder if this influences the way I paint: my drawings always seem to go around in a spiral, to build up through accumulation and redundancy; the line is continuous, sinuous, moving in circles and going back on itself.

Often words are written directly on the canvas, or onto the wall beside the canvas; there is an urgency about this writing that cannot be confined to the paper. The words become signs, therefore drawing: my handwriting dictates a particular movement, the way the sign sits on the canvas, the way the letters are bent or defined by a certain pressure of the hand. Words do not only convey meaning, they have an aesthetic as well. When I asked thirteen people of different nationality to write the sentence "we are building the Tower of Babel" in their own language on the same piece of paper, the result was an extraordinary assemblage of signs, each with a specific character and its own beauty; what the words actually meant was less important.

Writing about one's own work can be a hard struggle and a frustrating search for exactitude: as Calvino pointed out,

> Rather than speak to you of what I have written, perhaps it would be more interesting to tell about the problems that I have not *yet* resolved, that I don't know how to resolve, and what this will cause me to write: sometimes I try to concentrate on the story I would like to write, and I realize that what interests me is something else entirely or, rather, not anything precise but everything that does not fit in with what I ought to write – the relationship beween a given argument and all its possible variants and alternatives, everything that can happen in time and space. This is a devouring and destructive obsession, which is enough to render writing impossible. In order to combat it, I try to limit the field or what I have to say, divide it into still more limited fields, then subdivide these again, and so on and so on. Then another kind of vertigo sizes me, that of the detail of the detail of the detail, and I am drawn into the infinitesimal, the infinitely small, just as I was previously lost in the infinitely vast.[13]

A similar attitude informs my writing to way I paint or draw. On the one hand, I am conscious of the impossibility of saying everything with words, to cover everything that Babel evokes. On the other hand, the subject encourages this shift between the infinitely large (the size of the construction and metaphorically, the vast amount of interconnected material, cultural, socio-political implications) and the infinitely small (the obsession for the detail, the swarming of the signs that fill the canvas like a crowd of people, or ants: Babel in the superhuman, divine perspective is an ant-like work), both expression of the *horror vacui* that finds a correspondent in the mythical building: clumsy presence, ruin, idol, utopian statement and permanent work-in-progress.

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[13] Calvino, *Six Memos*, p. 68.

F.2g - The other; on influences

> Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply – humanistically – a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being *in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself.[14]

There is much talking today about the culture of the 'other,' and inevitably, giving the multi-cultural, super-exposed or super-modern, globalized or progressively becoming global society in which we live.

One possible answer to the topical question "how can one participate in globalization, that is be part of the dialogue among artists and thinkers, and still hold onto one's own tradition?"[15] is perhaps not so much "try to be yourself" as much as "try to see the other within yourself," that is, take from your own history (personal history but also cultural tradition) and place it in a wider context, connect it, compare it, relate it to other histories that compose the mosaic of the world's history (and contemporary reality).

> Being simultaneously itself and the other, familiar and nevertheless strange, the subject is that which has no face and whose face exists from the point of view of the other.[16]

To consider one's observatory point as a lighthouse from which to view far away places until now unimaginable; to question the very notion of tradition; to explore unfamiliar paths in life as well as in painting, inserting them into existing familiar patterns. Far from constituting a 'loss of identity,' it will enrich and strengthens one's sense of belonging to a wider community, transnational and transcultural. Although it may sound like utopia, this concept has been explained by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, adducing the Japanese use and modification of other's cultures without discrediting their traditions as a valid example:

> Experience shows that when cultural influences cross historic frontiers, they get adapted as well as adopted. Cultures can borrow from each other without sacrifice of identity.[17]

The macroscopic character in today's globalization dynamics is that

> Identities are now forged in reaction to world trends, not merely by self-differentiation from neighbours.[18]

'Mediation' is the word that could help us find our way out of the dilemma posed by (too many) existing possibilities and equal historical settings. Of course, this ability for mediation requires a certain sensibility and a sense of one's own cultural identity, a knowledge of one's particular viewpoint. According to Paul Crowther,

> The fact of 'intertextuality' then, does not, in itself, count as an argument against artistic originality. Indeed, it plays a key role within it. [...] No matter how saturated the individual is by collective life and cultural influences, each of us *qua* embodied subject necessarily sees the world from a particular existential viewpoint which cannot be occupied by another person. This means that all the influences which impinge on us are not passively registered in a quantitative 'mix' like so many discrete elements in a container. Rather they are mediated by our own personal history.

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[14] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1991), p.13

[15] In the words of Joyce Kozloff, courtesy the artist.

[16] Mahamoud Sami-Ali, "L'espace de l'inquiétante étrangeté," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse 9* (Spring 1974): 33, 34. Quoted in Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 223.

[17] Fernandez-Armesto, op.cit., pp.561-562

[18] Ibid.

'Mediate' here means such things as queried, puzzled-over, taken-apart, put back together again, qualified, compared, accepted, rejected or thoroughly transformed. Now, if the influences are brought to bear on an artist, they are not only subject to interpretative processes of the kind just mentioned; they are also subject to further mediation through the actual process of making the artwork. What all these facts mean, of course, is that, through mediation by a personal history and creative artifice, influences admit, either individually or in concert, of *qualitative transformations*. The slightest inflection or nuance at the level of style can substantially change the meaning and significance of an influence.[19]

And it is precisely in this *possibility of change* that a solution to the impasse of the 'deja vu' (been there, done that) could be sought. Although "for the rest of us, who live in societies in touch with each other and constantly modified by the influences we exchange, our sense of getting more like one another is irresistible" as a consequence of the fact that "global culture has scattered the world with lookalike styles and products,"[20] there is still room for the difference.

The risk of 'cultural entropy' is there; 'minor' languages disappear, lifestyles become more uniform with the advance of technology and artistic trends (one does not speak about 'movements' anymore) are more and more similar to fashion trends worldwide. I say this without touching upon economics or politics. Nevertheless, I believe that reality is still much more complex than it appears and that what statistics reveal us on a nearly daily basis should not be taken for granted.[21]

Boris Groys[22] once said that the well-advised artist knows that on a deeper level 'globalization' may be just another myth of our time, as utopia was for the builders of the Tower to find unity of name under the flag of Babel (one people, one language, one name...) and that if one does not get recognition in a given place, one might get it at another. Something can still be out of fashion 'here' but up-to-date somewhere else. However, by 'here' he meant the former Soviet Union, and by 'somewhere else' the contemporary Western European art scene. It would probably not succeed the other way. The centres of power of the art market remain concentrated in a few spots in the Western hemisphere, while the most interesting signs of creative activity often come from 'other' places, often at the margins of those centres. The last edition of Dokumenta Kassel, 2002, mirrors this present situation, by creating an event on a global scale, with conferences and debates in various cities on different continents, especially focusing on Asia. It is probably true that the major watershed in the future will be between those who remain (by circumstance) 'local' and the privileged who will participate to the great 'global' competition. (Like nomads and babelians.)

[19] Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From aesthetic to self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.197.
[20] Fernandez-Armesto, op. cit., p. 560.
[21] Cf. Alessandro Baricco, *Next: piccolo libro sulla globalizzazione e sul mondo che verrà* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2002). Baricco analyses the deceptiveness of statistics with the example of the diffusion of a popular drink, Coke, in every corner of the globe: although it is true that Coke is exported nearly everywhere, there is a *qualitative* difference (in terms of cultural incidence) in the 380 bottles per year the average American drinks, and the four bottles the average Indian drinks during the same time.
[22] Art historian and theoretician and visiting lecturer at the Internationale Somerakademie für Bildende Kunst in Salzburg. The above references are taken from lectures attended at the Sommerakademie in 2001.

L.2h - Tradition

> Artistic creativity is linked to originality – [...] that is a positive notion, rather than the mere
> absence of constraint. Specifically, it involves taking up traditions and going beyond it in the
> direction of refinement and innovation.
> [...] Originality is not created *ex-nihilo*. Rather, it is a function of the relation between the
> particular work and, in the broadest sense, tradition. The debt to other works of those pieces which
> are original in the sense of refinement is obvious. But it is even true of the great innovatory works.
> Picasso's and Braque's radical breaks with Renaissance perspective between 1907 and 1914, for
> example, were not achieved at a stroke. Rather, they involve an exploration of familiar genres such
> as still-life, and an assimilation of imagery from non-European art. [...] On these terms, in other
> words, artistic originality is not an absolute. It is relative to, and embodies, specifiable traces of
> that from which it develops, or against which it reacts.[23]

What should the contemporary artist do? According to the modernist tradition, to express himself or herself, and to say something new. But modernity came to an end when the overproduction of tradition and historical debate imposed a fragmentation on our permanent archives (the phenomenon that marc Augé calls 'supermodernity'); we have lost the ability of saying what is new not because there cannot be anything new anymore, but because we are not sure of what is well-established in terms of historical narrative and spaces. In fact, we have *many* competitive historical spaces. How can we deal with historical representation, narrative, canons?

How to recreate the context that has been vanished with the crisis of the idea of modernity? How to substitute the lack of a collective narrative? We are very much like babelians facing their sudden impossibility of communicating in the same language, and the vanishing of one common ground, a shared context. They/we are facing fragmentation, dispersion, individuality, solitude, *sameness* of experience on a superficial level. A possible alternative is to invent one's own context/tradition/set of narratives (which also explains the emergence of installation art, an art genre that reinvents its own context); *if* the 'new gesture' is no longer possible, this may be true at least as the idea of radical break with what was there 'before.'

In any case, whether one assumes a line of continuity with a given tradition, opposes it, or assumes a critical approach to it, dealing with it is unavoidable. There never has been such an isolated outburst of creativity without prcedence, even in more 'radical' art. There is truth in what Boris Groys said about the artist's need to relate to the dead rather than to his or her contemporaries. Ultimately, we look at the work of our contemporaries, but we continue a dialogue with our predecessors, those whose achievements and problematics we admire, or those who opened a path not yet fully explored.

Rather than preoccupying myself with making 'the new,' I would deal with tradition (and primarily the one that has been mostly influential in my art practice, namely the Western European and Mediterranean culture from antiquity onward, which incorporates a number of heterogeneous components, without excluding other influences like the Far Eastern) in a critical, but not necessarily confrontational manner. Assimilation and transformation have more potential than refusal and destruction, in my viewpoint. In this way it would be possible to supply a collective narrative, art still able to communicate on a deep, spiritual level, and possibly able to go beyond the 'fashionable instant.'

> There are constants in human experience whereby there is no absolute gap between past and present. There is
> always a universal core which recurs under different historical circumstances.[24]

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[23] Crowther, op. cit., pp. 194-195

[24] Paul Crowther, from an interview with Ian Hamilton Finlay (*Art and Design*, 1994). Courtesy the author.

L.2i - Craft

The grandest utopia of any time was the invention of a universal language within the community of humankind: a perfectly organized microcosm able to recompose and reconcile differences. A metaphor for the artist's work: the artist's utopia might well be to find a universal language through her art.

It has been argued that it is not possible to speak of universal language in art because of the different reference systems existing in each culture that can define, for instance, what it is and what is not. But it is still possible to recover the idea of an artwork that can be enjoyed independently from its context or culture, yet without dismissing its historical-cultural framework that undoubtedly formed its genesis. Perhaps what is common or 'universal' is the ability to appreciate an object that appears to be human (thus 'artificial'), made with a certain knowledge or skill.

As Paul Crowther aptly put,

> "Whilst what counts as aesthetically valuable varies according to different cultures, there is an interesting phenomenon which cuts across these divides. One finds it, for example, in both the Renaissance and our own time, and in numerous African and Oriental cultures both past and present. It consists in an admiration for artefacts which are well made, or unusual instances of their kind. Our attention focuses here not simply on function, but on the relation between function and the qualities of being well made or unusual.
> [...] Indeed (in Western culture at least), this contemplative attitude towards artefacts is accentuated and entrenched by conventions pertaining to the format and (where relevant) the packaging of artworks, and the context in which they are encountered."[25]

The context in which a certain object or artwork is located is strictly connected to its appreciation, which does not diminish the importance of its constituent elements. Therefore I would stress the conveyance of one's idea into a suitable form, that is, the ability to make sense of raw materials that we consciously chose to manipulate while following a particular mental drawing, idea or 'vision,' without knowing in detail the result of our manipulation. The development of this ability or skill comes through experience and work; but we should not underestimate the impact of an efficient educational system. It will be acknowledged in passim (since the nature of this text does not allow a longer digression) that we are currently witnessing a crisis of the art school as the institutions in which traditional skills are fostered and passed from teacher to student, at least in the European and America. A fine craft tradition still survives in the art schools of Eastern Europe and probably in Asia too, where on the other hand, there might be insufficient training in conceptual and theoretical articulation. The false idea of a contradiction existing between being able to express oneself in manual terms and the ability to theorize about one's own work is still mostly unresolved.

As Ilya Kabakov recently said, "being a professional artist means to work hard and constantly, as a pianist exercise for 12 hours a day. It's not only a mental thing, it's a physical thing as well."

Cf. Ian Hamilton Finlay's statement concerning the issue of the heritage of the past: "You see, I don't understand or feel the past as other people seem to feel it. I regard the French Revolution as being not very far away at all. It is very real to me. I can't feel any distance in space between me and the French Revolution any more than when I read Hegel. When I read Hegel, I do not think that this kind of thing belongs to the past, it seems to me to belong now. Similarly when I read Heraclitus, they are all real to me. I live in the same world where the French Revolution took place, where Heraclitus lived and I expect the culture to do the same. But now it is a crime – a crime not to live in the fashionable instant."

[25] Crowther, *Critical aesthetics and postmodernism*, new ed. (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 77.

Regarding this last point, I still believe in the necessity for the artist to be directly involved in production. Although it is now common practice for an artist (especially 'conceptual' artists of the last generation) to commission the execution of their work by experts in 'making,' thus remaining engaged with the ideation phase only, I still feel that the actual making of the work by the artist is crucial for its transformation. This does not imply a dismissal any external help or assistantship in the fabrication of a particularly complex work. It means that the artist is in control of the process and, more importantly, that the initial idea will necessarily go through a series of changes and adjustments *while making the piece*. Even more interestly, the very act of making could determine a new mental set or solution, idea or form. By making I produce thought; by transforming raw matter into a finished piece I transform my inner self. At stake here is a kind of psychological structure – everything refers to the individual. The social combines with a personal utopia, from which the creative act stems.

> The mark of the Saturnine temperament is the self-conscious and unforgiving relation to the self, which can never be taken for granted. The self is a text – it has to be deciphered. (Hence, this is a an apt temperament for intellectuals.) The self is a project, something to be built. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for artists and martyrs, those who court the purity and beauty of a failure, as Benjamin says of Kafka.) And the process of building a self and its works is always too slow. One is always in arrears to oneself.[26]

L.2j - History

> The best part of history, Goethe said, is that it inspires. This is a maxim by which all creative people have lived and worked, including those who become creative because they have no choice. Willful destruction obviates the burdening weight of history, leaving only the liberating elixir of its inspiration. History is now.
> The accumulated remnants of the past are important elements in culture, and in the individual's existence, but exists only to be transformed into the material of the present. Willful destruction is an attack on history that at the same time drives its survivors to react by elevating history to a near-religious importance. Whenever this happens, history becomes pernicious, infecting the present with the odor of the dead. The architect must love history for the forms of hope it offers, but also must clear the air, even by the suspect means of transforming the sacred remnants into disposable remnants for the future.[27]

The same could apply to the artist in relation to history and art history in particular (the burden of one's tradition, heritage, models or references). The 'destruction' is symbolized by the degree of manipulation and transformation of sources, which are often stimuli for new work. The 'history of a work' is relayed by the simultaneous and visible presence of all the passages through which it has gone, by means of layers, rehandling, surface build-up, erasures, stitches, superimposition of forms and materials.

To use ready-made images as a basis for a new work is to mark something that is already existent, that already has a history. When I take a reproduction of an old city map, glue it onto a larger sheet of paper, cover it with a layer of paint and draw my own map of the city, copying aerial views or maps of the modern city, I am conscious of what lies underneath the painting and I want it to be visible. Even when it is barely visible or not visible at all, the fact that the image was there affects the process and the final result. When I transfer

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[26] Sontag, Under the Sign of Saturn, p. 120.

photographic images onto paper I will use photocopies or silkscreens; thus the initial image will be transformed into a different one, and the more the passages (or mechanical reproductions), the greater the level of transformation. The image obtained in this way will be the basis for the subsequent drawing or painting that I make on top of it, mixing the mechanical reproduction with the freehand mark.

As events in life seldom happen in a neat sequence but nearly always overlap and merge with one another (there is not 'one history' but many histories going on at the same time, running parallel and occasionally crossing one another), so in my art, the layering, overlapping, use of transparency and opaqueness, juxtaposition of ancient and modern elements, expresses the main idea of *simultaneity*.

Hegel coined the concept of 'dynamic conciliation' (*Aufhebung*, also: overcoming): for thought to grasp reality in its complexity, it must see the 'unity of the determinations in their opposition,' to resolve both the problem of identity (to recognize the individual, the singular) as well as that of contradiction (to accept the stranger, diversity). We can dispose of rational thought (its 'driving soul' is the *dialectic*) to resolve the oppositions of life. Hegel, like other philosophers before him, did not see art (as much as religion) as an adequate means to attain this unabridged comprehension of reality; philosophy was the obvious route to this synthesis. However, a more open interpretation of his thought might indicate that history is no longer the revelation of the absolute, but the *eternally incomplete* and risky realization of humanity, dramatically involved in producing itself and its own history, like the story of Babel foretells.

L.2k – Myth

Babel is a text about a myth. Or rather, a series of myths: myth of unity, of the common origin of humanity and language, of human striving to transcend limits. All myths deal with a lost origin. The sense of an origin buried in the depths of time and of a work that could not be accomplished carries a feeling of nostalgia, loss and failure, and the longing for a vanished utopia. These complex feelings can be used as a poetic device in contemporary art, by presenting an event that has either already happened (idea of loss, nostalgia), or that is going to happen in an hypothetical future (a utopian idea). The former possibility would provoke the question: "what happened?" or even "why was I not there?" (as for so many 'historical' events that we have irremediably missed), while the latter would provoke the question "why did it not happen?" or, "why did it fail?"

Another question: what is the relationship between reality and myth in the artistic process?

The answer is to be found in the hidden idea, sound, or word - that is, the nucleus from which the work springs. It can be as simple as: nobody will see ever the Tower. Or: you can only see it from afar, without ever reaching it.

Is the Tower an *archetype* within a myth? And what is the difference between the two?

The myth is a conscious, systematic, narrative formulation of very ancient events that were always present (innate) in the people's consciousness. The archetype is located in the individuals' unconscious, as the most secret and hidden part of it.

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[27] Woods, *Radical Reconstruction*, p. 29.

The myth is the visible, the external; the archetype is the invisible, the inner.

Archetype----------individual / collective

[*arché* = beginning, origin]
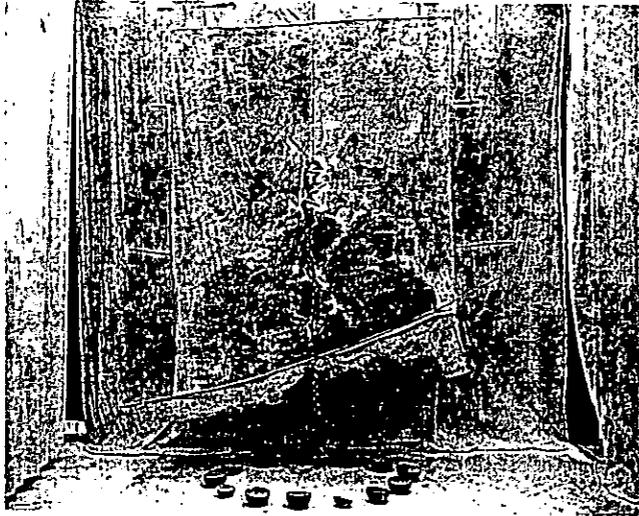
142   Jacobo Borges, from the installation *Se Vino*
Abajo el Cielo, 1995. Mixed media,
Residenzgalerie, Salzburg

The myth is vertical while history is horizontal. The myth transcends the peculiarities of a specific time and space to deliver a broader, 'universal' message. The myth could be considered as "a revenge of history that vindicates its removal by coming back again in that timeless set."[28]

Primigenia (primitive; primary; original) is a key word when talking about the myth; artist Jacobo Borges used this word to characterize his project on the Flood, inspired by the sixteenth century painting cycle by Caspar Memberger.[29] This word entails at least two concepts: the idea of the present and the idea of the origin. If we take a look at Borges' project, we can see how the artist used very basic materials like tar and earth (i.e., the materials used to build the biblical ark) to visually convey this idea. Borges' first idea was to build the ark and to tell the story as it appears in the Flood. Later he preferred not to tell the story but to represent a *place* and the drama of having to leave it due to impending danger.

His main idea was therefore to show the *memory* of what had happened *after* the Flood.

Similarly, an exhibition of work about Babel could display 'documentary material' as if the fact took place in the distant past (an archaeolgical exhibition), or a series of utopian projects about a future tower still to be realized. In both cases what resonates is what is missing; the void left by the lost or unaccomplished event. The tower is an empty, blank space: the part to be imagined-reconstructed?

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[28] Cf. O. Marquard, *Estetica e Anestetica* (Bologna, 1994), quoted in Angelo Trimarco, *Opera d'arte totale*, p. 37.
[29] This project was site-conceived and exhibited as an installation at the Residenzgalerie in Salzburg, 1995, with the title *Se vino abajo el cielo - Der Himmel Senkte Sich* (The sky came tumbling down). The following text is based on a conversation with the artist.

L.21 - Unfinished (void)

> From times immemorial, man has aspired to the infinite. The first known attempt to
> reach infinity occurred in Babel and is told in Genesis... Their attempt was doomed to
> fail, for God, fearing that their aspirations may be too high, "confounded their language,
> that they may not understand one another's speech" (Genesis 11:4). Ever since, the
> Tower of Babel has become an allegory of the infinite - or of man's futile efforts to reach
> it.[30]

The Tower is not only an allegory of the infinite in a metaphysical sense, but also of the more concrete notion of *unfinished*, a quality that the artist may adopt as a poetic and technical device.

In one of his reviews of the Parisian Salon paintings, Denis Diderot wrote "...Must a writer say all? Must a painter paint everything? Can't he leave anything at all to my imagination?"[31]

For a painting or an artwork in general to be interesting there should be a certain level of not understanding what is shown, that is a degree of 'mystery,' to allow the viewer to complete what he or she sees. As Daniel Liebeskind indicated, the void or empty space is a quality; in a building this is self-evident, it's the space between the walls, between one floor and the other, one room and the other; in a city it's the space between the buildings, the streets etc. The same criteria can be applied to a painting or installation, where the empty areas are crucial to the experience of objects in space.

The void is a possible impulse to begin a work, when we are confronted with a fragment of an object or an idea that begs completion. The idea of *unfinishedness* or the infinite is connected to the idea of the void: what is unfinished always leaves room for the potential completion of that emptiness, for the work of imagination itself.

Unfinished, unspoken, infinite, undefined, *vague*: these terms seems to indicate something of a negative quality, something connected with imprecision, opaqueness, indeterminacy. But once again, Italo Calvino's *Six Memos...* might provide a useful insight regarding this issue: talking of 'exactitude' and of its direct opponent, 'vagueness,' Calvino moves from the analysis of Italian poet Leopardi to demonstrate that vagueness itself does not exclude exactitude and vice versa.

> Giacomo Leopardi maintained that the more vague and imprecise language is, the more poetic it
> becomes. I might mention in passing that as far as I know Italian is the only language in which the
> word *vago* (vague) also means 'lovely, attractive.' Starting out from the original meaning of
> 'wandering,' the word *vago* still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is
> associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure. [...] So
> this is what Leopardi asks of us, that we may savor the beauty of the vague and indefinite! What
> he requires *is a highly exact and meticulous attention to the composition of each image*, to the
> minute definition of details, to the choice of objects, to the lighting and atmosphere, all in order to
> attain the desired degree of vagueness. [...] The poet of vagueness can only be the poet of
> exactitude, who is able to grasp the subtlest sensations with eyes and ears and quick, unerring
> hands.[32]

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[30] Eli Maor, *To Infinity and Beyond: a Cultural History of the Infinite* (Boston: Birkhauser, 1987), p. 136.

[31] Denis Diderot, from "Francois Boucher, 'Shepherd Scene' (Salon of 1763)" – Cf. *Enlightenment, Common Sense and Sensibility*, p. 56.

[32] Calvino, op. cit., pp. 57-60.

While the qualities of gracefulness and even beauty may not be the most urgent for the contemporary artist, attributes to claim are rather those of mutability, openness, transience.

These relate to *imperfection*, also the state to which the Tower is doomed, a consequence of the impossibility of its ambitious, 'totalistic' task. The word 'difetto' in Italian means 'shortcoming', 'defect', 'fault' but also 'deficiency', 'lack'; it designates something imperfect but it also indicates something missing, a void.

In "From the One to the Many: Pluralism in today's Thought" Matei Calinescu mentions Ihab Hassan; raising the question of models (social but also more general ones), he quotes: "is every model of 'perfection' really an image of the void? If perfection is indeed an 'image of the void,' then the poet Yves Bonnefoy should be right when he states, bluntly but how suggestively: "L'imperfection est la cime."[33] (Imperfection is the top). Calinescu considers the brief poem by Bonnefoy as emblematic of the (post-modern) spirit of our time; I shall quote it in full as an epitaph to the Tower:

> Il y avait qu'il fallait détruire et détruire et détruire,
> Il y avait que le salut n'est qu'à ce prix.
> Ruiner la face nue qui monte dans le marbre
> Marteler toute forme toute beauté.
> Aimer la perfection parce qu'elle est le seuil,
> Mais la nier sitôt connue, l'oublier morte,
> L'imperfection est la cime.[34]

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[33] Matei Calinescu, "From the One to the Many: Pluralism in Today's Thought", *Zeitgeist in Babel – The Postmodern Controversy*, ed. I. Hoesterey (Indiana University Press, 1991), p.158.

[34] Yves Bonnefoy, *Hier régnant désert* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964), p. 33, quoted in Calinescu, op. cit., p. 159.

CONCLUSIONS

I have conducted you across three different levels of the metaphorical Tower; we started from the Archive, the foundation or cellar of the building, in which the historical implications connected with Babel were explored and considered in connection with my personal history and the genesis of the project.

We continued by climbing the Tower's body to her centre, the Museum or Gallery, were the *body* of visual, practical work produced is exhibited and related with the *corpus* of written material that examines different meanings associated with the original myth. Finally, we ended our journey at the top of the Tower, where the symbolism of the head finds a parallel with the idea of Laboratory, a place to explore working process and the broader concepts that the choice of subject entails.

This kind of organization or systematization of the Tower research does not imply a hierarchy among the contents of the three different levels, but is intended to help up visualize them in a configuration that is on the one hand progressive and on the other hand open to free roaming. The journey through the book could virtually start from any of the three sections without losing their meaning, although by starting from the basement (Archive) the reader receives a general historical background before moving on to the catalogue of work (Museum) and the theoretical elaboration on art practice (Laboratory).

In reality the *whole text* is a laboratory; it represents the virtual place in which I have been exploring and developing the possibilities inherent to an image and the various forms this elaboration has taken. The present text is a *portable laboratory* not unlike the portable models displayed in section 8 of the Museum. At the same time it is Archive and Museum, that is, a place in which to arrange and go through the files of reference material and an illustrated catalogue of visual work. It is three books in one.

To simplify, we could associate the three levels with three phases of my research:

A	–	M	–	L
collect		display		elaborate

while keeping in mind that the three moments or phases run equally through the whole text and through the making of the artwork.

The 'reconstruction of Babel' that I have attempted in this work (written and painted) is a symbolical reconstruction of my own reference material in light of my art practice. It allowed me to take all the images, texts, visuals out of their boxes and out of the studio and to place them into the historical context of a contemporary debate.

I tried to hold the theoretic study together with the studio practice to prove the continuity between those two parts of the creative process; I am convinced that it is far from obsolete to stress their interconnectedness and mutuality. Prejudices still exist on both sides, the theoreticians and the artists looking suspiciously at each other, while it should be evident that "the debate about theory versus practice, words versus art, is part of an outmoded and debased romantic tradition" as Griselda Pollock effectively said.[1] Artists should assume the

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[1] Griselda Pollock, "Framing Feminism", From *Women's Artists' Slide Library Journal* (No. 26, 1988): pp.22-23. Quoted in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson, Blackwell, 2001.

challenge to push the boundaries beyond the easel (i.e., the visual) and re-appropriate that space of thought-production and political intervention that has been part of their sphere of action from time immemorial (Leonardo's writings are an example!) but too often let at its potential state.

Finally, this thesis examines the urgency of retrieving an historical narrative in painting and visual art in general; history as well as personal history, broadly speaking, *stories*,[2] and pursuing the multiple levels of a wider context (artistic, sociologic, political, cultural etc.). We do not want ivory towers: the artist wishes to communicate and make sense of the reality she lives in, possibly to change it. The tower is the world, and the artist is part of it.

The way this historical narrative has been personally elaborated finds its exemplification in the final project that accompanies this dissertation, the "Reconstucting Babel" exhibition at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston. The exhibition is presented as an archaeological, topographical and architectural survey into the Tower of Babel, highlighting specific characteristics of the Tower from different viewpoints.

The displayed body of work embraces a three years' span, although it mostly consists of works produced in the last year of research. It is arranged as an organic whole, or a total installation. The work consists of paintings, drawings, prints, 3D objects, texts, and small scale models.

In my interpretation the Harris Museum becomes the Tower of Babel: this idea is achieved by considering the whole Museum, its spaces and collections, as part of the artwork and by intervening on several parts of the building, from the basement to the very top. The building is the container for the fragments representing Babel and it is the Tower itself in virtue of its space configuration, and the role that it plays in the local community too.[3]

The complete sentence is as follows: "The debate about theory versus practice, words versus art, is part of an outmoded and debased romantic tradition which cannot be allowed to prevent women having access to the vital cultural theories which feminists in education sites are developing. [...]"

[2] N.B.: in Italian the word *'storia'* means 'history' and 'story' at the same time. Only the context would define the meaning of the term. *'La Storia e le storie'* would express more succinctly the above concept.

[3] The Harris Museum in Preston could inspire a small Babel story, which would take place in a remote province on the north-west of the Kingdom. The New Tower was to be a monument to human knowledge: it should have contained the best of science and art produced by the Babelian species. As the work started, the Tower progressed without apparent effort. A triumvirate was supervising the work: it was known as the "Three H's": Harris, Horrocks, Hibbert.
Edmund Robert Harris, the king Nabucodonossor of our story, was the local lawyer who left £ 300,000 to the building and furnishing of the Free Library, Museum and Art Gallery in 1877. **James Hibbert** was the architect of the building; **Horrocks** was the wealthy owner of the local cotton mills who contributed to the enterprise.
In 1892 the "Preston Guardian" reports:

"The site of the building is one of the most elevated parts of Preston, and the building itself is of a form eminently fitted to crown an eminence. The square massive lantern is a conspicuous feature for miles around. The Acropolis or citadel was generally placed on summits, and the structure of this classic form are more imposing and picturesque than gothic erections in similar situations."

Like the Tower of Babel, the Harris was born under the sign of utopia: to bring knowlegde to all people, a universal knowledge; to be a landmark in the region, in reason of its imposing structure; to virtually and physically elevate the visitor to the celestial heights, as one can sense by climbing from ground floor to Egyptian Balcony, which in bright sunny days – not a common thing over there – appears like the closest thing to heaven, transfigured by the Northern light pouring through the high windows all around its perimeter.
Like Babel, it remained unfinished: the grand staircase that should have provided the main entrance to the edifice was never built, probably due to a lack of funding.

"Reconstructing Babel" maps out a parallel story inside the Harris Museum, whose narrative is held together by the numerous signs and fragments scattered in various sites of the building, more or less hidden, sometimes "confused" (it reminds us the confusion of the Babelians who could not understand the different languages that all of a sudden were spoken inside the building...) among the heterogeneous collections of this Victorian monument to human progress.

I like to quote again Wittgenstein's metaphor of the rope in which there isn't a single thread that runs from the beginning to the end of the rope, but a series of fibers intertwined to one another: the strength of the rope is given by the fact that there is a vast amont of fibers overlapping. Similarly, in the exhibition we have a series of pieces held together by the structure of the building and by the connections established by the visitors during their deambulation through the museum, map in hand, eyes ready to catch the "strange element" among a profusion of objects. They trace the map of this virtual story; it is through their interpretation that the clues acquire a meaning.

We have mentioned maps and movement in space: "Reconstructing Babel" is indeed a *symbolic journey*, a passage from darkness to light into the Tower, from the depth and obscurities of its basement – where the building begins – through its various levels until we reach the top of the building (the Egyptian balcony), the brightest spot and a real site of contemplation, from which it is possible to overview the whole Harris Museum interior (and metaphorically, the whole world from the top of the tower).

The visitor is offered a path to follow through the building/story of Babel traced on the map that is provided at the entrance of the building (see TABLE II at the end of this section). The red signs refer to the artworks to be found among the Museum's displays, on five levels in which seven zones have been identified. The reference comes from the Sumerian temple of e-Pa, and here it corresponds to different bodies of work, associated with imaginary characters: the **builder** (BASEMENT, zone 2), the **architect** (GROUND FLOOR and STAIRWAY, zone 1; 3), the **archaeologist** (FIRST FLOOR, zone 4-5), the **nomad** (SECOND FLOOR, zone 6) and the **angel** (EGYPTIAN GALLERY, zone 7). They all show a different aspect of the Tower.

The pieces are distributed from the basements (usually unaccessible to the public) to the top of the Museum. The work takes advantage from the omnicomprehensive nature of the displays at the Harris, by establishing a poetical link between the objects of the collection and the theme of the Tower, and by drawing a parallel between the nineteenth century concept of the Museum as the place where the totality of knowledge is made available for the community and the idea of the Tower as a representation of human endeavour to bring the totality of experience and diversity to a unity.

This exhibition constitutes an archetypal form - an *ur-project* - in my artistic production: an experiment that could be repeated with the necessary variations in another, similar context. In this respect it can be said that the "Reconstructing Babel" project confirms and reinforces the theoretical assumptions formulated in the beginning of the research. Although by no means this should suggest that a specific form automatically follows a theory established a priori: there is a constant and often unpredictable exchange between pure thought and material output. Through the process of making I create thought no less than the other way round.

We can conclude this dissertation saying that the artist's purpose is to lead the viewer through the alleys and the building yards of the Modern Babel of the Mind; an excess of information and details draws the spectator into a universe where the true centre is the absence or the 'yard,' the 'work in progress,' what we cannot see yet or anymore, what one day we shall see if we have the strength and the perseverance to start 'working.' To detach the eye from these absences provokes a kind of displacement, a dizziness: what we face, what we can see or learn is so dense as to appear incomprehensible. The Modern Babel is an excess of communication that we are no longer able to select or decode; it's the background buzzing of a distant and infinite metropolis. The artist invites us to construct, reconstruct, dig in, discuss the usual topography of the mind, to turn the corner and look again from new perspectives. The Modern Babel is a city in ongoing transformation that looks for an order, a centre, to give herself, perhaps, a name and a new language, a universal one.[4]

And now it is time to take a breath and pause, as "with myths, one should not be in a hurry. It is better to let them settle into the memory, to stop and dwell in every detail, to reflect on them without losing touch with their language of images. The lesson we can learn from a myth lies in the literal narrative, not in what we add to it from the outside."[5]

Following page:

143 *Epilogue*, 2001
      Etching on copper
      24x30 cm

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[4] Thanks to Vincenzo Perrone for his suggestions.
[5] Calvino, *Six memos*, p. 4.

Epilogue

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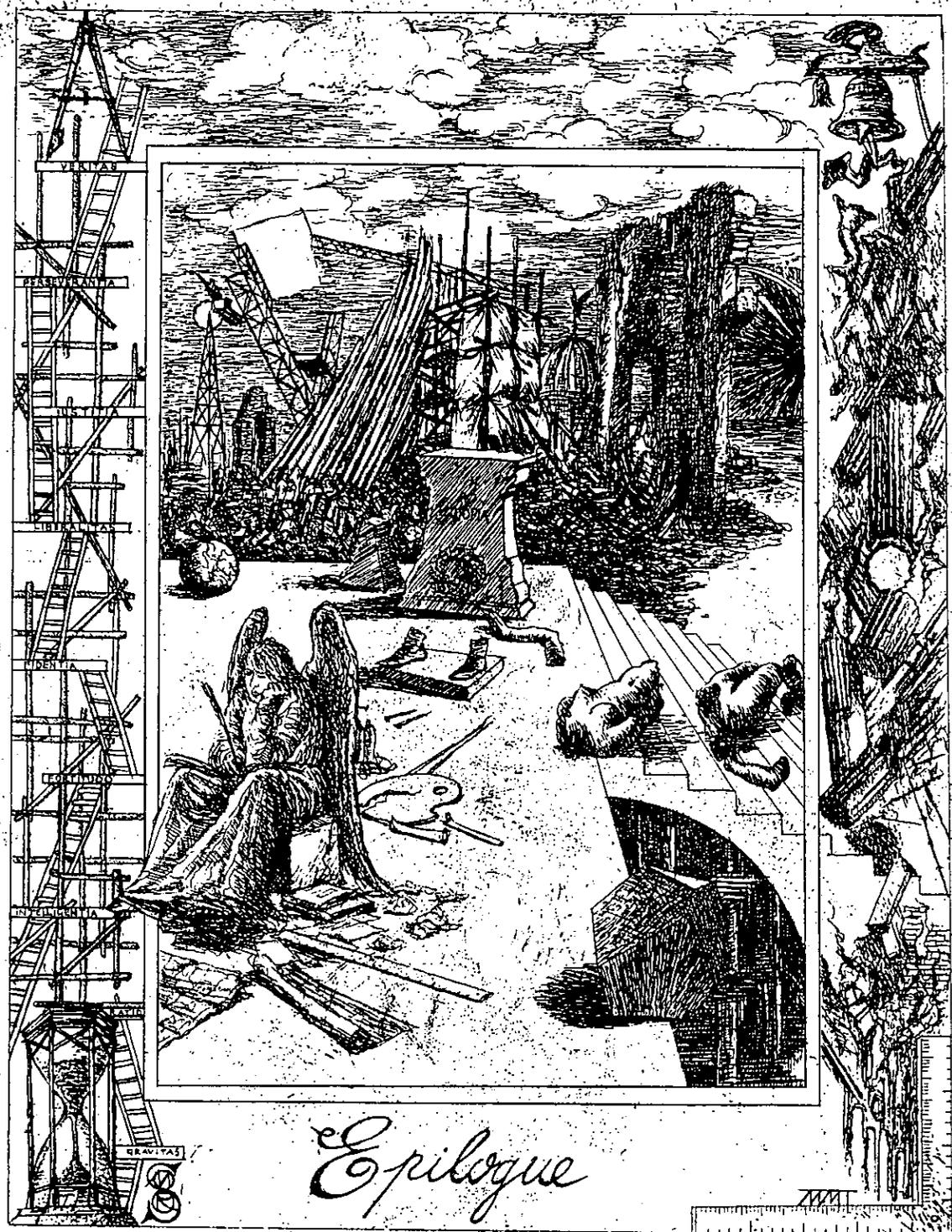
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Re-constructing Babel

The History And Creative Possibilities
Of A Myth, Explored Through Text And Installation

Part 2:
Appendix
Harris Museum Project

Simonetta Moro
A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
University of Central Lancashire

April 30, 2003

APPENDIX

Additional Texts and Works

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE JOURNEY (link to A.3, p. 40)

This text is largely based on the essay *Mente Locale* by Franco La Cecla. Page numbers are given in brackets after the reference passage.

Contents: **the Journey** – **The Tower** (forms: from the cup to the space shuttle) – **Rituals** (foundation of a city), **people** (signs, languages, inhabitants)

When Albert Einstein was five years old, his father showed him a compass; the way in which the needle was pointing always at the same direction made him think that there was "something deeply hidden" in nature.[1]

postcard: Compass bowl, 1516-1520 circa, Damask museum

The journey starts with a postcard of an ancient compass with no needle, small piece of the Babel jigsaw. We can imagine the builders starting from here: location of an improbable Tower.

<u>Scheme of the 3 paintings:</u>

1. Foundations (Trajan Fora)	STARTING POINT: the ancient city
0. the KEY	THE KEY
2. Figure in the desert (picture by Alain Sèbe ed.)	THE JOURNEY

KEY: the lost way to Babel (cf. THE LOST SPEECH). Loss of orientation: after the Tower failed the people of Babel were scattered all over the world (MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS).

N.B.: Compass is also the name of the instrument to draw circles, or to measure the distance between two points on a map.

"A message concerning Damascus. Observe! Damascus is about to be undone as a city; she will become a heap of ruins. The cities of Aroer are forsaken and given over to flocks, which lie down with us one to make them afraid. The fortifications will disappear from Ephraim, the royal power from Damascus, and the remnant from Syria (...)".
(Isaiah, 17, 1-4)

The compass symbolises the search for orientation, the journey into unexplored territories. It's the fixed star that the artist holds in front of him/herself when starting a new travel (a new painting, a new sculpture: a new work). It is also the instrument that the inhabitants of Babel had to carry around with them when leaving the tower and the city.

Here we have a compass with no needle in shape of a container; it indicates the loss of orientation (the dispersion of the peoples in the world) or the existence of multiple cardinal points (no more one direction, but an indefinite number of possible routes: the post-Babel condition). This time – our time – has been considered as the time of the loss of centre: we are in a condition of unbalance, decentralisation, dispersion. For the Westerners it coincides with the loss of the SACRED SPACE. In its place there is the secular space of the periphery; history substitutes myth, the linear time wins over the mythical, circular time (natural cycles).

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[1] Reported in Franco la Cecla, *Mente Locale*, (Elèuthera, 1993), p.26. My translation. When not otherwise specified in the text, all quotations are from this source, followed by the page number.

> Space seems to be more domesticated, or less offensive than time: you can see everywhere people with a watch, and very seldom people with a compass. We always need to know what time it is (and who can deduce it anymore by the position of the sun?), but we never ask ourselves where we are. We believe we know it: we are at home, in the office, in the subway, or on the street.[2]

The journey starts from a city, but from a city that is already a ruin. We start from the point where the Tower was abandoned to its own decay. Babel is past already; its story has been told, but its making is still in progress. Therefore we are free of rewriting its story as often as we can find, imagine or invent variations on its themes.

People / Language

Orientation systems, dispositions = **linguistic** board = social organization board of a **human group**.

Relationship among: <u>language - perception/definition of space - position of the social actors in the space</u>

It is necessary to estabilish a conversation with the PLACES; because *it is the places that create the space.*

> In Indonesia, for instance, in the eastern side of the Kalimantan region - by the Modang Wehèa societies living in villages along the rivers and maintainig a highly precise spatial organization either in relationship with the inner, inhabited space or with the world around the village - if two people of the same house want to go one upstream and the other one downstream in the same day, they have to put a night in between. (p. 53)

The village of Modang Wehèa is **structured** according to three axes parallel to the river (the head - near the river, the centre and the back of the village), **oriented** according to the direction of the tide ("upstream" and "downstream") and two more reference points (the other side of the river and the interior, the outside of the village).
Spatial configuration on several levels:
1. <u>cosmological</u> – tales on the origin of the world and the ancestors - divided in three parts like the village: sky, earth and hell (underworld)
2. <u>social hierarchy</u> – division sacred/profane corresponding to the cathegories perpendicular/parallel to the river. The nobility lives on the perpendicular axis, while the citizens stay on the parallel one; the central house for meetings and rituals is located on the perpendicular axis and the ordinary houses on the parallel one. The common places to men and women are situated on the perpendicular axis, while the women-only places are on the other one. The same spaces are conceived as warm (the first ones) and cold (the second ones).
3. The orientation prescribes roles, behaviours, rituals.The opposition parallel-perpendicular goes together with the binomial high (upstream) and low (downstream), left-right and the movements. There are three corresponding averbs for places, three social cathegories, three ritual situations of relationship with the myths.
This „spatial scaffolding" of the village is not fixed and it allows jumps from one level to the other and it is open to corrispondences and changes.

ORIENTAMENTO: orientation; orientating / bearing
> *Perdere l'orientamento*: to lose (be out of) one's bearings
> *Senso d'orientamento:* sense of direction

ORIENTARSI: to orientate oneself / to take one's bearings / To see one's way / to make head or tail of...

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[2] Georges Perec, *Espéces d'espaces.* My translation.

2

> The orientation as a form of understanding rather than of explanation, in the
> sense that to orientate oneself always means to know a context relatively to
> oneself in that particular context.
> (But it is from the certainty of one's own being "in the centre" that the
> dizziness of being elsewhere, in the same time, is born).
> (p.54)

To exchange **time** for **space** and vice-versa; the symultaneous presence and the exchange of the **inside** and the **outside**.
To wander around, to walk around, to discover places gives the occasions of such disguises.
(cf. Paul Auster, *Trylogy of New York*)

Language and space

Language habits greatly influences the architecture of a people, and their concept of space; e.g., in the Hopi language there is a great number of specific terms for architectonic details, but a complete lack of words to define a tridimensional inner space, what we would call a room. The spaces are defined according to their function, or by the position of the objects inside them. They are not *named*, but *located*. The Hopi language considers the built places as relational concepts, as it is the case for other ur-atzech languages.
Something similar happens for the Gourmantchè people from Gobnangou in Burkina Faso, for whom there are two terms of definition for the forest: one is *Muagu*, the other *Fuali*. The first indicates every uncoltivated or abandoned places where there is grass or straw; the latter indicates a place that has never been used by man, regardless from its being a deep forest or an arid spot.
The *Fuali* is also a place whose borders are moving, sliding with the function of the moment:

"At night the *Fuali* gains ground in the village until the point which is marked by the houses' fences, sometimes penetrating in the interstices between the houses. When the sun is at the Zenith, the territory of the village looks like a constellation of little islands of "wild" space, in which it is dangerous to enter. *Fuali* implies something indistinctive, the absence of clear borders, the elimination of boundaries. Therefore, every night each space outside the houses tends to get transformed into a "wild" ground, and the way in which the landscape appears under the lively moonlight, when things seem to go back to an indistinctive state, is a "wild" ground as well.[3]"

Another concept of "floating" space is present in the Tin Dama people of Sepik, the eastern provinces of Papua (New Guinea); according to which, on the journey from one village to the other, the space gets more and more rarefied, until it becomes an invisible "hole" in which it is possible to get lost unless one practices some ritual gestures. In the same tribe, whoever walks back must use the paths already traced, taking care of not making new marks on the ground, in order to avoid that the spirit of the forest might enter one of those paths and destroy the village.
Therefore, at night, the whole village erases the traces from the ground to turn it again into a neutral space. And during the day, whoever moves around always carries along his/her own broom, that s/he will use before stopping and sitting down.[4]

Another example of spatial orientation is given by this description of a rural house in Ulster:

> The fireplace is at the centre; the directions inside the house are defined in relation to the
> movements around the fireplace. You go "down" when the fireplace is an open mouth at our
> back, "up" when you move towards it. You move "upwards" when you move towards the
> back of the house, and "downwards" when you head to the entrance door at the front of the
> house. Outside, you go "down" to the North and to the East, and "up" to the South and to the
> West. With an helicoidal movement, a whirl, the space turns, its four directions extend until
> they curve, forming a spiral at the top and at the bottom to contain the world, then they go
> back home, converging precisely in the fireplace.[5]

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[3] Michael Cartry, *Dal villaggio alla boscaglia o il ritorno della questione*, quoted in F. la Cecla, p. 29. My translation.
[4] cf. F. Lupu, *Toponymie Tin Dama, Cartes et figures de la Terre*, Paris 1983.
[5] From H. Glassie, *Passing the time in Balleymenone. Culture and history of an Ulster community*, Philadelphia, 1982. Quoted in La Cecla, p.30

Could it be that the Tower failed because different people had different concepts of space (according to their different languages), different topological varieties that kept the people from understanding each other's "spatial qualities"? The way they moved in space, the way they considered space. Appearently simple concepts like "house" or "to inhabit" could have had a completely different meaning for different groups of people. Concepts such as "wall," "fence," "fortifications," "platform," passage" etc. could have put the individuals of different groups in a conflict for lack of common understanding.

> My body - and I cannot help it - is not driven into a unique and specified variety. In the euclidean space it works, but it just works and nothing more. It sees in a projective space. It touches, caresses and handles in a topological variety. It suffers in another one, it hears and communicate in a third one. And we could go on as long as we wish.
> The euclidean space was chosen in our cultures of work: the space of the bricklayer, of the land-surveyor, of the architect. From here the idea of the origin of geometry in the praxis - that equals a tautology, because the only recognized space is the space of the work, the space of transportation. My body, then, is not let down into a unique space, but rather in the difficult intersection of this numerous family of spaces: in the whole of the connections and the links to estabilish among this variety of spaces. It is not about a datum, something that it is always there, so to say. This intersection, these links are always to be built. And when someone lacks of this construction, he will generally be defined as sick. His body explodes in reason of a deconnection of spaces.[6]

The "shape" of an installation is a cultural construction, a mental map that only the inhabitants are able to keep alive. There are invisible thresholds, but as solid as doors or walls (e.g.: ndembu rituals of circoncision,[7] where the initiates occupy specific spaces, delimitated only by their being off-limits. Or the separation between female and male parts in the *jibaria*, in the shuar[8] hut. Only after the arrival of the white man the limit was marked by a fence).
(p.32)

There are untraced paths that are very strong in the mental map of the installed. Among the Nias of Indonesia, for instance, the one who leaves home to visit the neighbour cannot take the shorter way , but has to pass first through the main street that divides in two the village.[9]

The *spoken discourse* of space is based on these privileged directions, on these thresholds, on the very boundaries of an installation. The accomplishment and the reiteration of the orientations, the traces and the circles allows the *comprehension* among the members of the community. The social structure itself is based on these references. The space fulfils the need to distinguish and to be distinguished (as it is when the basic identities of an installation are confirmed), by maintaining some fundamental separations even in times of quick modernization .
According to Mary Douglas, the nature of the inhabited space is such as to be non-deducible only by its physical aspects. In the case of archaeological ruins, for instance, there are well known cases of clamorous blunders based on the mere architectonical evidence. Morgan built a theory on a pueblo culture of the high slopes of Ohio, whose spacious courtyards and the houses strategically well-designed were to be revealed after deeper research as funeral tumula.[10]

Limit and orientation

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[6] Michel Serres, "Discorso e percorso", in *L'identità*, a seminar held by C. Lévi-Strauss, 1977. My translation
[7] Cf. V. Turner, *La foresta dei simboli. Aspetti del rituale Ndembu*, 1976.
[8] Cf. P. Israel, *Dalla jibaria al centro shuar: modernizzazione dello spazio domestico nell'Amazzonia equatoriana*, 1985.
[9] Cf. P. Scarduelli, *L'isola degli antenati di pietra*, 1986.
[10] M. Douglas, *Symbolic Orders in the Use of Domestic Space*, London 1972.

Another ritual consists on putting on the head of a ritually purified person a lamp – called lamp of the limits – made of flour and filled with a butter (*ghi*) that fuels the lamp and carrying it to the periphery of the village. The place in which the lamp puts out indicates the ritual limit of the village.[11]

To install oneself (*insediarsi*) means to cut a site into the vagueness of the places, to set a border between the inhabited and the non-inhabited. This is a foundation gesture; every foundation implies an orientation.[12] The place now inhabited is in relationship with its surroundings, according to an oriented general plan. Every installation is defined not only by a circonscription, but also by a bond with the whole cosmos. The house or the village (the Tower or the city) become the reverse of the cosmos, a reflected cosmos, or a parallel cosmos. The house-basket of the Dogon, or the order of the fields, or the man and his women's enclosure among the Fali of Cameroun: everything reflects and tells a story of the creation of the world, and how the world is continuing to be.[13] The installation (*insediamento*) is a cosmography, a cosmology, but not as a static model could be. The village-system *is* the cosmos itself, and a summary of the cosmos in the same time; that is, a complete system that is self-ruled and self-produced. It is a "centre" of the world.[14] Only from the centre the directions of orientation can be drawn.

The Tower was built at the centre of the city of Babel. The loss of the tower signifies the loss of the centre. The compass with no needle is like a place without centre, a journey without an aim, a labyrinth without a minotaur.

Among the Berti of Sudan, as for the inhabitants of the island of Bali, the first words that children learn are the cardinal points. Orientation is constantly kept in mind, from the working gestures to the act of walking, to the entering and exiting, to the position while asleep.
In the Chinese tradition one never sleeps with the head to the South, in the Lao tradition the sleeping body must keep a perpendicular direction to the line of the roof's ridge. For the Dogon it must head at the front of the house, but the man sleeps on his right side, the woman on her left side.[15].
For many cities, even long time after their foundation, their *forma urbis* has been contained between the two parameters - *orientation* and *delimitation* - until it exploded in the **modern city**.
The modern city is an undefined system in continuous expansion, in grids and facilities. This expansion not only vanishes its boundaries, it vanishes it centre too. The suburban areas grow out of control, eating the villages and the nearby hamlets, erasing borders and orientations. The new suburban landscape becomes a list without beginning nor end, and the remaining space in between the conurbations lose its character of filter to assume that of a "no-man's land".
(p.36)

This new *de-marginalised*, "evaporated" space, it is a place that alternates place and placesness;[16] the result is the fall of any sense of place.[17]

What provoked the **disappearing of the forma urbis?** Was it the demolitions and the prescriptive buildings of the nineteenth century or rather the fall of the mental maps of the inhabitants? In this case the *forma urbis* would indicate a "shared mental map" (to go back to our Tower: exactly what failed in the building process, i.e. a mutual, shared mental map of the site). This identification is automatical in the case of "primitive" installations, but it might have gone through a change in the European social history. The streets and the squares of European cities tell us a story made of the activities and movements that fulfilled and re-shaped the urban triumphs of the king, that was also a reflection of the mental maps of the people that inhabited the places.
When the control over the urban and domestic behaviours becomes more and more rigid, it is not the gestures of the people, but the walls and the streets-corridor that dictates the map. The loss of contact

[11] From a tale of the Karnataka villages, South India, reported by Jackie Assayag in *Espaces, Lieux, Limites. La stratification spatiale du village en Indie du Sul (Karnataka)*, 1983.
[12] Cf. F. Lévy, M. Segaud, *Antropologie de l'Espace*, 1983.
[13] J.P. Lebeuf, L'Habitation des Fali. Montagnards du Cameroun septentrionale, 1961.
[14] Cf. M. Eliade, *Immagini e simboli*, 1980.
[15] M.Griaule, *Dio d'acqua*, 1968.
[16] Cf. E. Ralph, *Place and Placesness*, New York 1976.
[17] J. Meyerowitz, *No sense of Place. The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, Oxford 1985.

between ihabiting and building makes the relationship between identity and places a difficult cultural process. We talk of "alienated" places, and of "alienated" inhabitants too.
The peripheries, the perspectives, the suburban quarters, they all look the same; the sense of *wasteland* is born, and with it the sense of anonimity.
(pp. 36-37)

The inhabitants of Babel wanted to build a Tower in order to give themselves a name; what they've got is a relapse into the anonimity that is dictated by their moltitude.

The global condition of being "uprooted" makes the inhabitants of a place more and more like strangers to the place: the volontary or forced mobility of our times does not echo the mobility of the nomads, but rather the wanderings of someone who is lost.

> One day I was walking by the corners of equal-looking houses and I was lost. I asked a passer-by: - Might the Immortals protect you, can you tell me where we are?
> - In Cecilia, might it not be so!- he answered. - For a long time me and my goats have been walking these roads without ever getting out of here (...).
> - It cannot be! - I cried.- Me too, I do not know how long ago I entered this city and ever since I kept penetrating its streets. But how could I reach to where you are saying, if I was in another city, very far away from Cecilia, and I still did not find my way out of there?
> - The places have mixed-up - the goatherd said, - Cecilia is everywhere; here once there should have been the Lawn of the Low Sage. My goats can recognize the grass of the traffic divider.[18]

Political strategy to create uprootedness: to prohibit the language and traditions to different ethnical groups and tribes, to eliminate the forests which are their natural environments with the purpose to eliminate the cultural differences and to create "citizens" out of indigenous. (p. 38)

The configuration of a settlement often reflects the religious belief or the cosmological order of a people; to create uniformity and to deny the peculiarity of a cultural group often goes together with the destruction of particular architectonical patterns. It happened with the American Indians, to whom the Confederated States denied the circular hut, closing the tribes into *squared* reserves and dormitories. It happened in the French Algeria, and in the Rain Forest too, where the salesian missionaries of the Rio das Graças understood from the beginning that the best way to convert the Bororos was to force them to leave their village where the huts were distributed in circles, an extremely important fact for their social life and ritual practices, in favour of another village where the houses were arranged in parallel rows.[19]
The Bororos get disorientated, they cannot deal any longer with the cardinal points, they feel deprived of a "platform" that could support their knowledge and lose quickly the memory of the reciprocal relationships and of their traditions: their social and religious system was too complicated to do without a scheme that revealed itself through the village plan, whose borders were constantly refreshed by their daily gestures.[20]

Forced evacuation of the people from rural villages to "popular houses" – all look-alike, in every city of any nation in the world – claiming a supposed benefit for the people themselves, in the name of "order" and "cleanliness," in reality destroying their identity.

Essentiality= perceived by the Modernist movement as a positive absolute, an hygienic and valetudinarian value.
City cleaning – *Ethnical cleaning* (relationship between the two concepts).

> **Native:** "Native" always means people who belong somewhere else, because they had once belonged somewhere. That shows the white race does not really think they belong anywhere, because they think of everybody else as native.[21]

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[18] Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*. My translation.
[19] Cf C. Lèvi-Strauss, *Tristi Tropici*, 1966.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Gertrude Stein, 1874-1946, *Everybody's Autobiography*, 1937, quoted in "Human Image", British Museum, January 2001.

(There came on a (merchant ship) a creature one couldn't put a name to that (appeared to have) human form at first (glance) but might as well be a long-nosed goblin, or a long-necked demon...Careful inquiry (revealed) that the creature was called a "Padre."
(Japanese account of a European missionary, about 1555-8, quoted in "The Indianness of Iberia and japanese iconographie's", in Stuart B. Schwartz (Ed.), *Implicit Understandings*, Cambridge U.P., 1994 – "Human Image," British Museum, 2001.)

The Baule believe in the existence of two parallel worlds so that people dying in the other world are born into this and vice versa. Often a man or woman may have an unhappy spouse or lover left in the other world, and this may lead to all manners of difficulties. These range from bad dreams to sexual disfunction. A cure may involve the commissioning of a carving of the abandoned lover, and the reserving of one night a week to sleep with it. Such figures represent an index of changing views desirability.
Traditional figures incorporate marks of elderhood, as here with elaborate scarifications and beards. Contemporary carvings on the other hand represent men with dark glasses, expensive clothes and modern coiffure. Women may nowadays be shown with straightened hair, in short skirts, high heels and holding handbags.
(Given by Mrs Webster Plass, *Ethno* 1956, H.I., B.M., 2001.)

Concept of *nostalgia* = homesickness = heimweh = saudade = absence of place = disease of the coming back = loss of ability of acclimatization, of taking roots in a new place.

After the myth of the "global village" and the "new citizens of the world":
In reality the process of adaptation between an individual , a group and a place is a complex, fascinating and fragile construction (like the tower?).
To make one's own place is a typical human work. The identification with a place has to do with the ability of surviving (physical, social and cultural surviving). Therefore it is so important: because it deals with the origins of our being human.

To reassess the central role that the sense of a place plays in our life is particularly important in a time and in a built world in which most of the relationships are mediated by electronic devices (telephone, internet etc.), that make reality lose its physical character. The "now" is more important than the "here" for the cybertraveller: the "here" becomes indifferent. The communication place is always "elsewhere", in a space that keeps moving fluidly and indefinetly. What counts is the speed that the information takes to reach the other side; we talk of "real time" but never of "real space".
Are we losing touch with the physical experience of space? Still, we have a body, a tri-dimensional presence into space; we have our favourite ways in the city, the road we take every day to go back home, places which are familiar and others that are unknown. Whenever we are in a condition of getting acquainted with a new place all these processes become alive again and we sense our being-in-a-place with more intensity. It is like learning a new language: to make it possible we have to partially get lost in it, partially try to recognize the common signs with our native idiom. And as we can never get familiar with a foreign language as we are with our mother-tongue, for as much as we learn, so it is for the acclimatization with a place that is not our original one. Acclimatisation is a cultural construction that is not created in a generation; a mountaineer cannot become a seaman, as well as a Galitian cannot become an Irishman. (42-43)

What distinguishes the individual learning process in relation to a place from the "local mind" of a place, *is a collective and regular attendance in time.* (...)
The peoples who are "different-from-us" and among them, the neighbouring tribes that have a totally different structure and vision of knowledge, are the example of the fact that knowledge is bound to a "here". (64)
The sense of a place plays a fundamental role in the construction of a people's identity.

The mythical Tower was under this point of view a totally artificial construction that did not take in consideration the different places of origin of the inhabitants, therefore the very root of their difference and the source of their misunderstandings.

The divine city

The following text is based on *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée* by René Guénon, 1962.

Polis (Greek)= civitas (Latin)= pura (Sanscrit) = **city**

The symbolism of the "divine city" corresponds to the centre of the being (represented by the heart, centre of the physical body); in the vedic tradition this centre is the residency of *Purusha*, the divine principle (purusha= puri-shaya, i.e. the one who lives – *shaya* -in the being like in a city – *pura*).

The roots of the words *polis* and *civitas* correspond to the two elements that form the word *puru-sha*: the sanscrit root *pri* or *pur* becomes in the European languages *ple* or *pel*, making *pura* and *polis* equivalent. What is interesting is that from a qualitative point of view this root expresses the idea of **fullness** (*puru* in Sanscrit, *pleos* in Greek, *plenus* in Latin, *full* in English) and, from a quantitative viewpoint, the idea of **plurality** (*polys* in Greek, *plus* in Latin, *viel* in German). Evidently a city exists because of the plurality of the people that inhabit it and constitute its "population" (the word *populus* has the same origin), that could explain the use of the term in question.

The duality fullness-emptiness informs the concept of "divine city" (complementarity of the active-passive elements); *Purusha* fills the city with its presence and with the integrity of its being enlightens the whole city . There is a close analogy with the Christian concept of the Lamb that irradiates from the centre of the Celestial Jerusalem, in a condition of non-action. The sacrifice of the Lamb repeats the vedic sacrifice of Purusha that in the beginning of its manifestation divides itself to reside simultaneously in every being and in every world, in a way that make it look multiform outside in spite of its being one inside (again the ideas of fullness and plurality). It has also been said that there are two Purusha, "one destroyable, the other undestroyable: the first is diveded among all beings; the second is the immutable" (*Bhagavad-Gitâ*, xv, 16). It would be interesting to draw a line of comparison between this concept and the Greek myth of Achilles, the half god-half man hero, partially undestructible, partially mortal, whose shield shows a round configuration of two specular cities, one in peace, the other engaged in a fierce fight (cf. illustration).

The latin *civitas* derives from the root *kei* that in the Western languages is the equivalent of the Sanscrit root *shi* (from which *shaya*, to lay, to reside); its primal meaning is to rest (Greek *keisthai*, to lay down), from which the words residence, or fixed dwelling as it is in case of a city are a direct consequence.

The vital elements are at the centre of the city: as we know, in the myth of the tower of Babel, the tower was built at the centre of the village. At the centre is located the palace of the king and the administrative quarters. This is the essential part of which the city around represents an extension rather than a subordinate element.

There is an interesting myth in the Vedic tradition, that tells the story of a city entirely populated by wooden robots, that can act in all and for all like living beings (any reference to post-modern dreams à la Blade Runner?) but for the ability to speak: in the middle there is a palace inhabited by a man who is ..the only conscience" of the city and the source of all the movements of the robots that he built himself. It is remarkable that this man is called "carpenter," a circumstance that makes him similar to *Vishwakarma*, divine principle and builder of the Universe. (cf. also the Western archetype of the Great Architect of the Universe, emblem of the freemason society and of other esoterical congregations as the gnostic one).

Unity and multiplicity

Another point of contact between the Vedic tradition and the myth of the Tower is the concept of "gathering what is loose". What is loose are the limbs of the primordial *Purusha* (the one who lives in the city) that was divided during the first sacrifice performed by the *Dèva* in the beginning of times and from which were born, thanks to this separation, all the manifested beings. Again, we have a symbolical description of a passage between the unity to the multiplicity, without which there could not be any manifestation. Therefore, the "gathering of what is loose," or the re-constitution of the original *Purusha* as it was "before the beginning" (that is, in the non-manifested state) is nothing but the way back to the original unity. Also the Egyptian myth of Iside talks about the reunion of the scattered limbs of Osiride; they are only two versions of the same cosmogonical process' description, in two different traditional forms. In the same way, in the Jewish Cabala it is from the fragmentation of the body of the *Adam Qadmon* that the Universe and all the beings in it have been born, so that these beings are like particles of such a body, and that their "reintegration" in the unity appears like the re-constitution itself of the *Adam Qadmon*. He, like Purusha, is the "Universal Man."

"In the sacrifice it is essential first to divide, second to reunite"; it involves the two complementary phases of the **disintegration** and **reintegration** that constitute the cosmic process as a whole: the *Purusha* "being one becomes many, and being many becomes one again."[221]

The reconstitution of the *Purusha* is simbolically operated, in particular, in the building of the Vedic altar, that comprehends in its different parts a representation of all the worlds; and the sacrifice, to be accomplished properly, requests a cooperation of all the arts. And if any ritual action (i.e. conforming to the norm = *rita*) has in some way a "sacrificial" character (from *sacrum facere*, i.e. to make sacred), what it is true for the Vedic altar it is true for any building which is erected in conformity with the traditional rules, because the building proceeds always from the same cosmic model (cf. the **rituals of foundation of a building or a city**). Even in a purely immediate sense, the builder gathers up some scattered materials to make out of them a building that, if it is really what it should be, it will have an "organic unity" similar to the one of a living being (from the microcosmical point of view), or to the one of a world (from the macrocosmic point of view).

The next symbolism, different in the outer look, but equivalent in its meaning (and absolutely pertinent in the myth of the Tower of Babel): the reconstitution of a word to begin with its literal elements taken at first isolately (the way of communication of the "sacred words" in the Freemasonic ritual, for instance). To understand it, one has to remember that the real name of a being is nothing but the expression of its very essence; the reconstitution of the name is equivalent to the reconstitution of the being itself.[23]

It is also well known the role that letters play in the symbolism of the Cabala about the creation or the universal manifestation; it could be said that this is formed by the separated letters, corresponding to the multiplicity of its elements, and that by gathering up such letters, the universal manifestation is brought back to its own Principle (thus, forming the correct name of the Principle).

From this point of view, "to gather what it is loose" is the same thing as "to find the lost word," because in its deeper sense the "lost word" is but the real name of the "Great Architect of the Universe."

See: **The sacred space; building materials.**

THE CENTRE

The symbolism of the Tower is connected with that of the **centre.** This centre is often in ancient myths related with the image of the Sacred Mountain as meeting point between Heaven and Earth, as a temple or palace, and as a temple that represents the sacred City.

In Mesopotamia temples were the house of the mountain, the bond between Sky and Earth. The same word Babylon derives from *Bab-ilani*, that is "door of (the) god(s)".

Sumerian Ziggurats were conceived as cosmic mountains, and often built upon them, as this was the highest point on the ground. The town was built upon *Bab-apsi*, "gate of Apsu". i.e. "waters of the chaos before creation". From here the connection between earth and underworld.

(From Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*).

A.Coomaraswamy recalls a passage in the *Tripura Rahashaya* in which there is mention of a town and its inhabitants, and the spirit (*pracara*, lit. "migrant" or "newcomer") states that without him the inhabitants "would be scattered and lost like pearls without the thread of a necklace".

(M. Eliade, *The Two and the One*, p.172)

Thread of a necklace, rope; rope of Wittgenstein (cf. I. Overview).

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[22] A. Coomaraswamy, quoted in Guénon, p. 261.

[23] Cf. the story of the real (secret) name of the city of Rome; the real name is Amor, i.e. the name read from back to front, that reveals the real nature of the city.

THE SACRED SPACE

Foundation of a city

Myth of the cave and the labyrinth

Building materials: black stone and cubic stone (earth divinities – *Cibele*)
                        rough stone and cut stone (nomads/sedentaries)

The sacrality is first of all a postional cathegory, *of emplacement*.
(p. 120[1])

We make a sacred place by implanting a sanctuary in it, while in ancient times the sacrality belonged to the place itself, and a sanctuary was built in it because it was the place itself to be holy.[2] (p. 121)

Where is the relationship between the concept of sacred place with the Tower and the city of Babel?
It is well known that the ancient peoples used to perform special rituals whenever they were to found a city, a village, or to put the first stone of a building. Every act of foundation involves the "sacralization" of a place. The symbolgy of the **sacred stone** is present in every myth based on a building tradition.

Tower – Temple : The temple of initiation *always remains symbolically incomplete* and this distinguishes it from a religious temple.
Its ultimate meaning derives from an operation, such as the initiation, which is the mystic himself.
At the outset, the mystic is chaos; in the end he becomes an actor by taking up his part in a play which was, until then, being acted without him. In short, the temple makes manifest the stage of the invisible.[3]

FOUNDATION OF THE CITY   The foundation of Rome is a typical example of a myth with an historical core.

It has been told that the two brothers Romolo and Remo, delegated to the augural signs the decision about whom of the two should found the new city, and where. Remo chose to watch the sky from the Aventine hill, and saw a flight of six birds, coming from the North; Remo stood on the top of the Palatine hill and saw "six and six birds in a row,"[4] coming from the East. According to the deal, Romolo had the will to found the city.

"The right day has to be chosen, to trace with the plough the perimetry of the walls. The *Palilie* were to be soon; in this day the work takes place.

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[1] Cf. J.Z. Smith, *To take place: toward a teheory in ritual* (Chicago, 1987).
[2] M.P. Nillson, *Greek Piety* (New York, 1948).
[3] André Nataf, *Dictionary of the Occult*, p. 93. My italics.
[4] Ovidio, *Fasti*, IV, 819-826.

A hole is digged until the stone is found, the harvest products are thrown on the bottom with the soil taken from the nearby ground.

Once the pit is filled with soil, an altar is located on top and lightened up with fire: a new hearth has been created.

Then, pushing the plough-handle (Romolo) traces the walls with a furrow. A white cow and a snowy ox carry the yoke."[5]

The walls built over the *sulcus primigenius* traced by the founder were an insurmountable limit (*sanctus* - holy), whose violation would be punished with death (as it happened to the brother Remo who tried to climb the walls).

The doors instead were ruled by a law (*ius*) and were passable.

Romolo founded Rome...and in the beginning it was named *Roma quadrata* - (squared Rome) – because it was placed in a balanced way...[6]

A ritual always takes place *somewhere* and it is precisely this "taking place" that constitutes the event in the ritual. It is about *placing* some objects, people or events in a precise location, outside of which they would lose their meaning. (p. 116) Smith offers three study-cases:

-the places and the paths of dreams (*dreamroads*) of the Australian Northern Territories' aborigenes' ancestors.

-the image of the Jerusalem Temple (the King Solomon's Temple) of the book of Ezekiel and the Jewish tradition – which presents some affinities with the Tower of Babel.[7]

-the holy places, in particular the Holy Sepulchre of the Christian tradition.

Smith assumes that, even in such different cases, there is a particular relationship between sacred places and memory, world-ordering cathegories and mechanisms of attention. A place becomes sacred when it becomes different from all the other places: that is, when it is taken out and set free from a spatial context and from a temporal sequence. The same could apply to the mythical place, in that it lives out of a specific time (the myth is eternal) and it isn't bounded to a particular place (it could be everywhere).

The nature of the sacred consist in the "spatial" invention of the exceptionality. The places are there to evoke facts and events, in a process defined by the sequence: "in search of a place", "to put in place" (to put in order), "replace", "to take place"...The sacred place develops a catalytic function in which time and space become homogeneous and reciprocally replaceable. Spaces become places of memory.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Varrone, in Solino, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* I, 17-18.

[7] The Temple of Solomon is a concrete expression of the alliance of the Jewish people and their God. It symbolizes that founding moment in Western history when the Jews, nomadic until then, settled in one land. They estabilished a bond with one land, not founded on blood, but open to transcendence. (From the *Dictionary of the Occult*, p. 93).

There are two oppposite examples that illustrate the concept of sacred as a "cultural device" that allows the free journey between space and time:

1. the early Christian cult of the pilgrimage to the "holy places" that transformed the primitive a-temporal and paradigmatic cult of the origins. The liturgy connected with the annual cicle (historical because time-based) derives from those topographic stations.

2. The Australian aborigenes' tales of a mythical time in which the ancestors were "walking" on the Earth which re-activates the sacred property of the real landscape, by virtue of the walking itself of the aborigenes. Time becomes present again only by "walking it", by following its traces in the tale and finding out the equivalent in the natural landscape, sometimes inventing new parts of the tale (inverting the process) to begin with new traces or new signs in the territory.

(Cf. my own device of telling a new story about Babel to begin with a walk through Rome)

If it is true that a ritual is essentially a way "to pay attention" (Smith), then we can understand the role of a place as a basic component of the ritual: the place *directs* (cf. chapter on orientation) the attention and from this viewpoint there is nothing that is, per se, sacred or profane. These are cathegories that come out of a situation, of a position; again, of *emplacement*. The distinction is rather between an "inside" and an "out of place".

What is the function of a sacred place? Within a specific culture it provides a reference point, and it marks a *difference* in the undifferentiated space.

BUILDING MATERIALS

The rough stone / The cut stone[8]

These symbolical images are particularly interesting in the light of the Tower because they refer directly to the different traditions respectively of the nomadic and the sedentary peoples.

Under the *rough stone* category we could mention the Jewish portable altars and the megalithic monuments located all over the world. The prohibition of using cut stones in the elevation of buildings disappeared when the tribes of Israel changed their nomadic condition into a sedentary condition; an historical example is given by the building of the Temple of Solomon, that could have never been erected with rough stones.

There is no doubt that, according to the cyclic laws, some "pre-historical" peoples (like those who erected the megalithic monuments) were closer to an original state than those who came after them, but also that such a state could not be permanent. The changing condition of humanity in the different ages of its history demanded relevant adaptations to the traditions; this could happen even in the entire existence of one people o (as it is the case of the Jews) without any solution of continuity. On the other hand, it is also true that among the sedentary peoples the substitution of wooden constructions with stone constructions corresponds to a stronger degree of "solidification," in conformity with the stages of the cyclic "descent". And, since this new building method was due to the transformed environmental conditions, it was necessary in a traditional society to receive from the tradition itself the consecration – through the appropriate rituals - to legitimate it and to integrate it to the society.

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[8] Cf. René Guénon, *Symboles Fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*, chapter 49.

12

Such a legitimating involved every kind of work, to begin with the stone cutting for the building, implying that every work would correspond to a particular initiation (this was true in any time and everywhere, but in our modern Western society in which the traditional character has been lost). For the stonecutters and for the builders that used the products of their work, the rough stone represented the "raw matter", the undifferentiated primal matter, the "chaos" with all its microcosmical and macrocosmical implications, while the finished, cut stone represented the accomplishment and perfection of the "work".

The cubic stone

Some banal considerations for the apprentice's study:

What is a *cube*? It is a regular solid with six identical faces, eight vertices formed by trihedral angles and twelve edges. It is the only "Platonic" solid that can fill the space without solution of continuity. The faces have a correspondence of two and two, there are three axis of symmetry and it's impossible to see more than three faces at once.

Plato associates the cube to the Earth element, the basic element without which the other ones would be of no use for humanity (...).

The *stone* is located *sub ascia* (under the axe), to indicate its sacred character; it remains "cubic" even though surmounted by a pyramid that protects it from Water as the axe protects it from Fire (the thunderbolt). The first represents the "dissolving" forces, the second the "sublimating" forces.

The pointed cubic stone, monolithic, cannot be employed in the construction of a building, but it can be its fundamental articulation: the keystone.[91]

We encounter the symbol of the cubic stone in the myth of Cibele (the Magna Mater, Great Mother) of the ancient Rome, whose traces are still visible on the Palatine hill in the place where the mythical founder of the city, Romolo, is supposed to be buried. The *Lapis Niger* (Black Stone) marks this particular place, and it symbolizes the earthly goddess Cibele as well.

The *cubic stone*, being a fundamental stone, must be essentially "terrestrial" (as the shape itself indicates); the idea of "stability" expressed by its form fits perfectly to the function of Cibele as the "Earthly Mother", in that it represents the "substantial" principle of the universal manifestation.

There is a direct relationship between the *black stone* and the *cubic stone* in the case in which the latter is not one of the basic stones placed at the four corners of the building, but the central stone at the basement, corresponding to the falling point of the black stone. At the other end of the vertical axis the *corner stone* or *vertex stone* (not cubic in shape) corresponds to the initial and final "celestial" position of the black stone itself. Generally speaking the symbolism of the black stone (with all the different positions and shapes it can take) relates, from a microcosmical point of view, with the different "localizations" of the "immortal core" (or "stone") in the human being.

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[9] From J. Boucher, 1948, quoted in *Architettura e massoneria*, ed. Marcello Fagiolo (Convivio, 1991).

Dialogue with a fragment of text: *Roma, il libro delle fondazioni* (Rome, the book of foundations) by Michel Serres.

N.B.: my comments are written between square parenthesis within the main text. Translation into English is mine and based on the Italian edition by Roberto Berardi, which, according to Serres, is "better than the original French."

The book of foundation is first and foremost iconographic: it's written in black, it's written in white. All that is possible is there, implicit; all that is virtually possible is there too. Here's the well, full; here's the white, virgin. Tito Livio originally describes the simplest operations: a black jar, full and closed, and a white jar, empty and open. (p. 65)

[...] Through an experience, today I think I can almost physically perceive what we could call the incarnation: Rome is not in the nature of the verb, like Athens; it's not in the nature of the book, the breath or the text like Jerusalem. On the other hand, it has neither the nature of water, like the former, nor that of the desert, like the latter.

[the water is underneath, hidden, but everywhere: underground rivers, *Cessati spiriti*, aqueducts crossing the city from one side to the other, hundreds of fountains providing drinking water. But the water is always surrounded by stone, enclosed, trapped, kept secret. The desert: we might catch a glimpse of the desert in the ruins of the forum, in an empty square under the strong August sunshine on a Sunday morning, in the sand-like colours of the buildings under the dazzling light, in the faces of exhausted tourists who lost their way around the Casilina...]

Rome is as tetragonal and as obtuse as stone, as black as the interior of a stone [*lapis niger*], it's never so transparent as the pyramid [*transparent/invisible cities*: my poetic interpretation of what is behind the opacity of Rome – true, Rome is not transparent, it's not a city of transparency: it's opaque, dense, heavy. Nevertheless, I wanted to make visible what normally is not visible in Rome. You walk and you perceive that there is something behind the walls, the stones, the soil...but you cannot see it; the matter is too solid to let the light or the gaze through. With the book *invisible cities*, it happens that when you look at each page individually you can see the image, the drawing and what is behind – the next city – but when you see all pages together as a block you don't perceive the transparent quality anymore, but a solid, opaque, confuse pattern of dark inky signs that trace the map of an incomprehensible landscape] or as the tetrahedron of the Greek epiphany: and it's never multiplied, like the Jewish interpretation, on the white space of the desert. Jerusalem is as pliable and light as hundred thousand signs. Athens circles around the logos. Rome, instead, weights. [...] The body holds the staff, tracing the basis of the temple and the plinths, without knowing why. The Hebrew is able to write seven times those "whys". The Greek will proclaim them seventy-seven times. My Greek-Judaic knowledge is so light that I can carry it either beyond the sea [trans-portable shrine-model, *Portable Tower, Models for a Portable Metaphysic;* M.8] or beyond the desert. It can fly as language and writing. It's the logical body. Rome resides inside her gestures and her body: there, where the sign stops and sinks in the mud. It's the material body. Her hand is as firm as the Greek mouth is fast or as the Hebraic complexity is ready to transform itself into a net of correspondences. [...] [Rome is a physical city, a female city; she is abundant, generous, maternal, protective, at risk of being suffocating, just like a mother can be] Athens and Jerusalem endlessly explain, disclose [spread out, unfurl, unfold – *spiegano, dispiegano*] until the object becomes desert-like. A river of light flows out of them. In Rome the traces are going backward. They go out of the black cave where the white oxen, Caco the herdsman, Evandro and the god Hercules stay. (p. 69)

[...] Rome absorbs light and doesn't give it back; instead, she gives a stone: it will take you a thousand years to understand. Thus the light descends into the petrified underworld; thus darkness cannot see it. Rome is mostly darkness. [...] Rome is the heaviness of the oxen, their legs or hoof; knife, plough, sword, Rome is the black of the sign when the white destroys itself. (p. 70) [the city at night, *Dark City* monoprints, a black space filled with white lines]

[...] The black light is trapped in the oven. It does seem that Rome is a trap – a trap for light – just like an object. [...] One has to lighten Rome-object with Athens-geometry and Jerusalem-time in order to scarcely begin to understand. (p. 71)

[...] The incandescent space of geometry and the obscure world of the opaque mass. [drawings-plans-schemes for the book – geometry(line) + sensuality (colour)] The former space is absolutely the easiest to understand: it exists solely to be understood and to understand; nothing is as easy to understand as the verb is: it is there to be understood; but nothing is so obscure as the latter [world]; nothing is so hard to understand as the body, either flesh or stone, nothing is so hard to see as the noise that results from it, nothing is so uneasy as to know in which way it receives light and wraps it up. The astonished inquiring of Einstein and the old Cartesian issue of incarnation form together the modern resolution born out of physics. Beyond the Christian mystery of incarnation, it goes back to the foundation of Rome. To the triangle of our mother-cities. (p. 73)

M.2a -Text written for Life Death and Miracles of the Tower, 1998*

-The space in this work is closed...like a monad. "Without
windows". Distance against measure.

-It's *corporal* though...

-It's like full – of matter. For example full of objects, that later
will be taken away.
There are holes in the thin matter...

-There is a ground, a tendency towards – the earth / the sky.
Like "flying" (cf. Woelfflin).

-I am not sure about the background colour; I would avoid the
brown at the base.

-But that could be a reference to the obscure nature...

-White for background works as a huge number (almost
infinite) of *minimal mirrors*. It's indirect light!

-The infinite, you mean: the world is an infinite series?

-Yes, and it's not pantheism!

-The object exists in its metamorphosis...

-And perspective?

-The point of view replaces perspective (which is defined
through a centre).

-The centre has become weak. Instead of a concept of centre
we have point of views.

-It's a mannerist attitude, rather than an essentialist one. The
idea of an essence of the Tower is not pertinent to this work.

-The activity involved is a manifestation of the soul, intended
as an expression of the world.

-As a metaphor?

*Transcription and adaptation from a conversation with philosoper Armin Vilas, Salzburg, 1998.
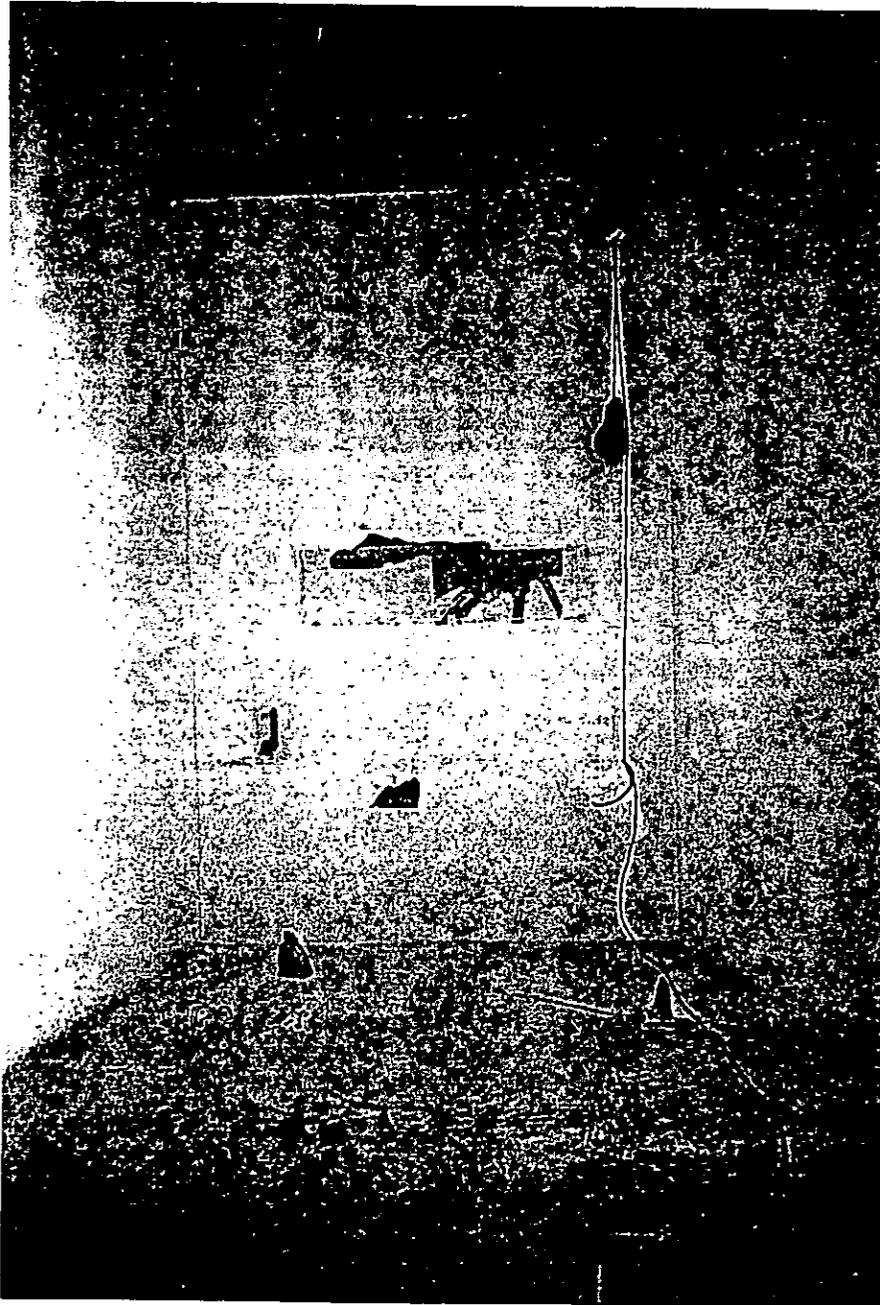
1 *The niche*, 1998
   Mixed media installation
   Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, Salzburg

Description of "the niche"

We see a white space measuring ca. 90x60x50 cm., carved into the stone wall. A plywood board in the background, painted white. Elements in the installation: cutout paper shapes, taken from photocopies of my own painting *The Red Tower*, and partially covered with tracing paper and Chinese paper; a light bulb hanging from a thread, painted half black/half grey; a white paper cup hanging from the same thread; a stone.

Q&A

-What is significant about this piece is the idea of containing a virtually immense space into a tiny, enclosed cabinet size room.

- This installation came shortly before *Life, Death and Miracle of the Tower*. Could it thus be considered as a preliminary study for it, or rather a model for the bigger room installation?

-At the time I was not thinking of it as an experiment for a bigger project, but just as a work in itself. The idea came by noticing one of the many niches on the wall in the Hohensalzburg Fortress in Salzburg, where the Sommerakademie class was held. This niche was particularly appropriate because of its location and its dimensions. It was just in front of our studio space, so that I did not have to walk far to work on it, which I could do when I was not painting in the studio. The niche was for me almost like a game, a diversion from other more exacting activities. I would work for a couple of hours or all morning on a piece in the studio and then step out for a brief adjustment to the niche installation, even for a tiny charcoal line in a corner. I would often record the new scene with a camera and move along. The main elements in the composition came from the *Red Tower* painting I did in Barcelona in 1996: the man seen from the back with a dog at the leash, the little tower far in the background and even further, the cityscape. New elements were added, such as the light bulb (painted in black and grey), the thread, the stone and the paper glass. Some of these ideas, such as the thread coming out of the niche's border on the lower right bottom, will then reappear in paintings of the Roman period (cf. **M.4a.4**, *Five Hypothetical Babel Cities*).

-This is something you seem to do often, to repeat the same vocabulary from your own paintings in a new context.

- Yes, it's part of a common art practice, to find one's main vocabulary and work with it in a series of pieces. In the end, you do not need many ideas: a few are sufficient, and can be elaborated in a virtually infinite variation of form and context.

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M.2b1 - Big Tower

Big Tower (fig. 1) is a painting on heavy brown paper, executed in white and black acrylic and black ink derived from a printing device (see **Appendix**, "Small Tractatus on Painting." **4.311a**). The image of the tower is obtained through the repetition of a single element (a group of small towers in a pyramid-like shape) again and again on the paper's surface. Other sheets of paper are hanging beside it, with traces from the same matrix reworked with natural pigments and earth colours.
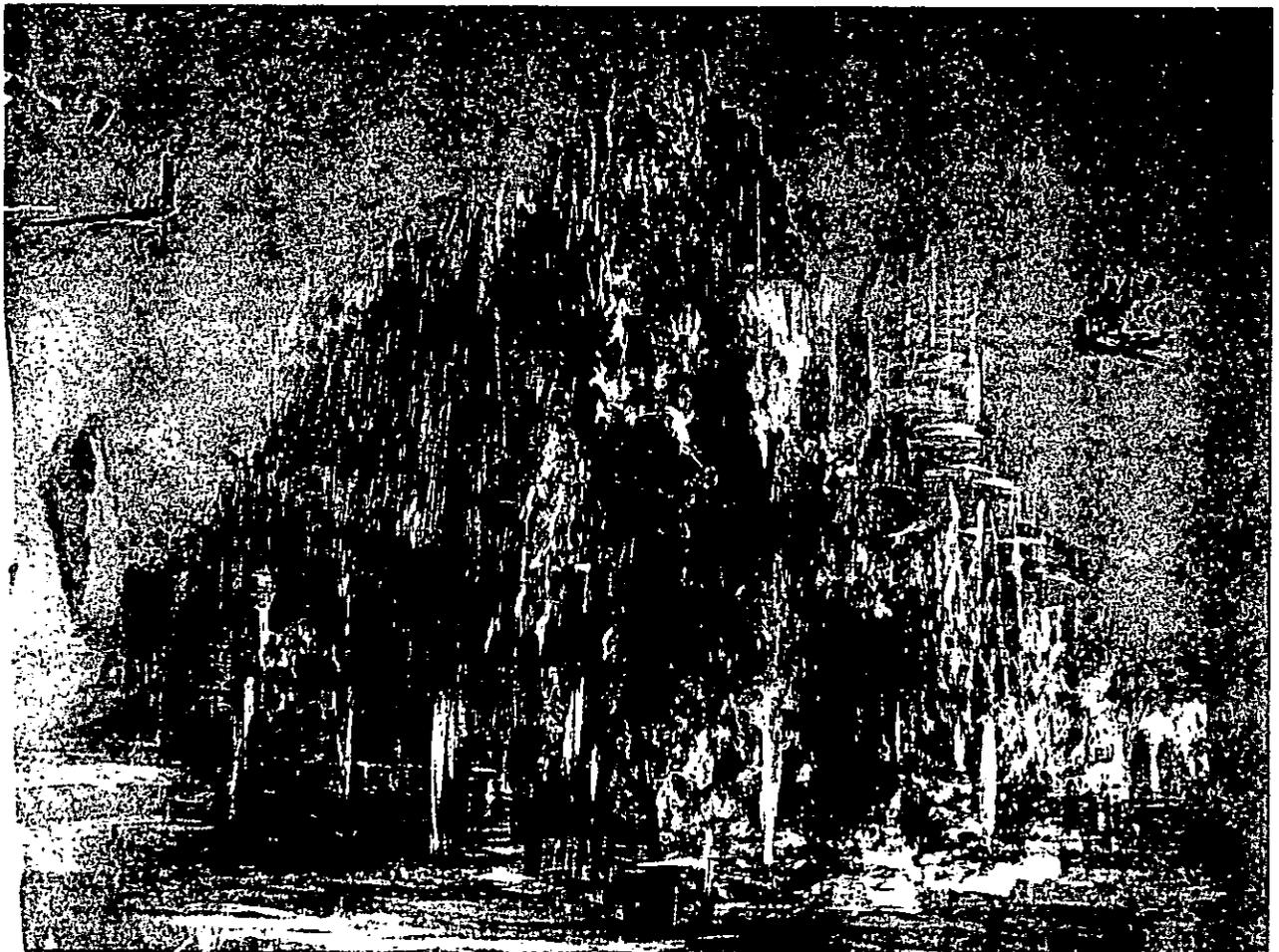
2   *Big Tower*, 1998
Acrylic and charcoal on paper
150x200 cm.

Circular map (fig. 2) evokes the idea of an African landscape, or a carpet even, because of the dense signs in earth and sand colours waving through the surface. A series of circular stencil designs defines the main pattern; they could represent a building seen from above, a Roman amphitheatre in ruin, a circus, or footprints of a giant animal on the ground. The interplay between white and black marks, mostly white over black, gives the surface richness of texture and a sense of depth.

3   *Circular Map*, 1998
    Acrylic, graphite, pigments, charcoal, collage
    on paper
    120x160 cm

Description of the installation

The piece is built around one of the Medieval iron doors of the Hohensalzburg Fortress, on two walls forming a 90° corner. On the left wall a sheet of paper of approximately 150x100 cm. hangs vertically. Its lower end extends by some 50 cm. onto the floor on which painted bottles are displayed. The paper shows a graphite and charcoal drawing, *Whirling City*.

A painted canvas, *The Hanging Tower*, is on the right wall beside the iron door. Small cutout paper figures are hanging from threads, arranged on the door between this painting and the canvas beside it.

4 *The Hanging Tower*, 1998
   Mixed media, view of the ensemble, Hohensalzburg Fortress, Salzburg

Whirling City (fig. 6) is a drawing on white paper - its starting point is a series of bottles painted in different colours in a range of greys and assembled on the lower end of the paper. The shadow cast by the bottles gives the first trace to the drawing, which develops in a baroque, whirling manner onto the whole paper. The bottles themselves suggest a cityscape, an impression emphasized by playing with light and shadow (Fig. 5).

The Hanging Tower (fig. 7) is first painted on canvas by imprinting over it natural earth pigments and acrylic medium gel, giving a Bruegel tower-like shape to the composition. Subsequently, little notebook pages (with my own handwritten notes) are glued on top, suggesting the presence of many windows or niches in the tower's wall. The image evokes a falling tower, or rather hanging tower, an analogy to the notorious "hanging gardens of Babylon". The bare hessian canvas hanging behind it acts as a frame and emphasize the natural colour of the unprimed cotton canvas.

On the cut-out figures attached to the threads hanging from the iron door, there are small drawings of doors and passages of the Hohensalzburg Fortress.

5   *Assemblage* (study), 1998
     Painted bottles, drawings on paper, light
     Variable size

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6   *Whirling City*, 1998
     Graphite, charcoal, red pencil on paper, bottles
     150x100 cm

7   *The Hanging Tower*, 1998
     Oil, acrylic, pigments, collage on canvas
     150x100 cm

A large horizontal canvas (120x270 cm.) is fixed to an easel; it depicts a view of Rome from a high point. presumably a hill. The city spreads at our feet in an intricate pattern of signs defining houses, bridges, domes; the drawing is executed with graphite on linen prepared with gesso.

In the foreground, the scene of a construction site: old-fashioned wooden scaffolding, the kind used in the seventeenth century and masonry instruments stand among traces of ancient columns and ruins. The city rests on a platform supported by pillars that suggests a deeper, dark, hollow space underneath, in contrast with the bright, luminous appearance of the cityscape.

Roman Journal, 1999

City lights −2. Sunset light: misty, blue-grey reflecting on the buildings, golden glare around them. Little contrast, subdue tones. Well-defined shadows in blue-violet and deep green. Domes are silvery. Best hour in the summertime: between 7.30 and 8.30 pm. Best view: from the Gianicolo hill, towards Trastevere.

Experience: Looking down at the city from the Gianicolo, the Acqua Paola fountain at my back, the Spanish Embassy and the Spanish Academy in front of me, on the right. Observing the buildings changing colours, the shadows turning violet, thinking of painting it.

The light seems to move faster at sunset than at sunrise: at dawn I have the feeling that the sun never rises. at dusk I think it disappears too quickly.
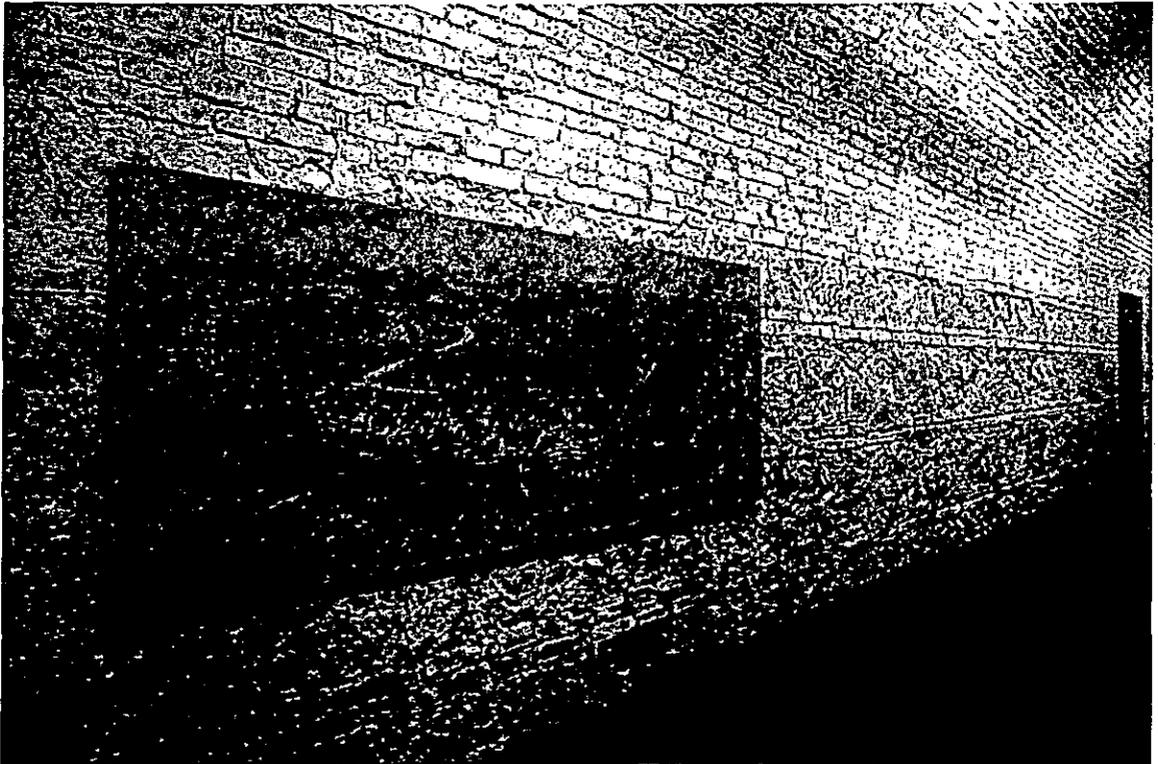
8   View of the installation at the American Academy
     in Rome, 2000
     Photo Mimmo Capone
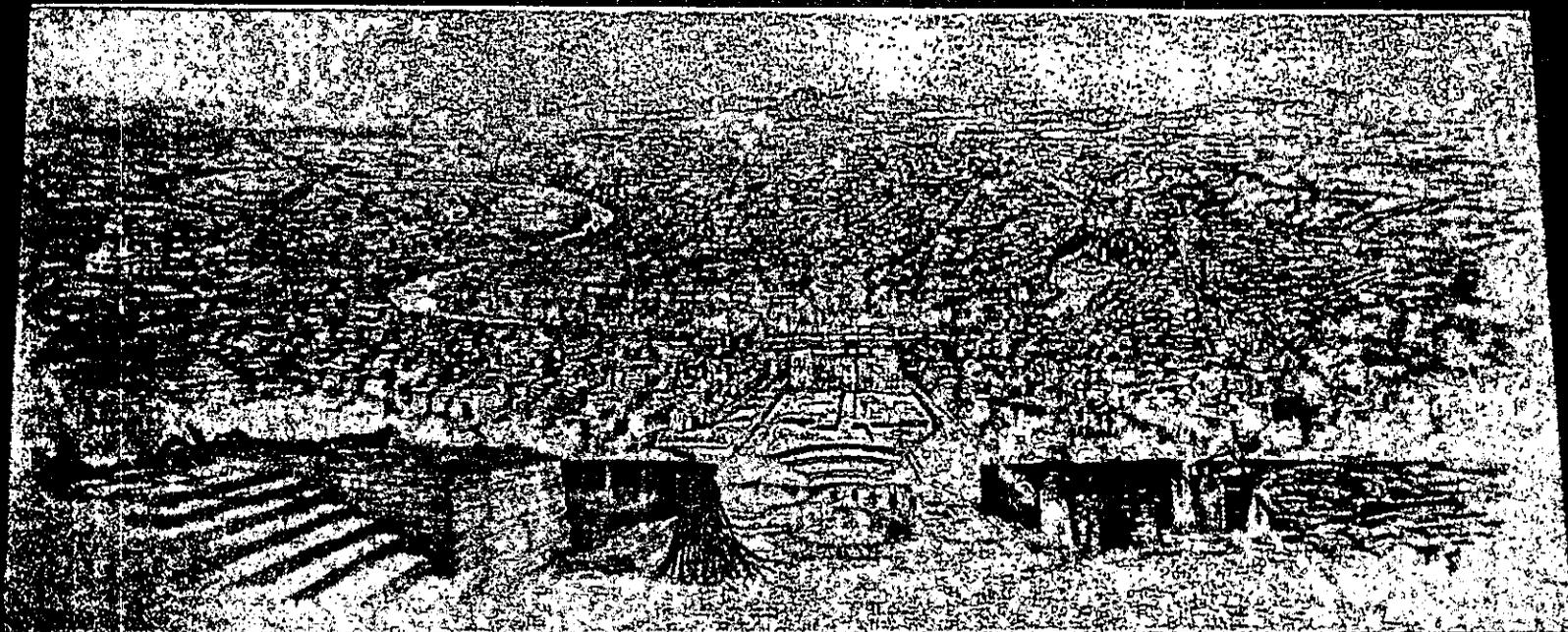
9 *You Are Not Here*, 2000
   Oil and graphite on linen
   120x270 cm.

25

I had the idea for a panoramic view while strolling around the Villa Aurelia, part of the American Academy complex. The story of this painting is curious: it begins with an old stretcher I found abandoned in a storing space at the Villa. At the time, Villa Aurelia was going through a renovation, and many things were thrown away. Among these things were two tall and narrow stretchers of a very fine quality. From a glance I could tell that one of the two belonged to a large view of Rome from the Gianicolo by Giuseppe Vasi: it was an etching mounted on canvas, the same etching that is now hanging from the wall in the lecture room at the American Academy, in a new frame under glass. I had been looking at this etching for a long time, and went back repeatedly to study it. It represents a black and white view in perspective, from a high vintage point, and very detailed. One can see the river Tiber crossing the city as it was before the walls around it were built, in the nineteenth century. The area around the Vatican is still open countryside, leading to the hills in the distance.

Finally, I resolved to make a painting out of it, on the same stretcher, with the same dimensions of the print, and the same subject although revisited. I started by preparing a linen surface with several layers of gesso and rabbit skin glue, according to a traditional recipe. Then I took a slide of the original print and projected it on the prepared canvas, drawing the panoramic scene in the detail, following the outline of the tiny buildings. Subsequently, I coated the drawing with emulsion and paint over it with thin washes of oil paint. The main hues are yellow and red ochre, as I wanted to capture the golden glare of the Roman light. The graphite underneath adds a silvery tone to it, and so the pale royal blue and violet used for shadows.

The lower part of the composition is entirely invented; the motif of the platform with pillars is taken from a painting by Antoine Caron (see **M.4**, fig. 75), while the building implements and scaffold in the foreground derive from a fresco seen at the Vatican Museum. These look like archaeological ruins that time and new technologies have turned obsolete; they still support an incomplete building in the foreground, but there is no sign of building activity.

The scaffolding has been the subject of two other paintings (fig. 10). These paintings are executed in a very accurate, traditional style, the way a "vedutista" painter of the eighteenth century might have painted them in every detail, showing a command of linear perspective and plastic volume. Although the medium is oil colour, the paintings look very 'dry' and matt: there is nothing of the luscious quality or shiny appearence commonly associated with oil paint. The colour is applied thinly and evenly, on a slightly yellowish base prepared with gesso and lead white. The palette consists of grey, graphite and light blue in combination with umbra and sepia.

10 *Two scaffolding paintings*, 2000
Oil on linen, 90x70 cm. each.
View of the exhibition at Palazzo Lancellotti,
in "Cortili Aperti", Rome 2000

From a letter of a traveller to the painter

[...] In this city, the scaffolding is generally made of steel, of tubular elements held together by brass joints. It follows a regular pattern of horizontal and vertical lines, often crossing each other to form a "X" figure. There are wooden gangways and small roofs to prevent building material from falling and harming people on the street. I see the scaffolding as the skeleton of the building, the inner as well as the outside structure. It can hide the building or it can be hidden inside it. It defines the final shape of the building, but it creates a new building as well, on top of the original one; see what happened with the scaffolding of the Washington Monument, now it's a piece of architecture itself, relocated somewhere in the Arizona desert. There has been a controversy about this scaffold: whether it was good to take it down or to keep it in front of the monument because it looked good – a kind of super-monument for the future. Finally it was decided to remove and rebuild it in another place, like a building or sculpture. I can perfectly understand that: scaffolding has a beauty. It speaks to us of the building process and of the human effort behind it. It is not a building in itself, not yet at least: it's an anticipation of the building. Scaffolding allows us to dream, or to imagine the final result; and often, although not always, imagination is more pleasant than reality.

Sometimes the external scaffolding is covered in plastic sheets: they can be green with little holes, or white, like huge curtains floating with the wind. Or it may be covered in wooden panels on which an image of the future building is painted. In the former case the building looks like a big ship ready to sail; in the latter, my eyes get confused at first glance, not being able to distinguish between the real and the false façade. The scaffolding-skeleton puts on flesh, or maybe just an elegant suit to hide the work that is going on in the process within. I am so fascinated by these things that I see going on around the big building that I would like to ask you whether you could paint some pictures of the scaffolding. If you agree, I'd like to meet you very soon to discuss the details. [...].

From a letter of the painter to the architect

[...] I wouldn't probably bother you know that you are so busy if I had not met a stranger some days ago who is travelling around the world and visited our city. He was very impressed by the building in process. In particular, he was struck by the scaffolding covering it; he saw me sketching the scaffold and liked the drawings so much that he nearly commissioned me to make some paintings on the subject. I am not sure if I should engage in this, but I think I will in the end. That's why I need your help: let me in the building yard and allow me to take sketches of the site. I myself am very curious to see the building from the inside; actually, I think I would do this even without a commission, just for my own pleasure...

On perspective

> In "The Origin of Perspective," Hubert Damisch argues that perspective is first of all a conceptual construction and only after that a technique for enhancing the verisimilitude of painted images. The primary goal of Renaissance artists and architects, he states, was not representation but orientation: how people locate themselves in space. In other words, Brunelleschi's experiments with mirrors were more far-reaching than his engineering of the great dome of Florence. His development of perspective structured how the modern world would see.[1]

I adopt specific viewpoints for my compositions in respond to a clear need: the "bird's eye view" in my cityscapes allows me to present a world seen from above, as if in miniature. It is a metaphor for the view from a far point in space but also in time, as if I were looking *back* onto the city, the city of the present viewed from the future. In other words, I am creating an image of a city that is no longer there (as if I were looking at the earth from another planet) but that is *there* in that precise instant – the eternal present. The other and opposite point of view, the view from a lower position focusing on the upper edge of the buildings, reveals the *here and now* inside the city, walking nose-up and feeling overwhelmed by the grandiosity of its buildings. It's a sense of smallness and insignificance as opposed to the earlier powerful sense of controlling the panorama (thus, the 'world').

While the former viewpoint represents a totalling glance across the city (*I embrace it all*), the latter is necessarily a partial one, a fragmented, incomplete glance (*I cannot see it all at once*). While the former refers to the idea of 'infinity,' the latter carries the idea of limitation, the finite. From the whole to the detail and vice versa is a circular movement. The patches of sky visible above the buildings suggest escape, going beyond, taking off, flight.

The two views are connected to two aspects of horizon (bird's-eye view) and verticality (the lower standpoint). Both are equally relevant, and both are part of my experience of the city and, conversely, of the Babel myth.

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[1] Herbert Muschamp, "Adjusting to a Shift in the Axis of Modern Art," *The New York Times Weekend* (28 June 2002), p. E33.

28

Five hypothetical Babel cities

Five small canvases are displayed in a vertical row; they depict imaginary cities. The one on top shows an ideal Renaissance city floating in the sky, while breaking into pieces at the side. A man is watching, his back turned to us. A cracked pot stands near the man together with broken columns and classic ruins. The second describes a building in progress from a fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli destroyed during World War II : the erection of the Tower of Babel. On top of it there is a tree; modern scaffolding creates a surreal cityscape on the horizon. The third canvas shows an ancient city in the desert, Palmyra; in the foreground a huge hand carved from stone, like the prototype at the Capitoline museum in Rome, points its index finger at the sky, as two men on a rock observe the scene from a distance. The fourth is a collage of several tower-like shapes, from antiquity to the space shuttle and rocket, against a background of ruins; a sort of wordless parable of the Tower's life through symbolic objects. The last canvas represents a labyrinth whose Adriadne's thread extends outside the border of the canvas like an antennae trying to capture signals from the ground.

These paintings are made on canvas prepared with Chinese paper: the paper gives strength and a smooth texture to the canvas, allowing to paint subtle details and the use of collage. Regarding the latter, the debt to Max Ernst's use of collage is obvious; like in Ernst compositions, these collages are aptly disguised and mixed with acrylic paint and drawing. The distinction among the different techniques is smoothed down and made coherent by the use of grey tones and the accurate proportions of the cutouts figures on the canvas. Another significant reference are the etchings and lithographies by Max Klinger, especially in the choice of the long and narrow horizontal format and the superimposion of different planes with figures of composite styles and techniques within the main 'cool' realistic manner.
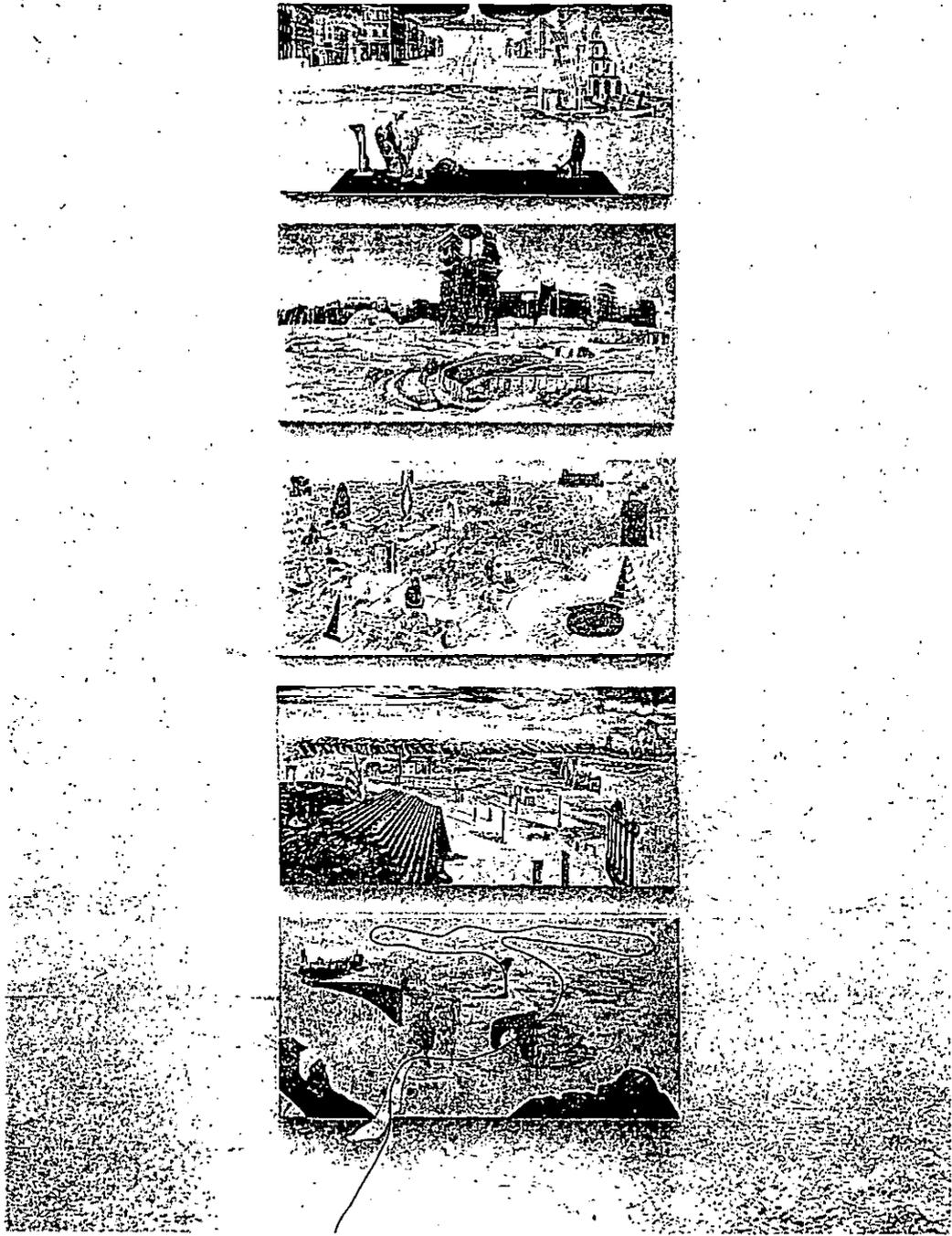
11   *Five Hypothetical Babel Cities*, 2000
     Collage, acylic, graphite on canvas prepared with paper
     25x50 cm. each

M. 5a1 Text in the Panorama installation

We stood in front of the city stretching below, in contemplation. And we felt as if we were watching ten or perhaps twenty or a hundred cities all at once, all in one.

The building was tall enough to offer us an overall view of the city; but the work was far from complete.

The city is made of black and white spaces. Light-dark, empty-full...
I play around with them inverting the order, until the city becomes an abstract map of fragmented signs.
Does anyone still have a story to tell?

Montesquieu used to say: "when I arrive in a city I climb up the highest steeple or the highest tower, to have a general overview, before seeing the singular parts, and when I leave I do the same to fix my ideas."

Léon Daudet on the view of Paris from Sacré Coeur. "From high up you can see this population of palaces, monuments, houses, and hovels,which seem to have gathered in expectation of some cataclysm, or of several cataclysms - metereological, perhaps, or social . . . As a lover of hilltop sanctuaries, which never fail to stimulate my mind and nerves with their bracing harsh wind, I have spent hours on Fourviéres looking at Lyons, on Notre-Dame de la Garde looking at Marseilles, on Sacré Coeur looking at Paris . . . [on the Gianicolo hill looking at Rome, on the top terrace of the Tate Modern looking at London, on the Empire State Building looking at New York, on the Blackpool Tower looking at the town and the shore below] And yes, at a certain moment I heard in myself something like a tocsin, a strange admonition, and I saw these three magnificent cities . . . threatened with collapse, with devastation by fire and flood, with carnage, with rapid erosion, like forests leveled en bloc. At other times, I saw them prayed upon by an obscure, subterrean evil, which undermined the monuments and neighborhoods, causing entire sections of the proudest home to crumble . . . From the standpoint of these promontories, what appears most clearly is the menace. *The agglomeration is menacing*; the enormous labor is menacing [the sense of danger is intrinsic to the Tower]. For man has need of labor, that is clear, but he has other needs as well . . . He needs to isolate himself and to form groups, to cry out and to revolt. to regain calm and to submit. . . . Finally, the need for suicide is in him; and in the society he forms, it is stronger than the instict for self-preservation. Hence, as one looks out over Paris, Lyons, or Marseilles, from the heights of Sacré Coeur, the Fourvières, or Notre-Dame de la Garde, what astounds me is that Paris, Lyons, and Marseilles have endured." [the astonishment of the survivor - in the same way when you look at the ruins of Rome you wonder how it is possible that they are still there, or that we are still there looking at them].[2]

Does anyone still want to go with me into a panorama?[3]

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[2] Léon Daudet, *Paris vécu*, vol. 1. Rive droite (Paris 1930). pp.220-221, cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [C9a,1]. p. 100. Comments in || mine.

Setup of the panoramas: View from a raised platform, surrounded by a balaustrade, of surfaces lying round about and beneath. The painting runs along a cylindrical wall approximately a hundred meters long and twenty meters high. The principal panoramas of the great panorama painter Prévost: Paris, Toulon, Rome, Naples, Amsterdam, Tilsit, Wagram, Calis, Antwerp, London, Florence, Jerusalem, Athens . . .[4]

The dream of the Tower is a Utopia of totality: the work that could possibly enclose all works. A work that could contain the complexity of the universe; the ultimate work; a work that contemplates all possible variations and combinations of its parts. A work that explores all possible meanings and facets.

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[3] Max Brod, *Über die Schönheit Hässlicher Bilder* (Leipzig: 1913), p. 59. Quoted in Benjamin, op. cit., p. 527.
[4] Benjamin, op. cit., p. 528.

There are always people who will come to inhabit the difficult spaces of the wall...[5]
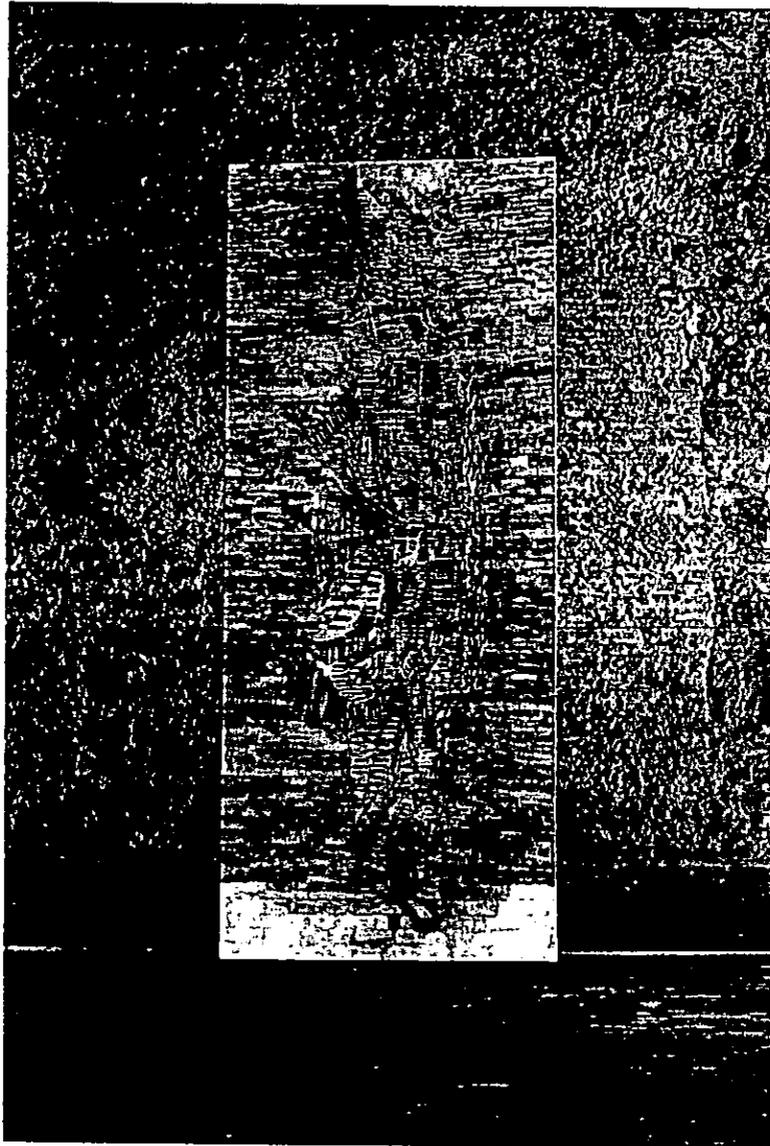
12   Vertical City, 2001
      Acrylic on linen
      270x120 cm

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[5] Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1997), p. 13.

The motif of the city seen through a gap in a broken wall (cf. *The Cleft*, **M.5c**) began with *Vertical City* painting (fig. 12). It began as a panoramic cityscape before being turned into a vertical piece, a fissure in a crumbling wall, inside of which a net of scaffolding, rooms and fragments of buildings are crammed together into a dense, baroque space, somehow reminiscent of certain painted interiors by Vieira da Silva (fig. 13).
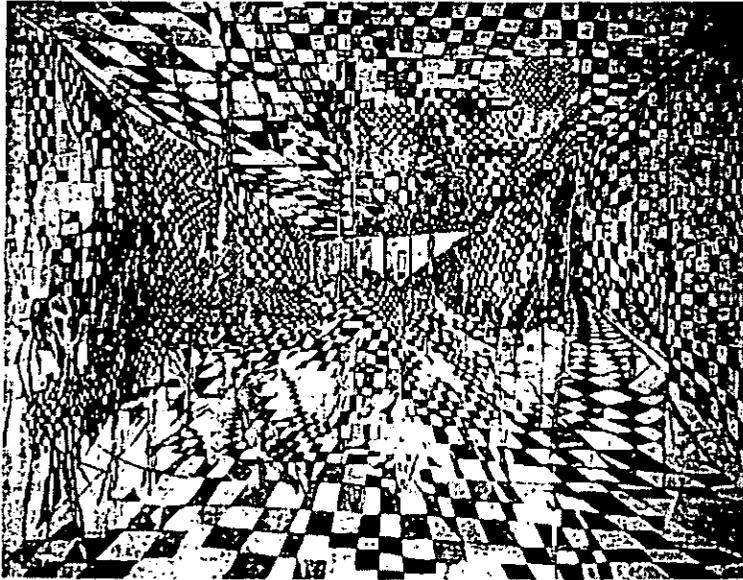
13 Vieira da Silva, Enigma, 1947, oil
on canvas, 89x116 cm

Artist Niki de Sant Phalle worked on a series of Tarot Paintings. One of them symbolizes the tower, and she chose to represent it as the Tower of Babel:

> The Tower of Babel, Tarot card no.16. Some people call this card "Home of God". It represents the mental constructions that have no solid bases. The Tower is not only negative, it gives us a lesson; our complex mental constructions are to collapse. We have to break our mental walls and look through them.

The poetry of the (broken) wall is also at the centre of Lebbeus Woods' architectural reconstructions for the city of Sarajevo, La Havana and San Francisco: three cities which were

destroyed in different ways (war; economic crisis; earthquake), therefore emblematic of three different types of reconstruction policy.

The walls [...] do not simply separate other spaces, but define spaces within themselves, spaces "between," zones where the norms and conventions of living on either side of the wall's divide do not or, more likely, cannot apply. They are not simply outlaw zones, feeding on themselves, but the critical edges of urban and culture as a whole. [...] A wall of this type can be metaphorical, but it can also be literal. In the latter case, it acquires an immediate tectonic presence, and at an architectural scale may become a room, a street or a city. Or the wall may become pure space, in other words, the negation of architectonic mass and materiality and the comforting assurance of their cause-and-effect certainty. There are always people who will come to inhabit the difficult spaces of the wall. They are the people of crisis, pushed usually unwillingly to confrontation with limits, borderline cases of every sort, adventurers, criminals, inventors, con artists, opportunists, people who cannot, or have not been allowed to, fit in elsewhere. They are nomads of the body, refugees of the mind, restless, itinerant, looking without much chance of finding a sure way either forward or back. Instead, they turn the situation to an advantage, making uncertainty a virtue, and strangeness an ally.

[...] To inhabit the spaces of the walls, edges, peripheries, borders, and the "in-between" – the spaces of the extreme conditions brought into being by radical transformations – is not a matter of creating entirely new knowledge, even less of discarding existing ideas or systems of knowing, but rather a matter of expanding them, precisely at their former, or present, limits. The new human landscapes created at the boundaries of the formerly known are those that increase the possibilities of choice among those people who find (or need to place) themselves on or against those boundaries. These landscapes may seem startling, even irrational, but they are nothing if not extensions of reason.[6]

14   Lebbeus Woods, *Berlin-Free –Zone Project,
Berlin, D,* 1990, pen and ink, coloured
pencil

How not to think of famous walls, such as the Berlin   Wall, the Chinese Wall or the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem? The walls encircling most ancient cities, from Babylon to Rome to Machu Pichu? Cracked walls show the space in between, that is the *Übergange*, the passage, the threshold that divides 'here' and 'there.' On a symbolic level thresholds perform a divide between public and private, inside and outside, therefore they are abolished in every totalitarian plan; thresholds represent the shade between black and white, and they are inhabited by the shadow.

In Vertical City the wall is crumbling: the loose bricks at the bottom of the canvas recall a baroque device: depicting the moment when a building is falling or fragments are parting from it (cf. for instance the Trevi Fountain in Rome whose right side appears to be crumbling, or the already mentioned Exploding Church by Desiderio Monsù, **A.3**, fig. 43). A city pokes though the gap opened by the falling bricks, as if pushing from behind the wall, to demolish it even further. Demolition sites: sources for teaching the theory of construction. "Never have circumstances been more favorable for this genre of study than the epoch we live in today. During the past twelve years, a multitude of buildings - among them, churches and cloisters - have been demolished down to the first layers of their foundations; they have all provided . . . useful instructions." [7] Demolition sites: "The high walls, with their bister-colored lines around the chimneys flues, reveal, like the cross-section of an architectural plan, the mystery of intimate distributions. . . A curious spectacle, these open houses, with their floorboards suspended over the abyss, their colorful flowered wallpaper still showing the shape of the rooms, their staircases leading nowhere now, their cellars open to the sky, their bizarre collapsed interiors and battered ruins. It all resembles, though without the gloomy tone, those uninhabitable structures which Piranesi outlined with such feverish intensity in his etchings."[8]

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Charles-François Viel, *De l'Impuissance des mathématiques pour assurer la solidité des bâtiments* (Paris, 1805), pp. 43-44. Cited in Benjamin, *Arcades*.
[8] Alexandre Dumas, Théophile Gautier, Arsène Houssaye, Paul de Musset, Louis Enault, and Du Fayl, *Théophile Gautier, Mosaïque de ruines: Paris et les Parisiens au XIX siècle,* (Paris, 1856), pp.38-39. Cited as above.

35

15   Detail of *Vertical City* with miniature plastic
      figurines, 2001

Piranesi is the name that comes to mind again when looking at the scene through the gap in the wall,
not so much for its darkness though, since the light, broken colours are more reminiscent of a cubist
palette, but for the intricacy of its lines, the absence of empty space, the chaotic crowding of innumerable
filaments, arches and multiple perspectives that give the painting dynamism and illusion of depth.

Every (re)building starts with a ruin. **(M.6b)**

Reconstruction sites: Dresden *Frauenkirche*. All stones from the 1945 bombing are currently being
collected and classified, put onto iron shelves in front of the Church (like a macro-archive), and slowly
being removed from their shelves to reconstruct the destroyed church, returning them to their original
location. (The fragments of the old church emerge like hyperrealistic details from the overall new
structure, like photographic collage in a painting). A massive scaffolding envelops the building. A
painting of the completed parts hangs on top of it. The whole site looks like a giant installation on the
theme of reconstruction, preservation of memory, identity and dialogue past-present (fig. 16).

36
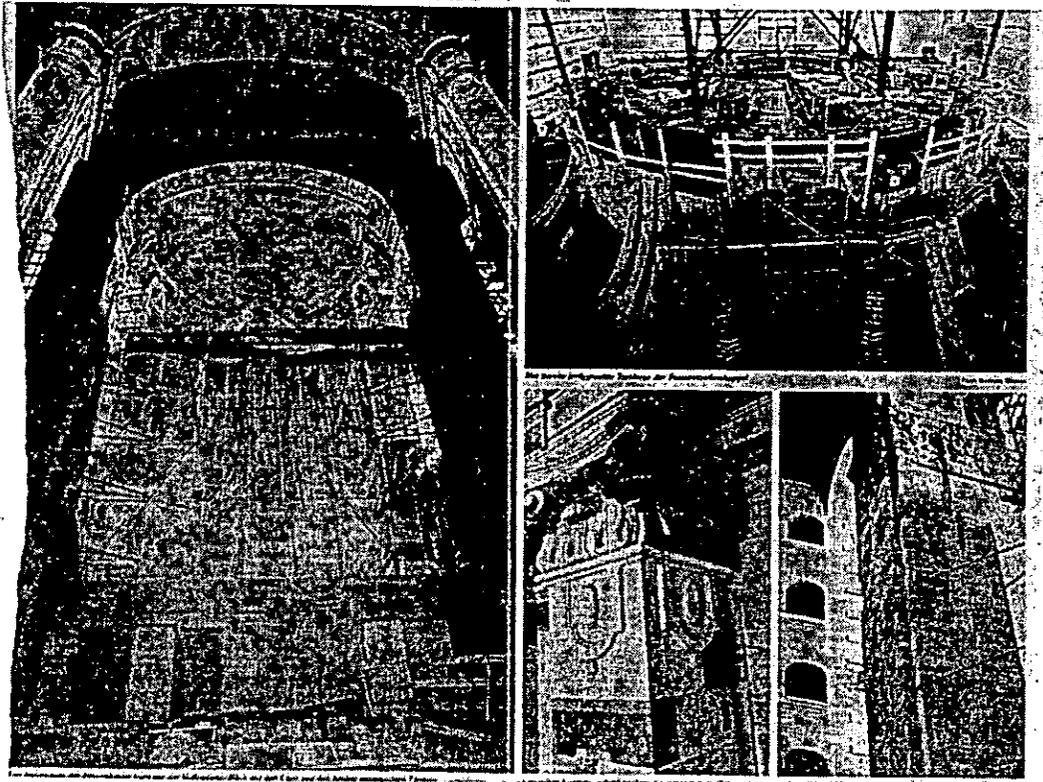
16   Dresden *Frauenkirche*, reconstruction site

NB: Each stone carries a number in a way that recalls a legend - that the Tower's bricks had people's names carved on.

Roman Journal, January 2001

I cannot explain exactly why I am so drawn to this building behind my house; is it maybe because of the ruined appearance without being an ancient ruin? The destroyed house dates back perhaps 60 years. It could have been bombed during the war and never rebuilt. It is now a home for pigeons, flying in and out the blind holes that once were windows and doors.

Or is it because the facade is missing and one can look inside and see the different stories and building structures? It's like looking at a doll's house, with the front stripped off to see the interior. With a little imagination, I can see the kitchen, the bedrooms, the lavatory in that tiny space and so on. And because of its many levels and layers, I can imagine that the foundations date back at least to the ancient Romans: there might even be a temple underneath, a Mitraic sanctuary or a Syriac tomb, or some other sheltered sacred place belonging to an archaic ritual.

This building, with its dramatic look and imposing height, would have appealed to Piranesi's taste for bizarre ruins; it could have been a model for one of his *Carceri d'invenzione*.[9] It also evokes the description made by Carl Gustav Jung on the imaginary building (a tower?) that reflects the structure of the human mind. [A.1]

This building has the power to evoke the image of the primordial tower: it creates a place for the *rêverie* and the journey in the unconscious.

The house is also a "no-man's-land"; it does not belong to anything, it has no function, no use: it is a piece of waste. It is a ruin in the real sense of the term, but without the charm or the aesthetic relevance of ancient ruins. It stands there as a forgotten, abandoned, once alive building (perhaps in early days it was the pride of its inhabitants) to which nobody pays attention anymore.

17   The fallen house in via Tiburtina, 2001
      B/w cibachrome

FICTION - 1

As U.* entered the warmly sunny-lit apartment at the first floor of the building in via T...210, she knew all of a sudden that that was *the place* for her. It had all she was looking for: a long corridor with many doors and a large mirror that multiplied the series of doors and rooms, articulating the space.

And when she saw the roof terrace, any little doubt she might still have had disappeared; because there she saw *it*. It was the most fascinating, awkward, captivating ruined house she had ever seen. A four-storey high building with no facade and no roof, falling apart and yet steady in its decay; full of wild plants growing chaotically out of the walls and floors, the pigeons making a home for themselves in the dark spaces behind the empty windows and holes in the bricks. U. let her gaze wandering onto the rich texture of the red and yellow ochre brick walls, onto the dramatic shadows cast by the empty rooms and the cavities that once were doors, staircases, and terraces. The whole complex spoke of abandonment, loss, tragedy and decay in such a way that she felt deeply moved. She saw a trace of a Babelian passage on those walls.

Was it an explosion that reduced it like that? Or the erosion of time? Was it a big fire? Nobody in the neighbourhood knew the real story and nobody seemed to bother. In fact, strangely enough, the people living in the buildings around the fallen house, with their terraces facing it directly, carried on their lives in an apparently unconcerned way, as if this big ruin did not exist. It's almost invisible to them, she thought. This is it – it came to her – the tragedy of the tower is under everybody's eyes but nobody seems to see...or to care. One of the neighbours, an aged man living with his wife and a cat,

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[9] The reference to Piranesi's Prisons may look directly borrowed from John Soane's *Crude Hints...* However, at the time I wrote these notes I was not familiar with Soane's text.

when asked about the building replied: "Building? What building? I don't see any ruined building here" – and he shut the door.

*Ufetta Crymes, reporter for the *Babel Post* and special correspondent in Rome.

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FICTION - 2

Prof. T. W. Zilt* came to a place where he had never been. It was in the periphery of the city, but not very far from the centre; in fact, very near to the central railway station, and less than a mile from the university campus. Maybe it was because of the proximity to the university that now he was strolling around the streets of this unknown quarter. It was a pleasant, lively, *declassé* neighbourhood: the kind with many old artisan's shops (marble carvers, metalsmiths, *ferramenta* shops), popular gyms, student associations, meeting rooms for the elderly and clubs of the communist party (still proud of its old name). Prof. Zilt was enjoying the unusually warm December sun and the streets, when all of a sudden he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk as if he saw something of great wonder. He saw a four-storey building, completely open on one side and in a visible state of decay. It looked like a giant tower that had been abandoned a long time before.
He immediately thought that the mysterious building could be the mythical Tower he had been searching for...

*Visiting Professor in archaeology from the University of Vilnius at the Università la Sapienza in Rome.

Tantric Towers
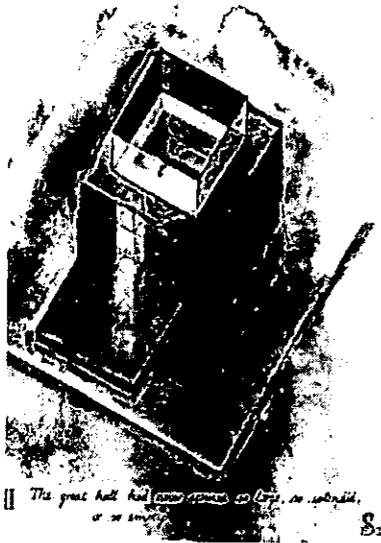
18   *Tantric Towers - III*, 2002
      Watercolour on paper, 30x24 cm

In a series of small watercolours, the main form is a cubic tower, shaped after the plan of the Harris Museum in Preston and a metaphor for the book's structure; bright and strong colours dominate - cadmium red and yellow, crimson and purple - inspired to the Eastern art of Mandalas and sacred-symbolic allegories. Like Mandalas these paintings explore the sensual power of colour within a geometric framework (the cubic tower plays the role of a scaffolding), which repeates with variations. We might see the different levels of the tower in 'exploded' axonometric view; a corner of the tower crumbling as if it were about to fall; the tower contained in a box, as if it were a representation of a model: each painting depicts a particular stage or aspect of the Tower.

The number eight refers to the eight storey of the Tower of Babel as Herodotus originally reports:

> In the midst of the temple [of Zeus-Belos] a solid tower was constructed, one stadium in length and one stadium in width. Upon this tower stood another, and again upon this another, and so on, making eight towers in all, one upon another. All eight towers can be climbed by means of a spiral staircase which runs round the outside. About half way up there are seats where those who make the ascent can sit and rest. In the topmost tower there is a great temple, and in the temple is a great bed richly appointed, and beside it a golden table. No idol stands there. No one spends the night there save a woman of that country, designated by the god himself, so I was told by the Chaldeans, who are the priests of that divinity.[10]

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[10] Quoted by André Perrot, *The Tower of Babel.*
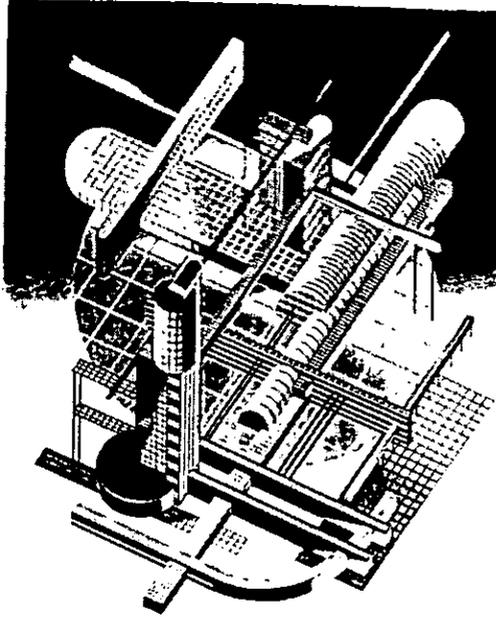
Russian Constructist compositions (cf. Chernichov, fig. 19) also comes to mind. The art of that period is extremely interesting also for the weight given to utopian projects (which like many avant-garde movements, were daring and subverting at first, subsequently to be absorbed into the political propaganda of a totalitarian regime).

They hint at the Modernist trend toward an art made of 'minimal' geometric forms and of painting as an act of meditation (Malevič, Mondrian, Newman, Judd, Riley among others).

I have twisted or denied this tendency with literary and figurative references, and by constant allusion to fleshy textures and body parts correspondent to structural elements in the building, as the title suggests; in other words, the cube is not simply a cube but it stands for something else (being it building, body or machine). These paintings also suggest what a dreamy architect might draw in her spare time, free from the obligations of her job. They may well be titled "An architect's dream".

41
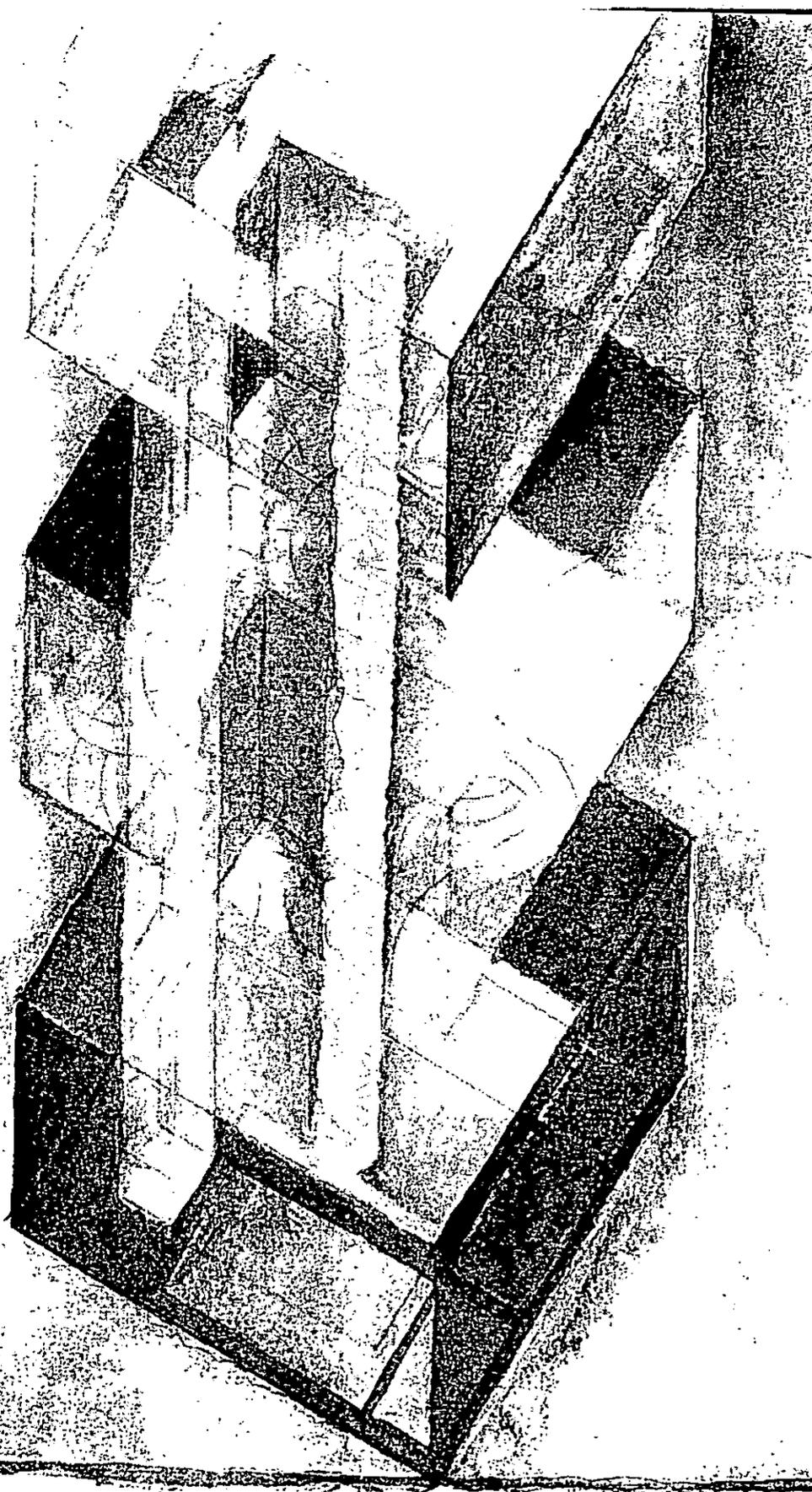
The clearness was only outwards; within
was a wandering flame.
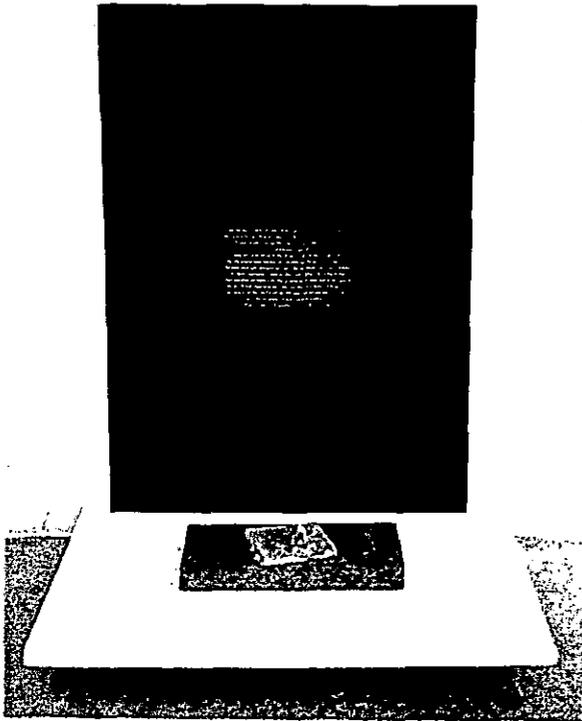
Text in the model

He spoke gladly to me of his art, of all the
cares and the knowledge it requires; he
explained everything I saw with him in the
yard. I saw above all his extraordinary spirit.
I found in him the power of Orpheus. It
foretold the monumental future of the
enormous heaps of stones and beams that lay
around us. [...] What marvellous talks to the
workers! There was no trace of the difficult
nightime meditations. He gave them just
orders and numbers...."[11]

21 *Model for a Portable Tower – Eupalinos*, 2001
Plywood, acrylic, cardboard, plaster
70x40x30 cm

The *Eupalinos* that gives the title to Valery's imaginary dialogue between Phaedrus and
Socrates on the theme of architecture is a mythical figure, an architect who either lived in a
distant past or is an archetype for the 'quintessential,' timeless Architect. Other names come to
mind like that Phaleg who, according to a freemason tale, was the legendary architect of the
Tower of Babel, or Nimrod, the chief of the Babelian enterprise according to another version of
the story.

Here, the nearly epic, lapidary invocation of the future monument, printed on a brick wall-
like pattern (derived from an ancient cuneiform characters' stone engraving) finds an 'opposite
correspondent' in the humble, nondescript fragment lying at its feet: are we in front of a ruin of
the once magnificent monument, or are we rather witnessing the potential of a lump of clay to
become, one day, a tower? This idea of a double possibility (either tower-in-potential or
destroyed tower) and of a cyclical process of construction and deconstruction is expressed by
the small text on the basement:

Every (re)building starts with a ruin

[11] Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos ou l'architecte," *Eupalinos; and, l'Ame et la Danse*, ed. with an introduction and notes by
V., Clarendon French Series (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 57. My translation.
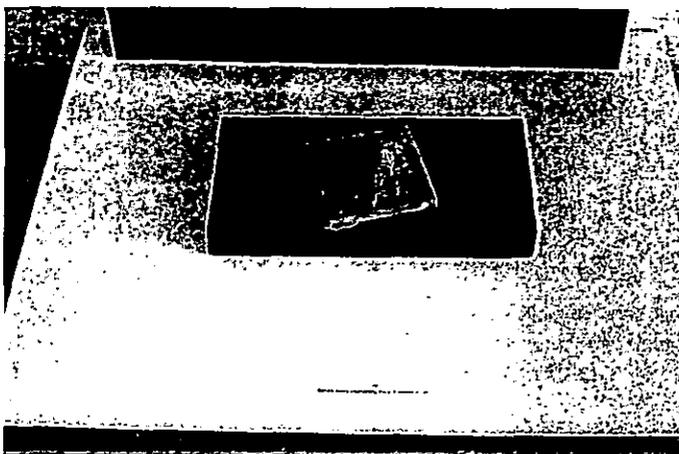
22 *Eupalinos*, detail of the basement, 2001

M.6c - The Pyramid
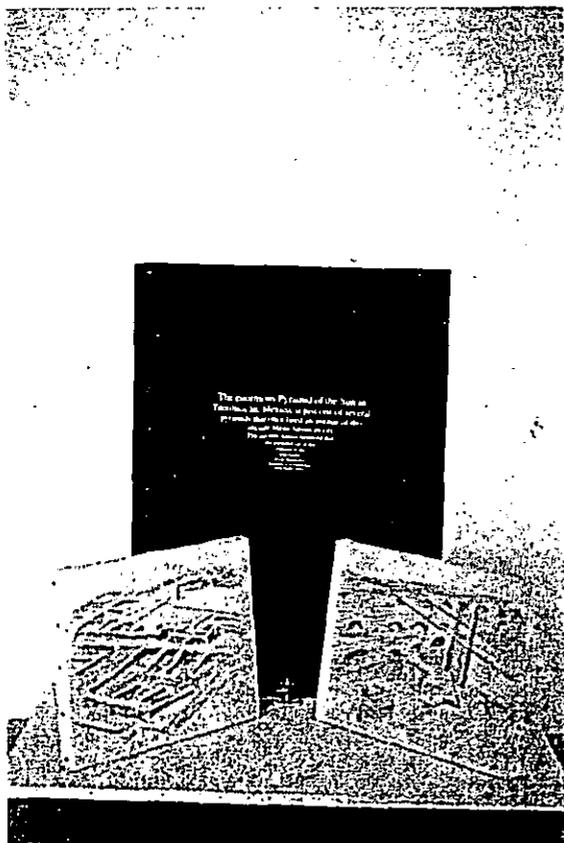
Text in the model:

The enormous
Pyramid of the Sun in
Teotihuacán, Mexico,
is just one of several
pyramids that once
lined an avenue of this
ancient Meso-
American city.
The ancient Aztecs
believed that
the pyramid sat at the
entrance to the
underworld.[12]

23 *Model for a Portable Tower: The
Pyramid*, 2001
Plywood, acrylic, cardboard, graphite on
handmade paper mounted on stretchers,
plaster
70x50x40 cm

Here the text works visually as well as from the point of view of its content: that is, it refers to a pyramid and it assumes the shape of an upside-down pyramid. This text has been chosen for its evocative power: it suggests the presence of an underworld that is furthermore suggested by the two small drawings standing on the basement. The drawings depict a detail of ruined foundations of a Roman city and catacombs, with a small model of St. Peter's Church in the \

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[12] Laura Brooks, *Monuments: masterpieces of architecture* (Todtri, 1988).

44

middle, looking minuscule and insignificant in comparison with the two mounted drawings and the imposing panel with the text.

The basement text says:

> Their irruption wiped out the kingdom

Which could refer either to the "hordes of white, tall barbarians"[13] who wiped away the Roman Empire, or to the Christian 'conquistadores' who went to Latin America in the fifteenth and sixteenth century and destroyed the ancient native civilizations; but the possibilities are so many that we shall let the viewer draw his or her own conclusions.

Samantha du Raeno, *Boxes and the New Babel* (1996)[14]

A new generation has arisen. We are the generation who have received the fruits of our forebears: we, the "enlightened", have embraced asceticism, secularisation, instrumental rationality. First we saw. Then we could "see". Then we could identify. Then we could sort. Then we could group, classify, pigeonhole, "box". The contents of the box has grown over time: first the Universe, the World Outside The World. Then the World. Then each country, each race, each "species". Each class. Each sex. Then the socio-psycho-culturally produced "individual" we apparently all were. Not content with boxing each other, we began to box ourselves. Like the Hope that sat in Pandora's box, we are waiting to be released; while we watch the mythical "evils" escape, we remain trapped inside.

The tower is built from boxes, and when the boxes are themselves boxed (in the contextually self-producing, perspectivist loop that is this system) the tower will be lost to reality, having long-forgotten its own purpose. In hyperreality, everything has a meaning, or everything has none: and both would be the confusions of the new truth seekers of Babel.

The boxes now become a curious nesting set, allowing us to pull out boxes that lay inside boxes, in search of the final (smallest) box, the prize within. Yet this nest plays tricks: every box that is pulled out is no nearer to the centre we seek, but is the same size as the last. Each box represents a perspective, and each box that is pulled out is accompanied by a change in our perspective of ourselves. In relation to ourselves, the box remains unchanged in size: the boxes grow smaller as we grow smaller, and we can only reach the final box by a corresponding reduction ad infinitum of what it is to believe, to understand, or to be human.

> *"Ours is the age of substitutes: instead of language we have jargon; instead of principles, slogans; and instead of genuine ideas, bright ideas."*
>
> Eric Bentley, *The Dramatic Event*

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[13] Umberto Eco, "La caduta della Quarta Roma", in *L'Espresso* (21 Dec. 2000): p. 350. My translation.
[14] From the website www.towerofbabel.com.

Building a painting through a case study: *The Cleft.*

The format of this text deliberately refers to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* to illustrate the idea of a consequent passage from one action to the next in the painting process.

a small *'Tractatus'* on painting

The process described in the following text refers in particular to *The Cleft* painting (M.5c), a case study for a number of general ideas such as copy, model, analogy, use of colour, the representation of space etc. By building the painting step by step (exposing the progression of actions and ideas by a progressive enumeration of each sentence) I shall refer not only to painting process, but to concepts that are implied in the general discourse. SMALL CAPS and cross references indicate that the specific highlighted issue or concept will be further expanded in the following chapter (L.2 – "In The Studio").

> *Ce n'était pas un travail original, c'était la copie d'une idée, l'exécution, une exécution technique, comme un pianiste exécute un morceau de musique qu'il na pas composé. La même chose pour ce verre, c'était la simple exécution d'une idée.*

> It was not an original artwork, it was the copy of an idea, the execution, a technical execution, like a pianist executes a piece of music that he didn't compose. Same thing for this glass, it was the simple execution of an idea.

So Marcel Duchamp wrote about his *Big Glass.* Why do I start with the idea of the copy? Perhaps the term 'copy' is somehow misleading, but it describes working after a project, that is, repeating with different methods an image already formed in a vague fashion in my mind, and afterwards developed on paper with exact proportions, shapes and colours.

In earlier times as opposed to today, the copy was a painter's usual practice: what mattered, was 'good painting,' not originality. We should therefore talk about 'analogy' rather than of 'copy,' but I like to retain the word 'copy' for its impersonality. When working after a model, composition, colours and motifs have already been established; the only task left to the artist is the actual execution of the painting, in more or less expressive terms but without inventing anything *ex novo.* The time for invention is thus entirely left to the realization of the model, which is not, however - a major difference with Duchamp's attitude – a pure translation of an idea into a visual form. An initial idea takes shape in the two-dimensional surface through a process of trial and error, in which different possibilities are explored through a variety of techniques (mainly – as in this case – with archival material and collage). A 'final' (but by no means definitive, for it is still open to subsequent variations and re-arrangements) form, assemblage, or composition is eventually chosen. This implies that the route between the initial idea and the final product is by necessity disseminated with uncertainty, *pas faux,* re-considerations,

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sudden illuminations. Most importantly, it is nurtured by the working process: ultimately the painting suggests further directions (see **L.2a**).

1. Copy, model: the pre-invention. That is, the invention comes before the picture, in the process of searching for an appropriate form: importance of the preliminary study.

1.1 A copy is made from a preliminary drawing and it may incorporate references and images taken from various sources (art history, photos, illustrations). *Appropriation* has always existed in art, but it hs become especially relevant in post-modern discourse. By now, its possibilities have been largely and consciously explored by artists working within a post-modern frame. [TRADITION; HISTORY - **L.2h**; **L.2j**]

1.12 Every copy is inevitably an interpretation. Even when attempting to copy one's own work one cannot truly copy it.

1.2 The copy of a painting is analogous[1] to the original painting. That is, a new painting following a parallel line, similar and yet different from its reference. Its differences are related to materials employed, scale, and modality of execution.

1.21 We talk of analogy also when we trace parallel lines with literary figures, images, philosophical systems that share a conceptual relationship with the artwork .

1.22 A given analogy is visually organized in allegorical form[2] to represent the Tower, that is a metaphor[3] for a number of concepts.

1.23 The word 'copy' is ultimately a metaphor for 'analogy'.

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[1] Analogy: equality of ratios , proportion (orig. A term of mathematics, but already with transf. sense in Plato).
Hence, Due proportion: correspondence or adaptation of one thing to another.
Equivalence or likeness of relations; resemblance of things with regards to some circumstances or effects; a name for the fact that, the relation borne to any object by some attribute or circumstance, corresponds to the ralation existing between another object and some attribute or circumstance pertaining to it.
E.g.: knowledge is to the mind, what light is to the eye.
The general recognition of this analogy makes *light* , or *enlightenment,* or *illumination,* an analogical word for *knowledge.*
[2] Allegory: lit. Speaking otherwise than one seems to speak (other + speaking).
Description of a subject under the guise of some other subject or aptly suggestive resemblance.
An instance of such description; a figurative sentence, discourse or narrative, in which properties and circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest; an extended or continued metaphor.

[3] Metaphor: To transfer, meta + fo bear, carry.
The figure of speech in which a name or description is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable; an instance of this, a metaphorical expression.
E.g.: life is a pilgrimage.
From *The Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

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1.231   The copy as such does not exist.

1.22   Rather than copy we should talk about 'imitation,' or 'approximation.'

1.23   While drawing the tower a formal self-generation occurs: form generates form. The drawing is a model of itself. When a new form is needed one can paint spontaneously without a predetermined form in mind, following the line around the 'casual' shape to create a new, conscious form.

1.24   Such a painting is self-referential and in the same time open to the possibility of metaphor.

2.   There is a greater degree of FREEDOM (L.2a) between the initial idea and the model for a painting than between the model and the final product (in the latter case, the analogy is between more similar terms than in the former). Nonetheless, there is freedom, even when setting precise limitations on the painting's plan.

2.1   The idea of freedom does not contradict the idea of limitation or restriction, if these limitations or restrictions are chosen by the artist to facilitate her work.

2.11   Example of self-inflicted limitations: utilizing only black and white instead of colour; choosing only a limited range of colours (e.g. black, white, yellow ochre, red oxide, ultramarine blue, olive green); limiting the range of brushes or painting tools; painting with one's hands only; fixing the dimensions and support for a number of pieces; establishing a time limit beyond which the work is finished; taking photographs of a city, using only b/w slide film; shooting b/w slides of a city, but only of tall buildings, etc.

2.12   The artist will control her art by keeping a regular journal to note these decisions and the progression of her work.

2.2   Working from a model guarantees a margin of objectivity within the laws of the artwork. It defines the field of action; it reduces the risk of having to make too many decisions, thus enabling the artist to focus on the painting process itself. By concentrating on the execution of the image (she is completely free in *how* to execute it), the artist can generate something unexpected and surprising. By working close to the surface, detail by detail, the larger context is momentarily out of sight - therefore, she may not have a complete control of the painting.

3.   The artist becomes similar to the architect when working from a plan.

3.1   Intention: to execute a picture the way a building is constructed.

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3.12   Working after a plan means: to establish the main elements of form, texture, materials, colour, time-space dimensions. To take care of details beforehand. To have a clear concept and to manifest it in the work. To conceive a project for a specific place.

3.2   The project should be legible on a graphic as well as on a conceptual level. Drawings will usually accompany the theoretical part, and vice versa.

3.3   To begin with the foundations: in the case of a painting, the unprimed canvas.

3.4   Preparation of the support presupposes at first a choice of materials: chalk or white primer, amount of water, i.e., the density of the ground, number of layers, tone.

3.41   The field is defined before tracing the preliminary drawing, i.e., the borders and margins of the canvas (does the image reach the edge or does it stop beforehand? Is it central or outside the axis?).

3.42   The basic drawing is sketched with natural charcoal or *fusain*.

3.43   To decide whether the canvas is fixed to an easel or to the wall, or laid down onto the floor.

3.44   To use one's hands, body, and other basic instruments such as sponges and rags, using the brush only occasionally (for more detailed areas), thus avoiding the repetition of gestures and marks occurring spontaneously or mechanically (assuming a distance from one's characteristic brushstroke).

3.441   The painting should look as if it were 'made by itself,' its artificiality appearing "natural,"[4] effortless, built up in layers like geological stratifications. (Analogy with artificial hills and mountain-temples built by various populations in Europe and Mesoamerica).

3.45   After tracing the essential outlines, to proceed with acrylic colours that dry quickly and allow speed of execution. This is essential when working in layers. The final layers can be applied in oil paint or any other media. This was a common technique in the Renaissance (using tempera), when paintings were often only finished in oil.

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[4] Cf. Immanuel Kant, *"On Art in General," Critique of Judgement*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 170.
"In [dealing with] a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness in its form must *seem* as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature. It is this feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers, a play that yet must also be purposive, which underlies that pleasure which alone is universallly comunicable although not based on concepts. Nature, we say, is beautiful [schön] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [schön] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature."

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3.46   To trace the form on the entire surface, proceeding from the general to the particular, i.e., the detail. During this process, to refer to the preparatory study for the image. The point is not to invent, but to make as accurate a copy as possible of the model.

3.5   The copy is made with other media and on another scale, bigger than the model.   By using other means and methods of execution the picture will be necessarily different from the model.

3.51   If in the model there is collage, photography, drawing etc., in the painting I shall try to imitate the parts made with collage, photography, drawing etc. with pictorial means only. In this way, a painting that is truly analogical to the preliminary study is obtained.

3.512   To define the image by using different approaches or working methods; e.g., from the general to the particular and vice versa; from high up to low down and vice versa, scanning the picture into sectors (mentally or by gridding the model and the canvas as well); by focusing on significant details distributed all over the surface (parts that emerge with realistic evidence from an informal background).

3.52   As in a building, the parts of the painting are refined and defined within the frame of the basic structure (cf. the function of the skeleton in anatomy drawing).

3.6   Importance of keeping some undefined areas; not everything has to be said. Leaving some blank or dark areas is essential, like the inner recesses of a building, dark corners or secret chambers to hide in. [UNFINISHED; INFINITE - L.21]

4.   By keeping open areas or undefined zones in the work, the artist introduces chance.

4.1   Chance is as necessary as discipline in the working process.

4.2   Working with chance means placing a *filter* between oneself and the work.

4.3   Every mechanical means for reproducing an image (like printing methods, from the simplest to the most complex) sets a filter between the artist's action and the support on which she works, therefore it reduces the artist's control over the painting.

4.31   Any technique that escapes the complete control of the artist will act as a filter.

4.311   Examples of techniques that mediates between the will of the artist and the result obtained: the *xerography* and all monotype methods, the reconstruction of forms with collage, painting

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at a close distance, and printing techniques reversing the normal process, such as the *reversed etching*. [see end of chapter, 4.311a-4.311c]

4.32 To consider the invention of a new language that might take into account all the possibilities offered by invented methods and techniques, in a similar fashion as Paul Valery talks about the Cunas population of Central America.[5] That is, to develop a vocabulary based on the number of possibilities that are contained in different working processes.

4.4 Through experience it is possible to predict the kind of chance that might occur, but the result will always carry something unexpected for the artist herself.

4.5 The use of different (visual) languages (or styles) creates another kind of filter, thus questioning the very idea of personality and individuality [L.2e]. By detaching from her 'personality' and creating works as if made artists living in the past or another part of the world or culture, the artist might experience a connection to them.

4.51 The artist appropriates 'characters' to assume a different identity and create work incorporating a variety of viewpoints.

4.6 Concept of "alterity" (*alterità*): being other than the work, to observe it from the outside. Being other than oneself.

4.61 The multiplicity of styles and/or media is an equivalent to the multiplicity of languages that were introduced by building the Babel Tower. On a psychological level, the crowds that were living in the Tower are the many faces of one's personality manifested through the artist's work. [L.2c; L.2e]

4.62 Multiple languages: why not subject one's way of making art to a specific time or place, whether mental or real? It would be a conscious and planned action. E.g.: to create an installation of an invented (therefore unknown) Baroque artist who deserved better luck. Among his or her subjects matters, the Tower of Babel. Or: to conceive an exhibition with several drawings and paintings representing the Tower by different artists in different times ("The fortune of the Tower of Babel between 16[th] and 20[th] century").
To conceive the exhibition about the Tower from an archaeological point of view: to display traces found on the supposed site of the original.

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[5] Paul Valery, in *Degas Form and Drawing*, writes about the way Cunas developed 14 verbs to designate the 14 movements of the head of an alligator. The same applies to the Innuit and their many expressions to define different states of the snow, just to mention extremely rich cases. But the same applies to other languages and populations.

Variation: as above, but from an architectural vantage, imagining a competition between architects to build the highest tower.

5. The form is implicit in the potentiality of the medium.

5.1 The question of whether the structure or the form is more important is a false dilemma: because the structure is inherent to the form, just like in a building in which the outer shape knows that there is an underlying structure that keeps it standing.

5.12 The question of meaning, on the other hand, is not necessarily implicit in the form; the artist needs a political conscience to introduce it into her work. A new meaning could be addressed through text accompanying the work, or integrated into the form of a title.

5.123 The artwork in this case is not merely an aesthetic product: it becomes an instrument for developing consciousness on another level (sociological, historical, anthropological, political etc.).

5.13 To give relevance to meaning, as well as to form, expands the possibilities of an artwork. It also carries a utopian vision of the world.

Techniques:

4.311a XEROXGRAPHY: Start with a photocopy of the image you wish to reproduce. Put it face-down on the support. Apply a solvent on the back of the photocopy until the ink is transferred on the support. By working repeatedly with the same image (e.g., the map of a city) you can make endless variations with a limited material (cf. *14 Invisible Cities* drawings, **M.4a2**). With many photocopies you can build the image in steps and layers overlapping one another. Many elements concur in the process: the filaments that the ink leaves on the paper through contact with the solvent, the irregular stains caused by an excess of solvent, the high definition of some areas with a range of greys in contrast with others that are more dull.
After the first phase of working almost at random, you can further elaborate the obtained result with pigments, pastels, charcoal, etc. The picture itself will suggest the next direction.

4.311b Method of the reconstruction of forms with COLLAGE: a variation of the concept of the (virtual) copy. Given a form or a number of forms, try to make a copy of it/them on different coloured papers of different colours (black, white and another colour may be sufficient) cutting them with scissors. Combine the forms and make a new drawing or painting utilizing these as a model. It is virtually impossible to reproduce a form without creating a new or

different one. Thus a series of paintings can be obtained from only one form. (cf. *1000+1 Tower*, **M.2b**).

4.311c   Painting in the middle of a canvas placed on the floor puts one inside the painting, thus losing the distance created by a far view. Then one cannot criticize oneself aor hold the composition under control. The artist chooses when to stop and step out of the painting to have an overview. These decisions are established before starting. It helps one avoiding weighing some areas of the painting more heavily than others. Only later, the artist decides what has to be modified and changes it accordingly.

4.311d   Method of *reversed etching*: a technique by which the signs on a metal plate can be totally erased, approaching progressively the 'ghost' of the image. The ghost or final image is the beginning of a new process that can be produced on the plate ex novo. The usual sequence is therefore inverted (one starts with a plate already full of signs and ends with a nearly blank plate) and the result even more unpredictable than a normal etching. The factors that determine the former are multiple and depending on variable causes (temperature, strength of the acid, quality of the sign filler, etc.) and by the lack of visibility of the image on the plate.

Simonetta Moro
Reconstructing Babel

The exhibition *Reconstructing Babel* is the result of three years research into the Tower of Babel, undertaken by artist Simonetta Moro. The exhibition has been arranged as an organic whole consisting of paintings, drawings, prints, objects, texts, and small scale models. The Tower of Babel story comes from the Book of Genesis (11:1-9) in the Old Testament of the Bible. Ancient people (who all spoke one language) tried to build a tower to reach Heaven. God was angered by this and so scattered the people around the earth and confused their languages so they could no longer communicate and therefore co-operate in building such a tower.

'Museum = Tower'
By considering the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, its architecture and collections as part of the artwork, and by intervening in several parts of the building, from the basement to the Egyptian Balcony, the Museum itself becomes the "Tower of Babel."

This map suggests a route to follow through the building and therefore the story of Babel. The red signs indicate where artworks are displayed amongst the Museum's collections, on all five levels of the building. Seven zones have been identified (making reference to the Sumerian temple of e-Pa), corresponding to different bodies of work and associated with imaginary characters: the *builder* (BASEMENT, zone 2), the *architect* (GROUND FLOOR and STAIRWAY, zone 1; 3), the *archaeologist* (FIRST FLOOR, zones 4 and 5), the *nomad* (SECOND FLOOR, zone 6) and the *angel* (ECYPTIAN BALCONY, zone 7). Each shows a different aspect of the Tower.

The artwork is distributed throughout the building - from the basement (usually inaccessible to the public) to the the Egyptian Balcony at the top of the Museum. The work takes advantage of the comprehensive nature of the displays at the Harris by establishing a poetical link between the objects in the collection and the theme of the Tower. A parallel is also drawn between the 19th century concept of the Museum as the place where the totality of knowledge is made available for the community and the idea of the Tower as a representation of human endeavour to unify the totality of experience and diversity.

FIRST FLOOR
Zone 4 - The archaeologist

collections: the hexagonal fragment (4.1)

installation
An imaginary Roman museum (the Corradini Foundation) has lent part of its collection for this temporary exhibition at the Harris. On display are fragments found by archaeologist Raimondo Corradini underneath the Colosseum, which he identified as belonging to an ancient reconstruction of the Library of Babel.

tower sweet tower (4.2)

3D object
A biscuit tower among chess pieces.

STAIRWAYS
Zone 3 - The plans & maps
until 19th October

left stairway: project plans (3.2)

silkscreen prints
The prints show the plans for the Reconstructing Babel project and its transposition in the book format. The book is available to view at the Archive, Centre for Contemporary Art, 37 St. Peter's Street - see map of the area.

right stairway: eight towers (3.1)

watercolour paintings
The paintings are based on a simplified structure of the Museum. The number eight refers to the levels of the Tower of Babel as reported in an ancient tale by Herodotus.

GROUND FLOOR - Rotunda Cafe
Zone 1 - The architect

plan T (1.1)

3D exhibition map in a wooden box
The box contains five sheets of perspex with the Harris plans screenprinted on top. They can be pulled out in order to obtain an axonometric view of the building, in which each floor has a distinct colour and the artist's interventions are marked red. Once closed, the box can be transported as a suitcase.

TOP FLOOR - ECYPTIAN BALCONY ★
Zone 7 - The angel

4 views from beyond the clouds (7.1 - 7.4)

3D objects
Four fragments of one city seen from above, in different times: we see the city of tomorrow, the city under construction, the city as a ruin and finally the clouds. Four texts accompany each piece.

SECOND FLOOR
Zone 6 - The nomad

balcony: the giant map (6.1)
             the temple (6.2)

3D portable models
Two 'models' contained in a wooden suitcase. 6.1 is inspired by a caption taken from a Jorge Luis Borges short novel *Del rigor en la ciencia* on the Giant Map of the Empire; 6.2 takes Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's motto "my temple should move humans like the beloved object does" to address the emotional aspect of architecture.

FIRST FLOOR
Zone 5 - The archaeologist

local history: the last days of the Empire (5.1)

drawing & text
A picture of the archaeological Roman site at Walton has been replaced by an original drawing of the archaeological site at Ostia, near Rome. The text accompanying the drawing is freely inspired by Umberto Eco's text 'La Quarta Roma' (The Fourth Rome), 2001.

a window with a view (5.2)

A text piece to draw attention to the Crown Court Tower visible outside the window, which acts like a frame of a 'living painting.'

the voice of the ghost buildings (5.3)

3D object & text
Fragments located in the Horrockses' model, representing buildings that are no longer there, with a text reporting imaginary testimony of people hearing the "voice of the ghost buildings."

BASEMENT ★
Zone 2 - The builder

room A: under construction (2.1)

video projection, 6 minutes
The video contains personal and archival material encompassing four years' work, from the "We are building the Tower of Babel" line written in 13 different languages by people of 13 nationalities to the sequence of Preston tower block buildings demolished in November 2001. The building of the Tower is symbolically linked to its own destruction.

room B: de - tour (2.2)

slide projection, approx. 4 minutes.
The room becomes the stage for an imaginary tour (or detour) in the space of the city; different cities are linked together by 'neutral' spaces such as stairways, passages, doors etc. to suggest their being part of a bigger context, namely the Tower building.

Note: Access to Zone Two is strictly limited to prearranged tours. Please contact the Museum Office for details.
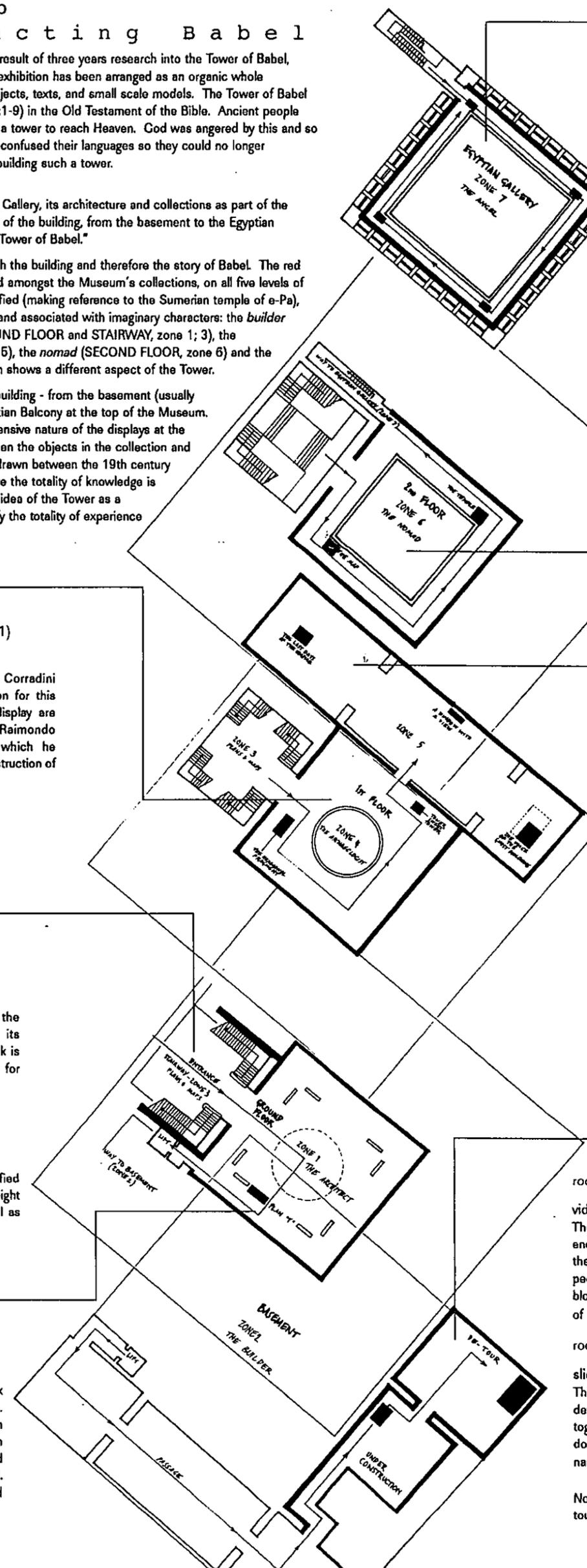
■ Interventions

→ Suggested route   ★ Access by appointment only

## Reconstructing Babel - Harris Museum, Preston

Simonetta Moro

The exhibition *Reconstructing Babel* is the result of a three years research into the Tower of Babel. The exhibition has been arranged as an organic whole consisting of paintings, drawings, prints, objects, texts, and small scale models.

"Museum = Tower": by considering the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, its architecture and collections as part of the artwork, and by intervening on several parts of the building, from the basement to the very top, the Museum itself becomes the "Tower of Babel."

This map suggests a route to follow through the building and therefore the story of Babel. The red signs indicate artworks displayed amongst the Museum's displays, on all five levels of the building. Seven zones have been identified (with reference to the Sumerian temple of *e-Pa*), corresponding to different bodies of work and associated with imaginary characters: the **builder** (BASEMENT, zone 2), the **architect** (GROUND FLOOR and STAIRWAY, zone 1; 3), the **archaeologist** (FIRST FLOOR, zone 4-5), the **nomad** (SECOND FLOOR, zone 6) and the **angel** (EGYPTIAN GALLERY, zone 7). Each presents a different aspect of the Tower.

The artwork is distributed throughout the building – from the basement (usually inaccessible to the public) to the Egyptian Balcony at the top of the Museum,. The work takes advantage of the omnicomprehensive nature of the displays at the Harris by establishing a poetical link between the objects of the collection and the theme of the Tower. A parallel is also drawn between the 19[th] century concept of the Museum as the place where the totality of knowledge is made available for the community and the idea of the Tower as a representation of human endeavour to unify the totality of experience and diversity.
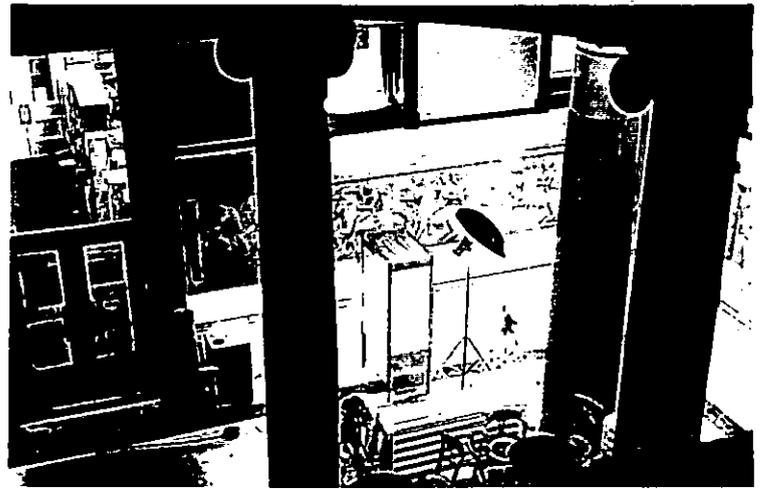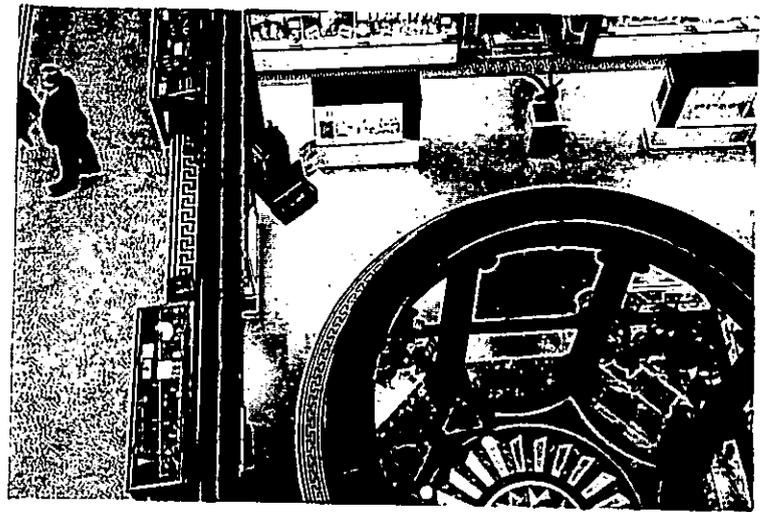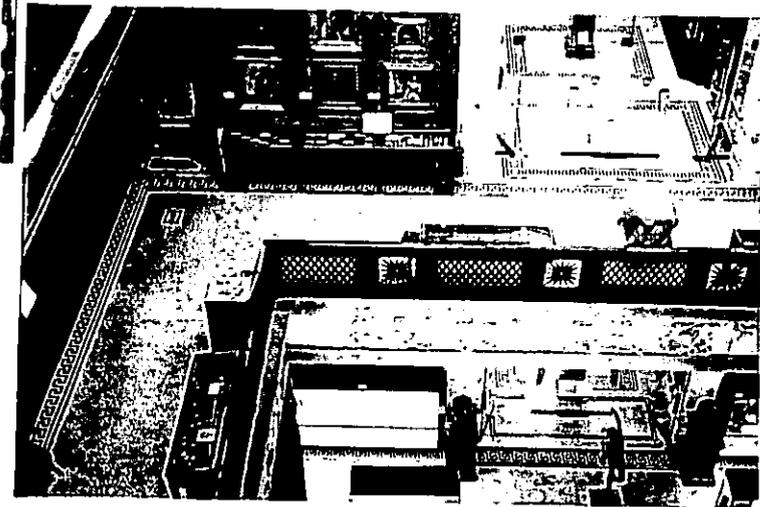
Work in the exhibition

GROUND FLOOR, Rotunda café **(zone 1)**
The architect

plan T   (1.1)
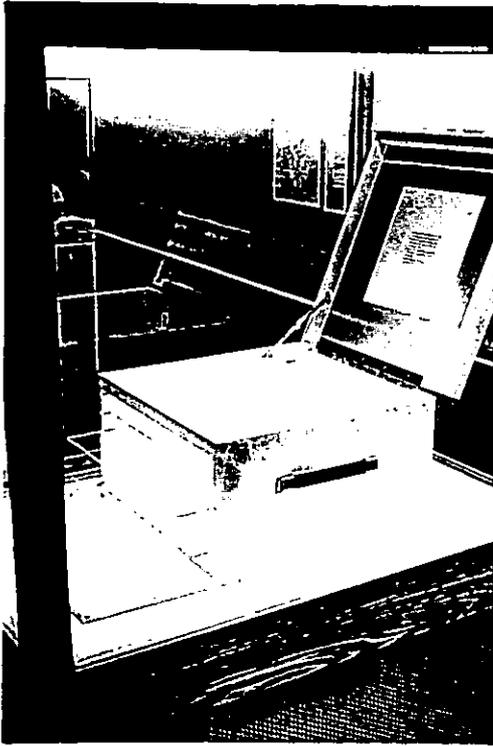
<u>3D exhibition map model in a wooden box</u>
The box contains five sheets of perspex with the Harris plans
screenprinted on top. They can be pulled out in order to obtain an
axonometric view of the building, in which each floor has a distinct
colour and the artist's interventions are marked red. Once closed,
the box can be transported as a suitcase.

Text in the box:

16: Dimensions of the *kigal* of Etemenanki: so that thou
mayest see the length and breadth of it.

17: 60.60.60 (is) the length, 60.60.60 th breadth
(reckoned) in *suklum*-cubits. To produce the
reckoning of it, 3 x 3.

18: = 9, 9 x 2 = 18. As thou knowest not the value of 18
(here it is): 3 pi (ephahs of seed) with the *sirhitum*-
cubit.

19: *Kigal* of Etemenanki: height equal to the length and
to the breadth.

Store A: **under construction (2.1)**

video projection, 4,5 minutes
The video contains personal and archival material encompassing four years' work, from the "We are building the Tower of Babel" line written in 13 different languages by people of 13 nationalities to the sequence of Preston tower block buildings demolished in November 2001. The building of the Tower is simbolically linked to its own destruction.

A book in a display case at the entrance of the room shows a collage of an imaginary machine to lift weights.
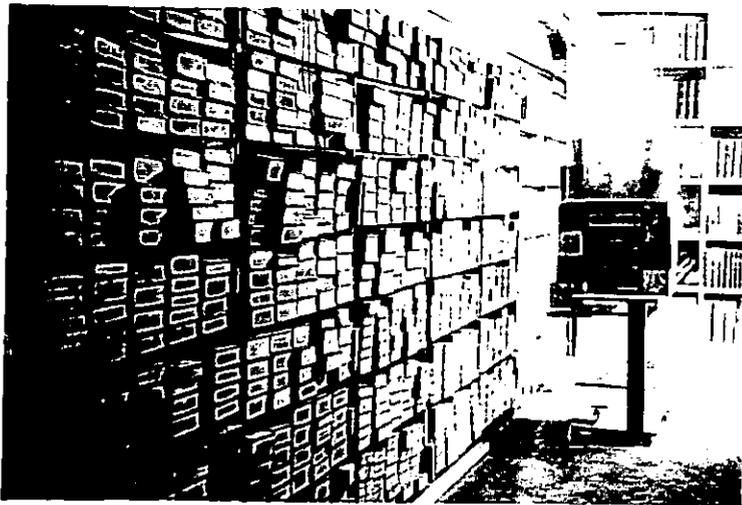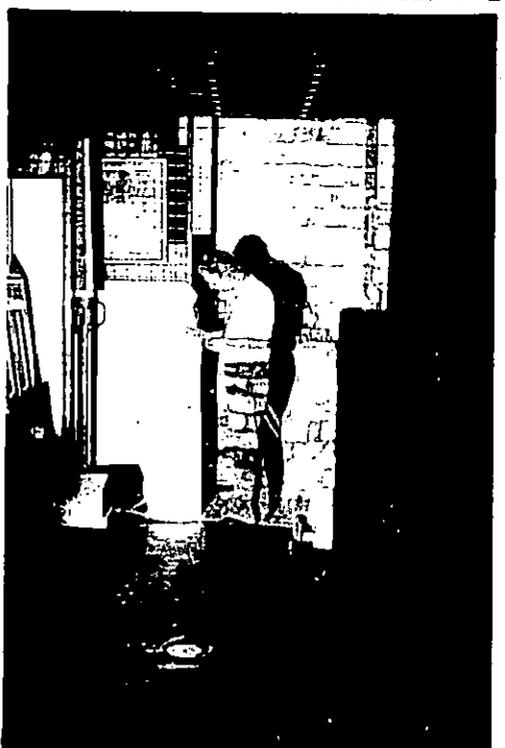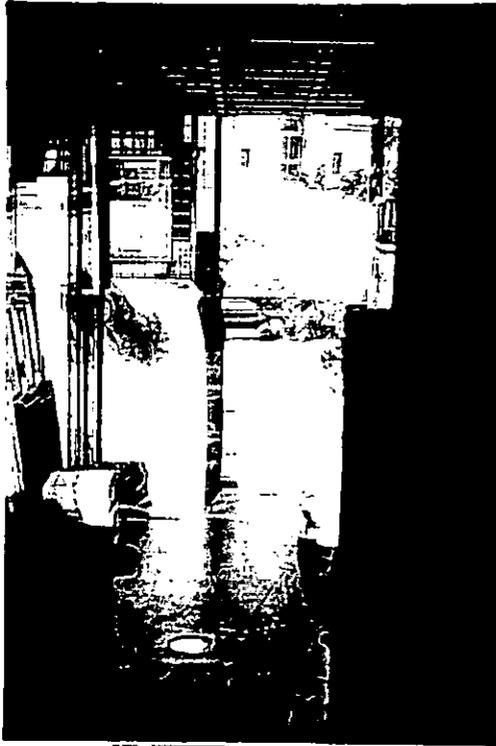
slide projection, approx. 4 minutes
The store becomes the stage for an imaginary tour (or *detour*)
in the space of the city; different cities are linked together by
"neutral" spaces such as stairways, passages, doors etc. to
suggest their being part of a biggest context, namely the Tower
building.

(see M.5b, p. .113)
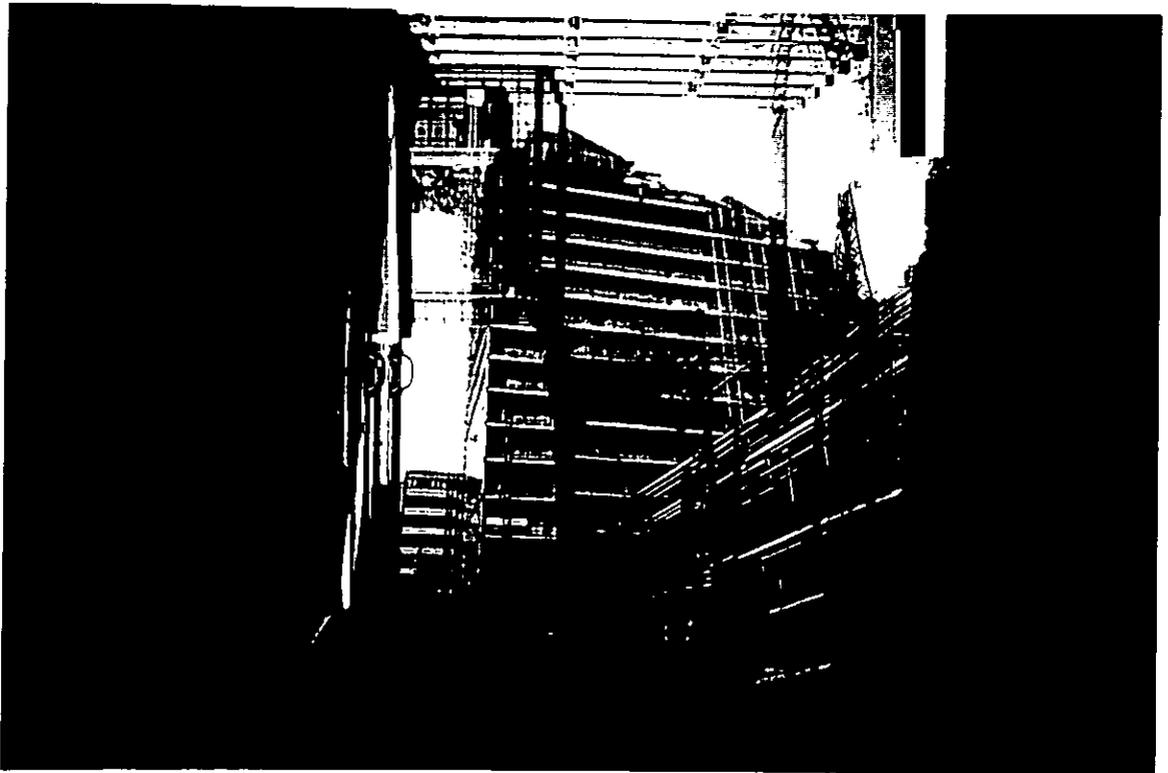
<u>Six silkscreens</u>
The prints show the plans for the
Reconstructing Babel project and its
transposition in the book format (thesis of
research).

First of all, I trace on the surface to
be painted a quadrilateral of the
size I want, made of right angles,
and which is for me an open
window through which the story can
be viewed.

Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura.*
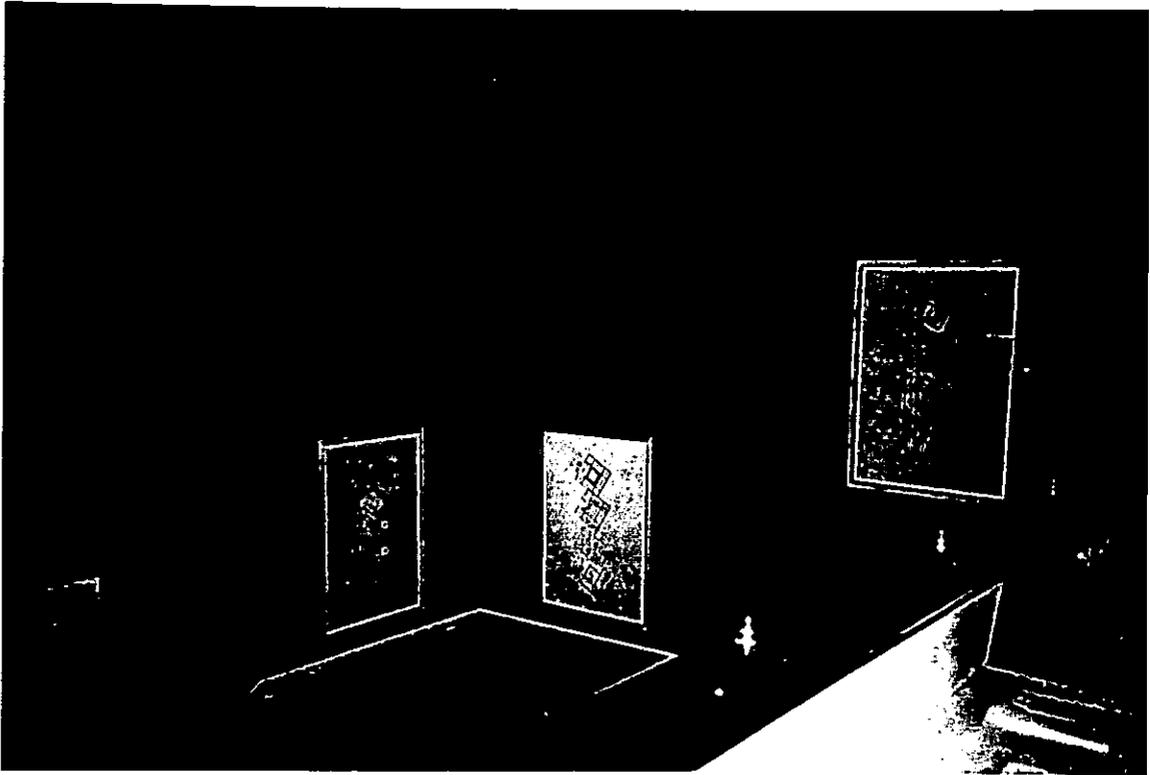
STAIRWAYS (zone 3)

Until 19th October

right stairway: **eight towers (3.1)**

watercolour paintings
The paintings are based on a simplified structure of the Museum. The number eight refers to the levels of the Tower of Babel as reported in an ancient tale by Herodotus.

In the midst of the temple [of Zeus-Belos] a solid tower was constructed, one stadium in length and one stadium in width. Upon this tower stood another, and again upon this another, and so on, making eight towers in all, one upon another. All eight towers can be climbed by means of a spiral staircase which runs round the outside. About half way up there are seats where those who make the ascent can sit and rest. In the topmost tower there is a great temple, and in the temple is a great bed richly appointed, and beside it a golden table. No idol stands there. No one spends the night there save a woman of that country, designated by the god himself, so I was told by the Chaldeans, who are the priests of that divinity.

Herodotus

(see Tantric Towers, Appendix, p. 40)

4. COLLECTIONS: the hexagonal fragment (4.1)

Installation
An imaginary Roman museum (the Corradini
Foundation) has lent part of its collection for this
temporary show at the Harris. On display are
the fragments found by archaeologist Raimondo
Corradini underneath the Colosseum's
undergrounds, which he identified as belonging
to an ancient reconstruction of the Library of
Babel.

(see M.7, p. 136)
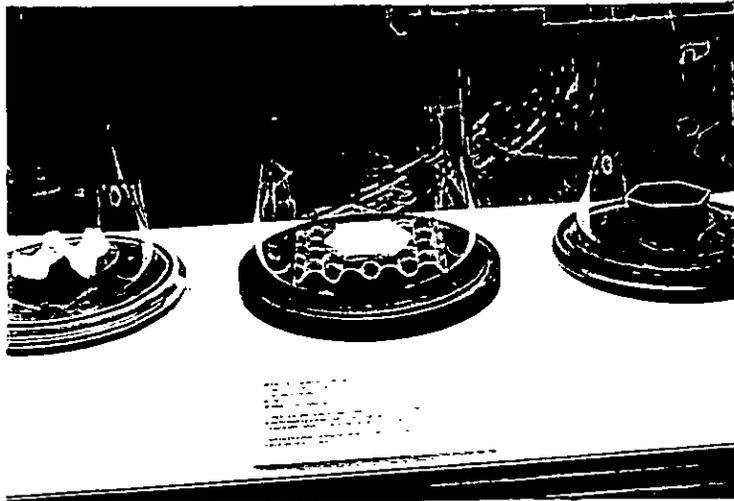
tower sweet tower (4.2)

The babelians used to play chess using towers only: a complicate system of colours distinguished the pieces from one another. The rules of the game were different from those practiced today, and instead of taking the opponent's pieces the players used to eat them: the towers were made of wafer.
A survived piece of an ancient chess set is here displayed.
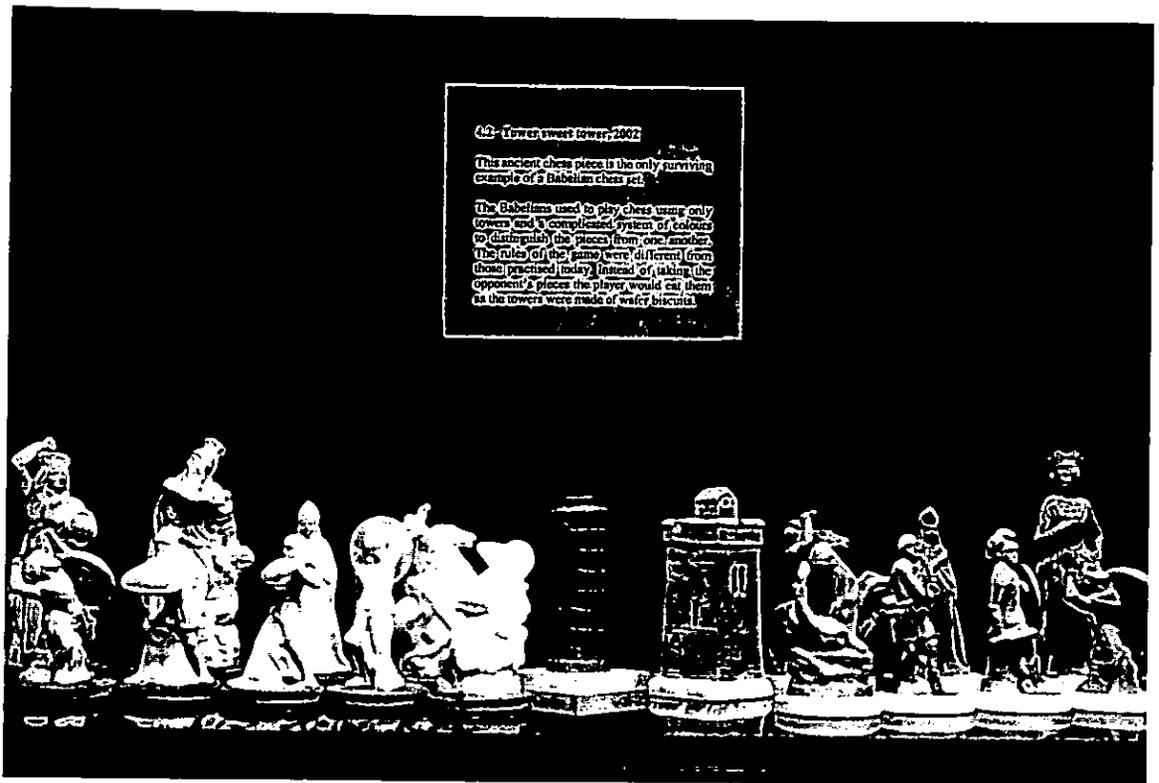
drawing+text
A picture of the archaeological Roman site
at Walton has been replaced by
an original drawing of the archaeological
site at Ostia, near Rome. The text
accompanying the drawing is freely inspired
by Umberto Eco's text "La Quarta Roma"
(The Fourth Rome), 2001.
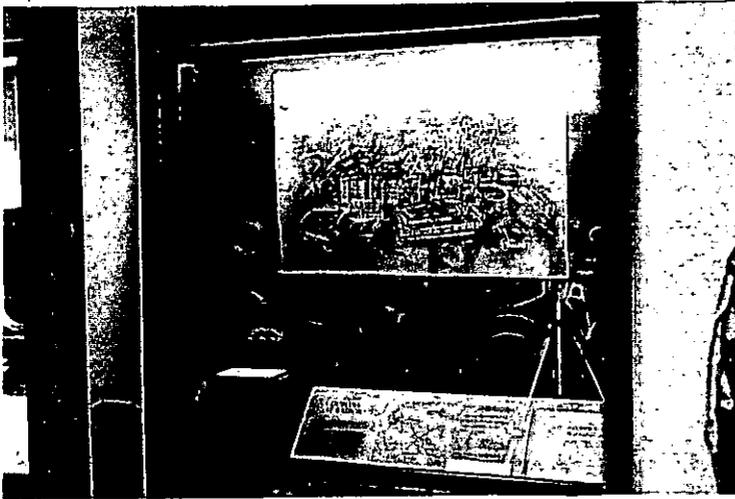
The Last Days of the Empire

The First Empire was wiped away by hordes of tall, bellicose, white barbarians.
In the Second Empire the population begun to fear the arrival of small, coloured, peaceful barbarians; they sensed they were on the verge of a new catastrophe.
The chiefs of the tribes decided to protect themselves from the invaders and promulgated a law, according to which the newcomers should have their big toe fingerprinted.
A Tower was going to be erected in a remote province on the northwest of the Empire. The new barbarians wanted to participate to the construction of it; the indigenous were in need of fresh labour, as the local people were by now only amusing themselves with circus' games and other amenities and despising any hard work.
The new Tower was to be a monument to human knowledge: it should have contained the best of science and art produced by the Babelian species. As the work started, the Tower progressed without apparent effort.
Towards the end of the work, when the only thing missing was the grand external staircase that should have provided the main access to the building, the process came to a halt. What were the reasons – a sudden lack of funds or rather a revolt of the workers claiming for higher wages and better working conditions – it is still unclear. In the survived chronicles of the time a point was made that suddenly nobody could agree anymore on what was to be built, and how. A series of bloody internal fights turned the building yard into a battlefield. In the end, the few survivors abandoned the place and dispersed.

A text piece to draw attention to the Crown Court Tower
visible outside the window, which acts like a frame of a
"living painting."

Label (plaque) for window piece:

County Sessions House (now the Crown Court)
Tower
designed by Henry Littler, 1900
179 feet high
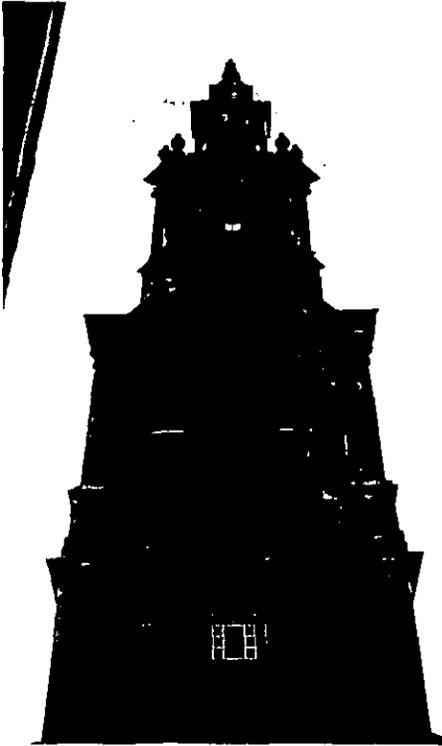
This is a "living painting": the light and colours in the scene
framed by the window is constantly changing, for your own
pleasure.
To enjoy another stunning view of the Crown Court Tower,
climb to the Egyptian gallery (zone 7) and look at the high
windows as you walk around the balcony.

It is therefore the frame that denotes that a work of art is what it is. It could even be used to replace this
fundamental and satisfying role, as witness the English tourists Louis Marin referred to in *Des Pouvoirs de
l'Image*, who, having found an artistic landscape they like, and wanting to refine their pleasures and
convert those of nature into those of art, turned their backs on them and contemplated them in a slightly
tinted mirror, a Lorrain-glass; in short, they made of the image in the mirror, of the "view," of the prospect, of
the panorama, a painting by Claude.

Quatremere de Quincy, *Essai sur la nature, le but at les moyens de l'imitation dans le beaux-arts* (1823).
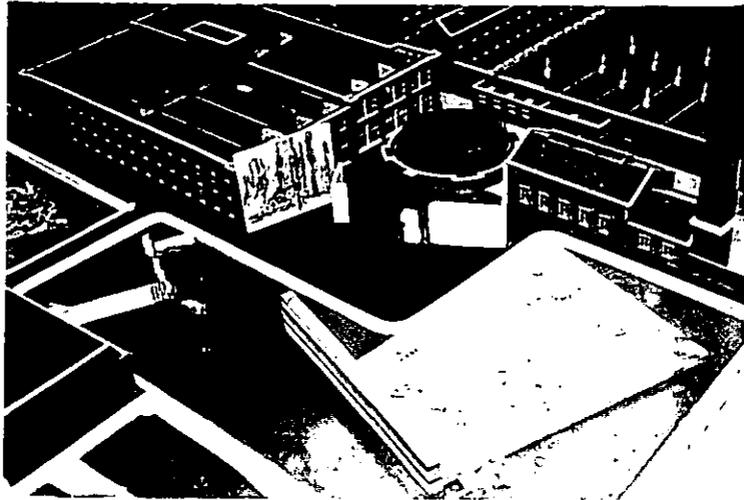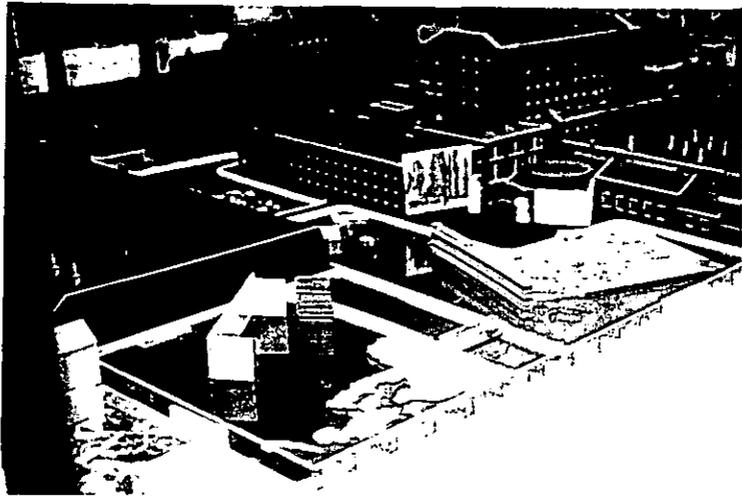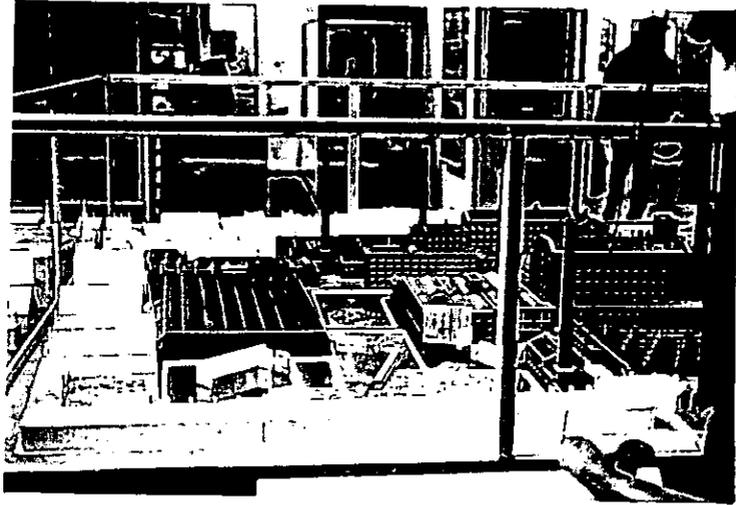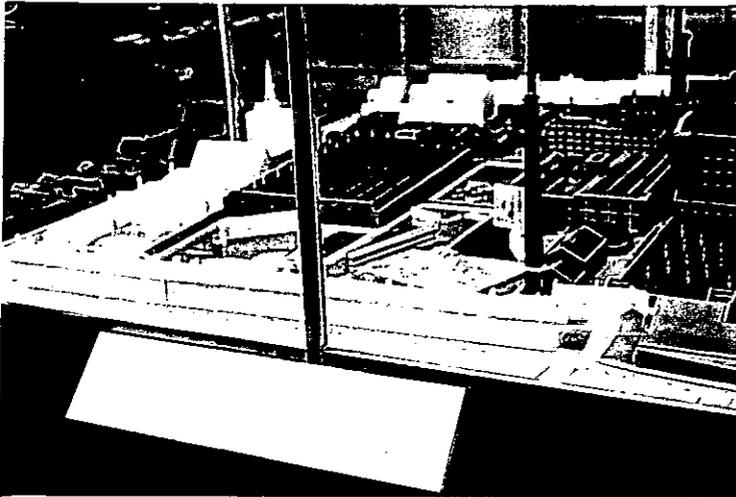
3D object+text
Fragments located in the Horrockses' model
(representing buildings that are no longer there), with a
text reporting imaginary testimony of people hearing the
"voice of the ghost buildings."
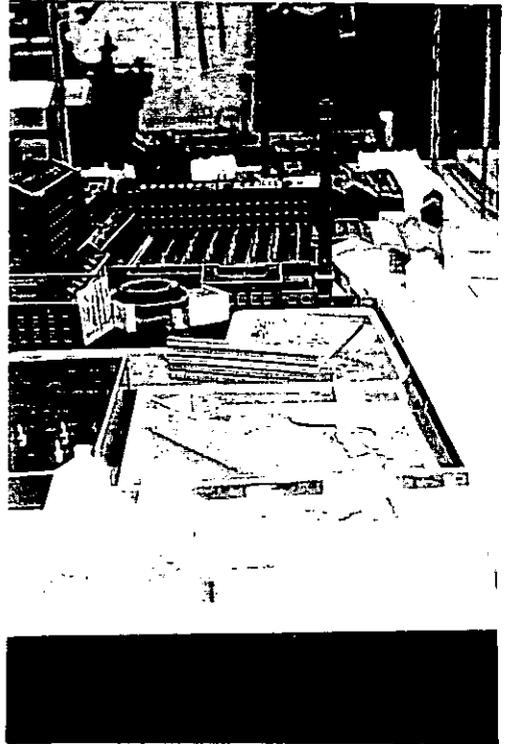
The Voice Of The Ghost Buildings

one-third of the unfinished tower sank into the earth,

another third was consumed by fire,

while only one third remained standing.

Whoever passes the place of the tower forgets all s/he knows.

(Old Jewish legend)

Where have the disappeared things gone?

They nevertheless left a trace behind themselves – hence the necessity to imagine their survival in another place.

This need has a primordial psychic foundation, which can be better understood thanks to some mental illnesses emphasizing qualities that in healthy people are normally hidden in reserve.

The archaeologist is but the healthy professional who answers to this pathology. He is the most efficient interpreter of the universally human need to wonder about what has gone elsewhere, where the sun goes down. Elsewhere is the past, that is, the world in which the dead were alive. The present appears thus incomplete, insufficient in the search for human models to reinforce our identity.
What is lacking to the present is the fullness of being, a unified and whole vision, the totality of the sacred that is to be found in the imaginary wholeness that myth offers. There is, in short, an unsuppressible desire to go out of our profane universe, contaminated by history and impoverished, and go back to a sacred primordial time.

(A. Carandini)

There is a place where all the lost buildings are gathered, like in a giant theme-park or a museum cast room. Ancient temples, destroyed places, bombed houses, demolished factories: a huge wasteland. It is not possible to go there by one's free will: in fact, you only get there by following the voice of the buildings that have a relevance in your personal history. Some people have the ability to connect with these voices: here's the testimony of some of them.

There were the Indonesians who came by the sea, like at the time of Conrad's Lord Jim. There were the Indians who had just got off an ancient propeller plane, brought into use for the occasion; back then, the believers did not bother about risks if only they could reach the Mecca (besides, dying in those circumstances would have taken them straight away to heaven).
There were the Iranians, with Zoroastrian reminiscences, camped around their roofless buses, in order not to lose contact with the sky.
With all those pilgrims I had one thing in common: a thin layer of DDT dust on my clothes, on my face and on my hair.

(Bernardo Valli)

I come here quite often because there are the remnants of a house I used to live when I was a child. It was a red brick house with green shutters; it's still in good conditions for being so old. It was demolished four years ago to make room for a parking lot.

(Jason Gordon)

Segue o teu destino,
Rega as tuas plantas,
Ama as tuas rosas.
O resto é a sombra
De árvores alheias.

One day I heard this voice, persistingly telling me to leave. I followed it, until I reached this place. Here I found the ruins of a tower block apartment that mysteriously disappeared from the quarter of Altabaia in Sao Paulo, Brazil. One morning the people in the neighborhood woke up as usual and found a blank space where the tower block was previously standing. No sign of collapse, nothing. Just an empty area. The apartments were uninhabited, so no one disappeared with it. But apparently there are voices coming from the building.
According to Prof. Virzinsky, buildings have their own voices, and in particular conditions it is possible to record them. I am taking a sabbatical in order to verify this theory.

(Prof. Delia Schwarzbauer)

It's a bit like a theme park, but more interesting because it's real.
I mean, I can recognize most of the buildings, also very old ones that have been demolished a long time ago. That's my old school over there...It had a flat roof and we used to skate on top of it, in spite of the severe regulations that would have had us all expelled. I haven't seen yet an Egyptian temple, but I've heard that you can only see what is part of your direct experience.

(Andrea Horvath)

I have no reason to be here. There's nothing here that interests me at all. I just keep falling in this damn pit by mistake. I tried to step out, but when I finally believe I've got it, that I'm out and far away, the next corner I turn I realize I'm still here.
Please take me out of here. I hate this place. It's just rubble and maniacs looking at piles of old rubbish. Please oh please take me out of here!

(Emilio Juarez)

SECOND FLOOR (zone 6)
The nomad
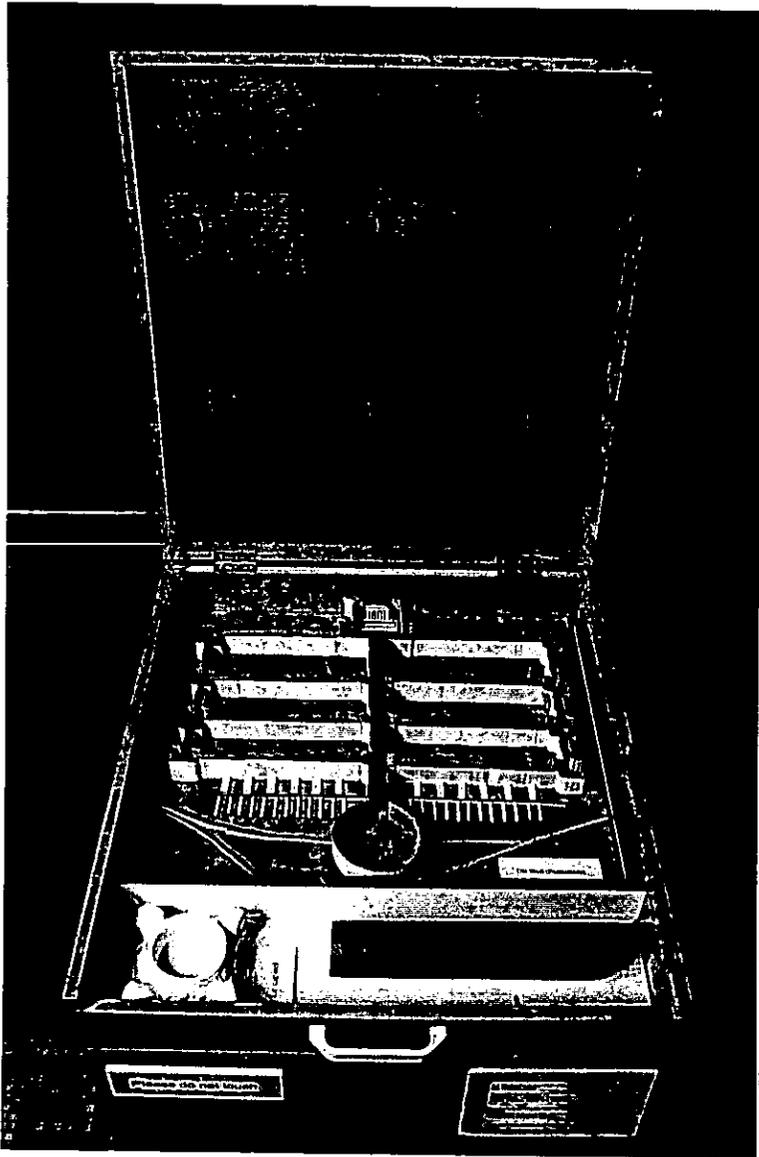
balcony: **the giant map (6.1) - the temple   (6.2)**

<u>3D portable models</u>
Two "models" contained in a wooden suitcase.
6.1 is inspired by a caption taken from a Jorge
Luis Borges short novel (*Del rigor en la ciencia*)
on the Gian Map of the Empire; 6.2 takes
Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's motto ("my temple
should move humans like the beloved object
does") to address the emotional aspect of
architecture.

(see M. 6a, p. 130)
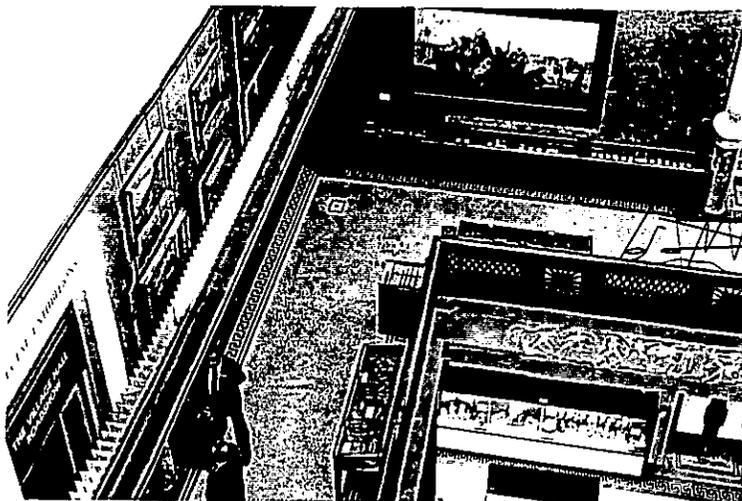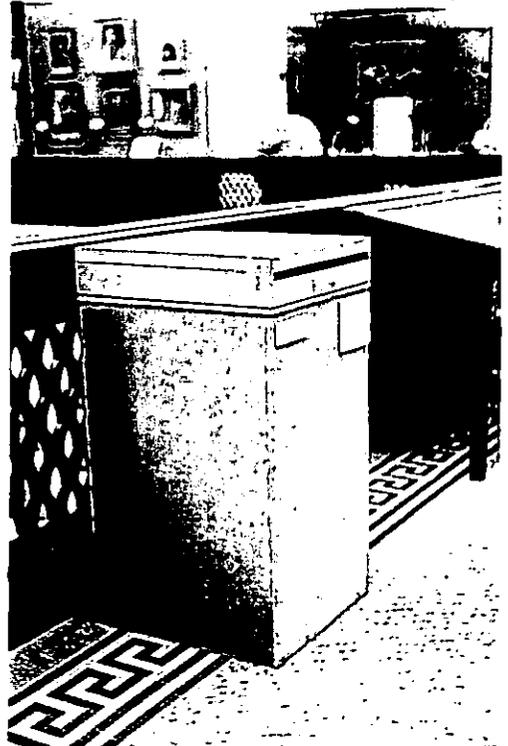
4 views from beyond the clouds   (7.1)

<u>3D objects</u>
Four fragments of one city seen from above, in different times: we
see the city of tomorrow, the city under construction, the city as a
ruin and finally the clouds. Four texts accompany each piece.
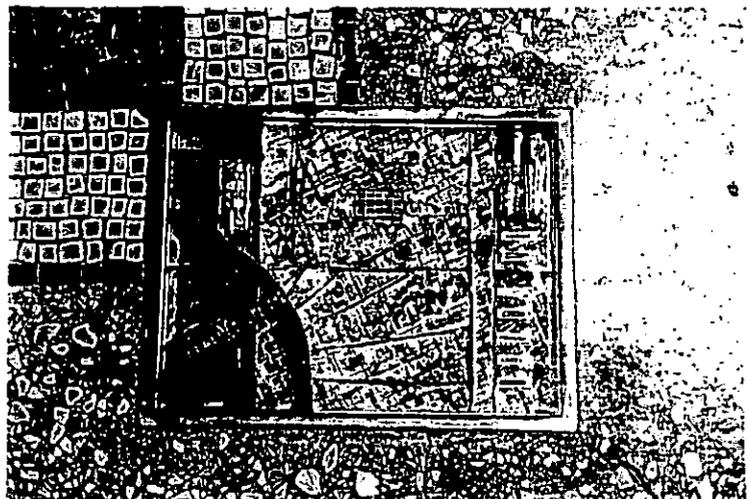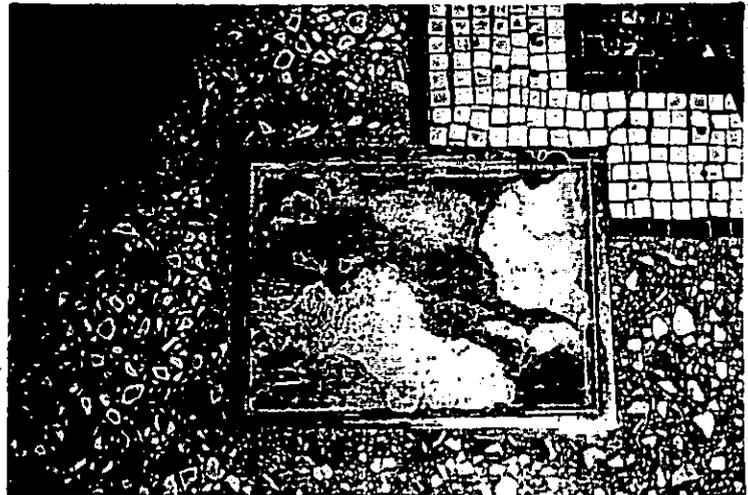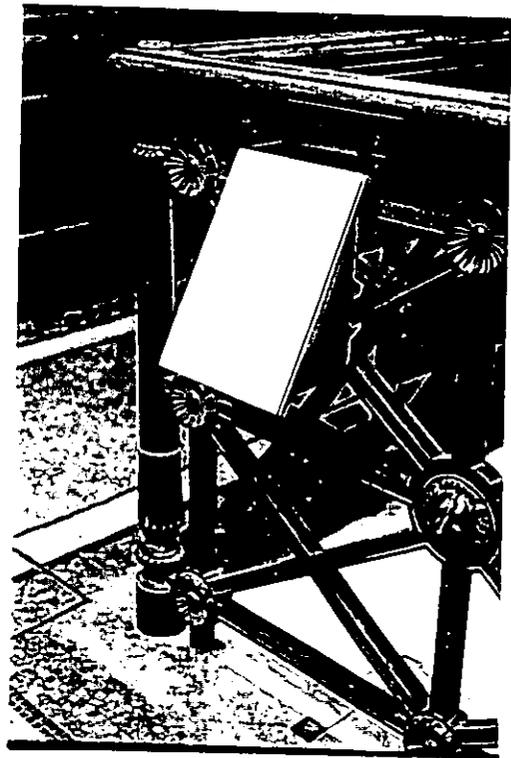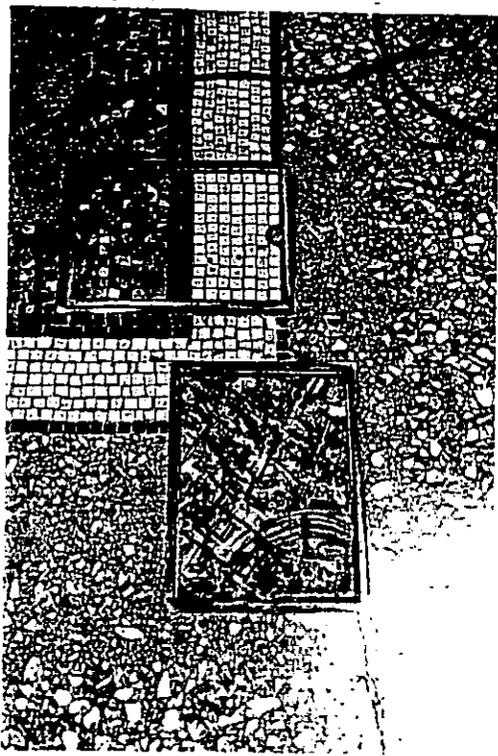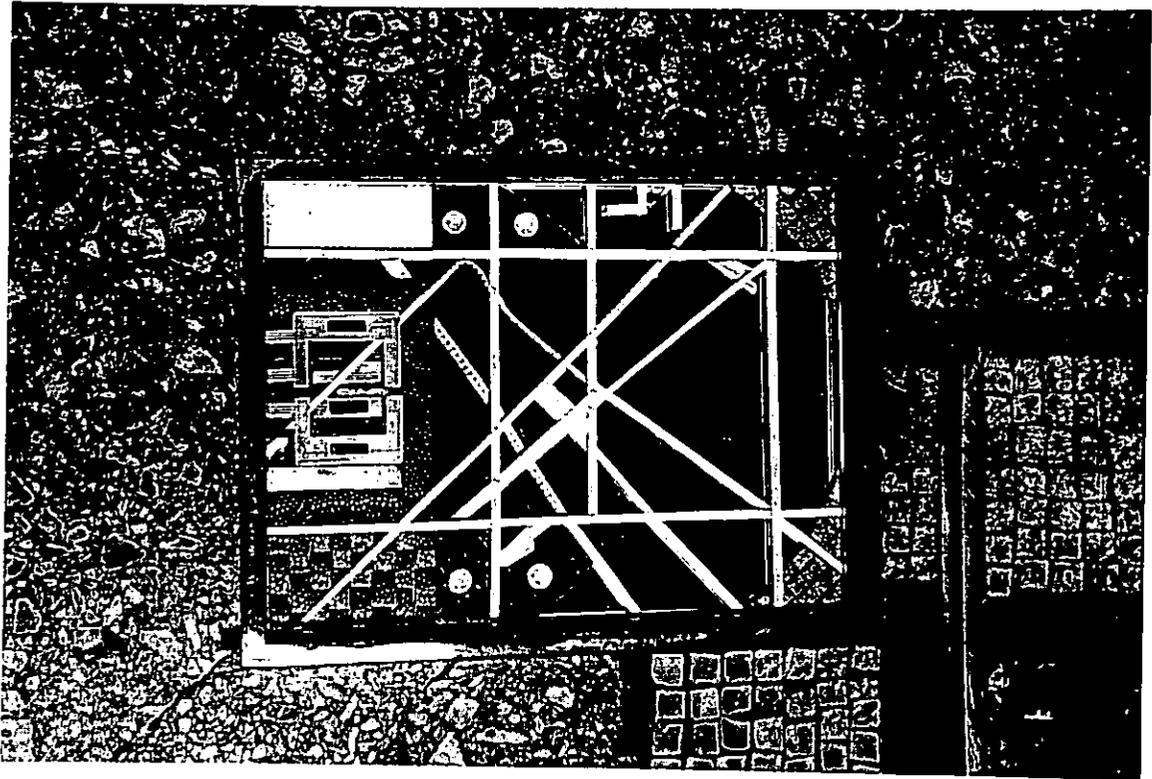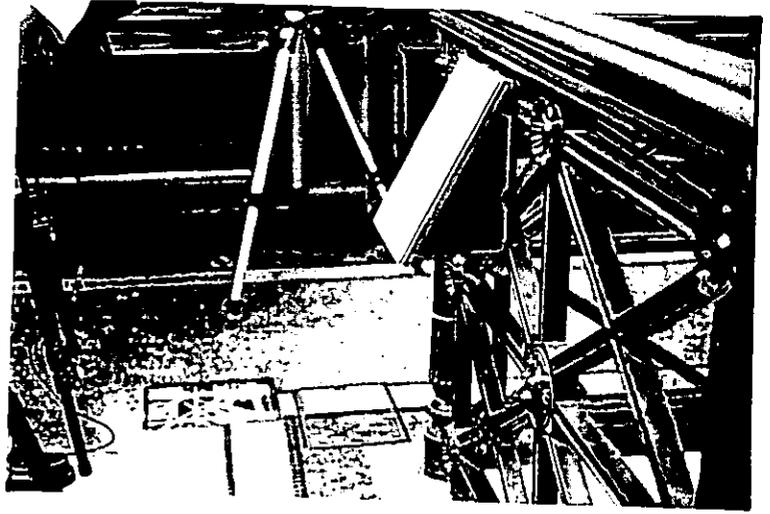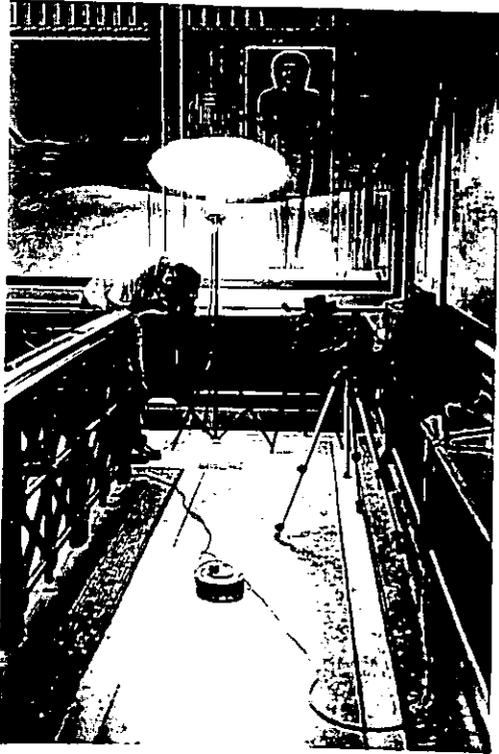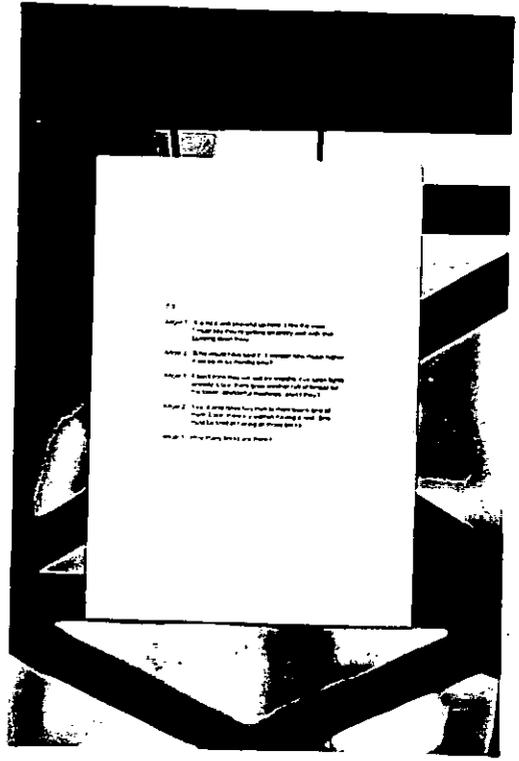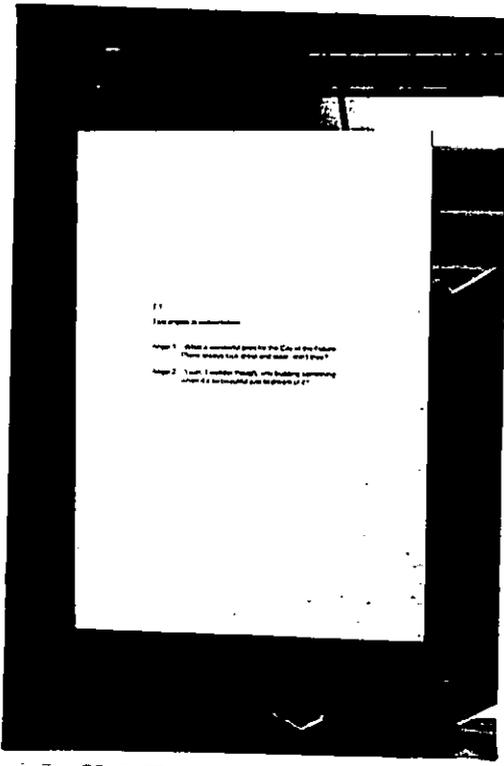
7.1-7.4 Egyptian balcony text

7.1

Two angels in conversation

Angel 1: What a wonderful plan for the City of the Future. Plans always look great and clear, don't they?

Angel 2: Yeah, I wonder though, why building something when it's so beautiful just to dream of it?

7.2

Angel 1: The building is going very well. Just look, it's already up in the clouds.

Angel 2: Where? I cannot see anything.

Angel 1: It's still not high enough.

7.3

Angel 1: It is nice and peaceful up here. I like the view.
I must say they're getting on pretty well with that building down there.

Angel 2: Who would have said it...I wonder how much higher it will be in six months time?

Angel 1: I don't think they will last six months. I've seen fights already. Look, there goes another raft of timber for the tower. Wonderful machines, aren't they?

Angel 2: Yes, it only takes two men to manouvre one of them. Look, there's a woman having a rest. She must be tired of baking all those bricks.

Angel 1: How many bricks are there?

7.4

Angel 1: I've got a terrible head for heights. I know that one day I'll go over the edge.

Angel 2: In that case you'll get into heaven, hahaha!

Angel 1: I thought we were there already.
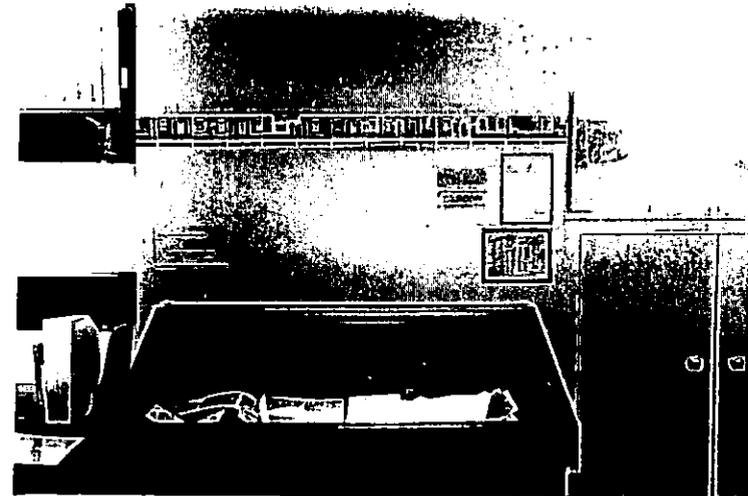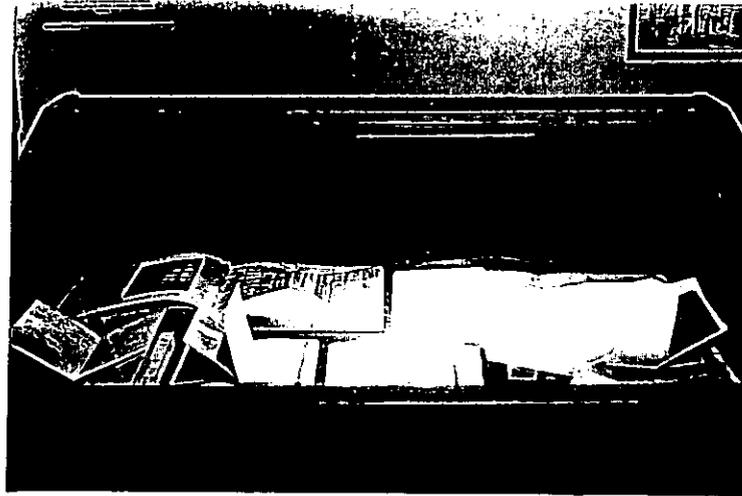
Simonetta Moro *The Archive of Babel* 2002
Centre For Contemporary Art, Preston, UK


notebooks, sketchbooks and maps, 2002

the archive (hand made folders, text), 2002
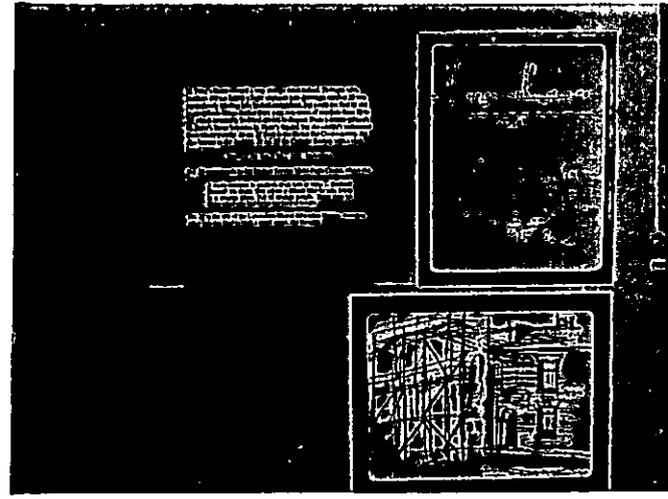
Panorama Scroll, 2001-02
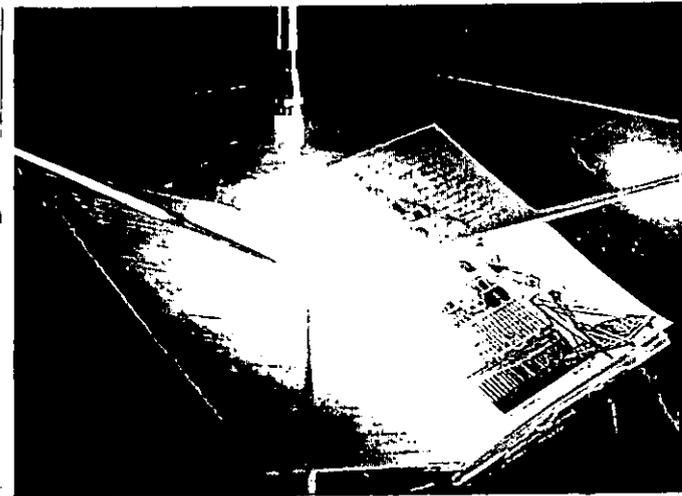
A Book of Machines to Lift Weights, 2002
Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, UK