

Babel 2001

Babel 2001 is a sculptural installation piece of art, comprised of secondhand radios stacked in layers to form a large tower. It was created by artist Cildo Meireles, whose artworks often take on political themes and express resistance to oppression.

Meireles is a Brazilian conceptual artist and sculptor, born in 1948 in Rio de Janeiro. He was interested in art from a young age, as well as in animation film, and was encouraged by his father to further his creative pursuits. As a child, he and his family travelled extensively within rural Brazil, at which time he was exposed to the beliefs of the Tupi people, which he later incorporated into some of his works. He began his formal study of art in 1963 at the age of 15, at the District Federal Cultural Foundation in Brasilia, under the Peruvian painter and ceramist Felix Barrenechea. In the mid to late 1960s he became involved in student politics, and began to explore new forms of art and ways of expressing his political views through art. In 1968 he abandoned expressionist drawings in favour of physically constructing and designing; in particular he sought to create interactive art, which led to one of his most famous projects, 'Virtual Spaces', which was based 'on Euclidian principles of space'. His art quickly gained attention for its strong messages, especially when politically based (and subversive), as governmental censorship of media was a very topical issue in Brazil. His first exhibition was in 1965. Though his work is now less politically focused, his art has achieved international fame, and he has exhibited in the UK, America, Mexico, and throughout the EU. In addition, Meireles was one of the founders of the Experimental Unit of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro (1969).



In 2001, Meireles produced Babel, in reference to the tale of the Tower of Babel in the bible. In this story, God destroys the Tower of Babel, resulting in multiplicity of language, when originally everyone spoke the same language. The inability of humanity to communicate becomes the source of all of mankind's conflict. Bearing this in mind, it follows that the artwork is meant to criticise the idea of one universal language and the pursuit of commonality - and also illustrates the challenge of communication.

Meireles' tower is made of 800 radios. Each is turned to a different channel from around the world and is set at an audible volume, blending into one indistinguishable sound. The decision to literally include different languages suggests Meireles is exploring international networks, and the collective sound might imply that there is a unity created from technology and globalisation. The different radios are stacked in layers, creating rings, which get progressively smaller as you look up, in order to emphasise the height of the work,



making it appear endless. It seems to be never-ending - almost ascending 'to the heavens' - which reminds us of the biblical story, and also emphasises the strength and power of technology. The layers are also sorted from most old to present-day devices. The 'timeline' effect of this could be symbolic of how technology continues to develop - with the never-ending nature of the piece reinforcing the infinite possibilities of technology.

While there seem to be many positive connotations of technology illustrated in Babel, the confusing blur of noise created from the mixing of different radio channels suggests a lack of individual understanding. To me this implies that democracy, globalisation, and the other 21st century notions arising from our developing society come at the price of no one person being truly understood. Has technology robbed us of our individual identities, and our culture? Or perhaps is it simply unable to ever fully overcome the boundaries of physical location? How do we break through 'the noise' of today's world? Is the world moving too fast? The ever-moving aspect of technology is further emphasised by the constantly changing nature of the display - because the radios play different things and are 'live', one's experience of the tower is never the same. It continues to change and grow, even without humans being involved, and the pace of technological development seems similarly uncontrollable. I also think that the large size and 3D nature of the installation is incredibly imposing, and this is a purposeful choice, complimented by the decision to bathe the installation in an eerie blue light. Babel is meant to intimidate and scare, and regardless of how it is interpreted, Meireles seems to be using the piece to portray a darker side to technology and the 'unity' it allows us to achieve.

