

KIWA

Babel Tower Project (2012–)

Na Hyun

The Babel Tower Project originates from stenographic records of a 1912 debate in the German Imperial Parliament concerning Mischehe—marriages between different ethnicities or religions—and expands to encompass the histories of Teufelsberg in Berlin and Nanjido in Seoul.

In this project, Na Hyun presents Teufelsberg—an artificial hill built from Berlin's post–World War II war debris—and Nanjido—an artificial mountain of waste symbolizing Seoul's rapid industrial expansion—as archaeological remains of a hypothetical "Babel Tower." Through this proposal, the artist exposes the desires and violent tendencies inherent in nationalist totalitarianism.

The project traces its conceptual origin to the fierce 1912 parliamentary dispute over interracial marriages (Mischehen). As a result of this debate, the parliament unanimously enacted laws prohibiting marriages between German citizens and colonized peoples or other races, with the aim of preserving "pure bloodlines." Those who married outside their ethnicity were even placed on lists labeling them as "deviants." Hardline members sought not only to prohibit new interracial families but also to deny the legitimacy of existing ones. These decisions formed a direct ideological prelude to later Nazi discourse.

The Nazi Party (1919–1945), proclaiming the racial superiority of the Aryan people, incited the public and led the world into the Second World War, carrying out genocidal ethnic cleansing that claimed millions of lives, including Jews and Roma communities. The violence of this deranged war left indelible scars on humanity, and after the regime's collapse, Berlin saw the rise of Teufelsberg—both a mountain of war debris and, symbolically, a Babel Tower.

During the period when Seoul's own "Babel Tower"—Nanjido—was created (1977–1993), the military government suppressed resistance to its coup and sustained its dictatorship by rallying citizens around the slogan of economic development. Invoking an emotional sense of ethnic homogeneity, the regime diminished social diversity, violently repressed human rights and democratic movements, and sought to control the cultural and intellectual life of individuals.

Although South Korea achieved remarkable economic growth in a short time, the nation soon faced the IMF financial crisis, followed by the collapse of the middle class and deepening social inequality. Nanjido, an artificial mountain formed by the waste generated during Korea's rapid industrialization, has since been sealed and transformed into an ecological park, seemingly erasing its past. Yet beneath the surface, it retains a simmering instability.



Nanjido 15-23
Drawing on archival pigment print
108 x 77cm
2015

The histories of nationalist totalitarianism embodied by Teufelsberg and Nanjido closely mirror the story of the Tower of Babel. For Na Hyun, the Babel Tower is not a mythic or legendary object but a recurring real structure found throughout human history.

(Genesis 11:6)

"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."

*When all men spoke one language, some attempted to build a great tower reaching the heavens.
But the gods sent storms, toppled the tower, and gave each group its own language. For this reason,
the city was called Babylon.
(Antiquities of the Jews 1.4.3)*

Collecting Naturalized Plants

To substantiate the hypothesis of Teufelsberg and Nanjido as Babel Towers, Na Hyun focused on historical accounts of the original tower—particularly the emergence of diverse, distinct languages that halted its construction. As contemporary evidence of this multiplicity, the artist conducted interviews with the multiethnic residents of Berlin and Nanjido in their native languages.

The artist also turned attention to the naturalized plants thriving in these newly formed terrains. The coexistence of native and naturalized species within those ecological environments became a metaphor for the appearance of diverse languages and peoples.

The works included in this exhibition were produced through collaboration with botanists. Naturalized plants from Teufelsberg and Nanjido were collected and made into botanical specimens. High-resolution photographs of these specimens were printed, and onto the images the artist added personal memories alongside academic botanical information—stamping and inscribing them through a method that transforms scientific specimens into sites of artistic interpretation.



Nanjido 15-52
Drawing on archival pigment print
108 x 77cm
2015



Babel Tower Drawing 01
Mixed media on archival pigment print
77 x 108cm
2024



Babel Tower Drawing 02
Mixed media on archival pigment print
77 x 108cm
2024



Babel Tower Drawing 03
Mixed media on archival pigment print
77 x 108cm
2024



Cherry Babel Tower
Mixed media
120 x 120 x 140(h)cm
2014



Babel Tower
2015, 2018, 2023