Alastair Noble’s **BABEL: A Project of Place**

*by Mary Ann Caws*

His is an amazing project undertaken by an architect/sculptor/philosopher, whose attachment to the world of words has been proved over and over, from early on to right now and later.

Where to start? There is, fortunately, no passive place to begin this wandering — already from the outset the observer is no observer, but a necessary wanderer. On the tall mesh leaves, or sails, or sheets, stretched high, are inscribed the texts — in the variety of languages the title BABEL suggests — English, French, German, Spanish... to be read, absorbed, continued ... and you make your own path, which is to say, your own reading.

A wanderer then has many ways to choose, many readings to auto-construct. The references are numerous, and for each pilgrim in the confusion of the BABEL/BABBLE, there will be a private set of references. And then, having wound your way one way, you can go back. Think of Borges: “The Library of Babel,” think of all his Labyrinths, look at how you can make and retake so many paths between these mesh panels, stretched on wooden frames ... *Making your way* ... using your own frames, as you choose them.

Noble has always cared about the walking into words. Let me look back first to some of his earlier paths between and under and around and through words.

What Noble’s work permits, encourages, even forces, is an indwelling on even the specific terms the incomer — never, let me stress this, never an outside or a latecomer — uses to describe the experience of wandering in this forest of symbols. The stretch of the mesh sheets stretches the vision and the mind ... the tension set up is all-powerful. Do we think of the tower of Babel rising higher and higher, as if the verticality of the poles were to matter, say, excessively? Yes, this is the tall
In an exhibition before this, in Lima, Peru, there were texts stretched on sheets held up by bamboo poles — there we would have meditated on a lamp within, on the idea of poles, and always, on the notion of stretch. The stretch of the mind encouraged by the massive amounts of reading, thinking, making, seeing, and being which have gone into this project as it developed.

It reminds me of Noble’s massive sheets of other materials, glass, marble, whatever, or the five Maiakowski panels, with light streaming through into spaces where the words would be. What could be better as a mixture of mind and nature, text and illumination (here we would think Rimbaud, and the Rimbaudian Illuminations). Or, cosmetically, we start thinking of the biblical FIAT LUX, so that the light makes the language, as it always did, from the beginning.

And if these dashes into which the observer/wanderer projects the language of the mind were to recall, for some, the experiments of Christian Morgenstern like his “Fisches Nachtgesang” — just dashes and tiny half-moons you could both see and hear — so much the better. We are all invited into this room, into this space, into this very place, all that takes place. Surely it’s enough?

Entering into the world of words — figuratively, literally, verbally, visually. Through texts of receiving and giving forth, and then sinking and soaring, what other way?

The corridor in the The Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn is narrow but not the mind. Think of Mallarmé’s “Limited Action” (“L’Action restreinte”). How very unlimited it can feel ...

BABEL, 2007, Juan Pardo Heeren Gallery, Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano (ICPNA) Lima, Peru
Une chambre

vraiment

une chambre

à une rêverie,

qui ressemble

à une chambre

vraiment
In Defense of Babel
— for Alastair Noble

When the sniper’s eye from paradise fastened on the tower, sand exploded and gushed into a whirlwind of shrieks.

In Babel’s place rose the libraries, cell by cell, words stacked like bees crawling on honeycombs,

where even Edgar Allan Poe sits down at his heart and boards up his words.

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In a flurry year to year some little god must crawl, dismantling installations.

And yet the body makes a language even of its spasms.

In every climate words rise to the top of the coiled stairs in the skull, paradise’s gate.

Knock there. Speak and be misunderstood.

Lee Upton

Noble’s constructions make room for the mind, and the path for it to wander in. Here again I think of Mallarmé and the leaves of his Livre. They were shuffled by the operator/poet/priest, but at random. Here, we walk at random, priest-free. But it still matters, just as much.

Babel, babble, baby-talk and big talk, what a tale! It is both new and not so new: Noble’s work has always been about reflection. That has always been the place ... and this is the place that is TAKING PLACE RIGHT NOW.

Mary Ann Caws is the distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature, English, and French at the Graduate School of the City University of New York. Her many areas of interest in 20th century avant-garde literature and art includes: Surrealism, poets René Char and André Breton, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group, and artists Robert Motherwell, Joseph Cornell and Pablo Picasso. Conceptually, one of her primary themes has been the relationship between image and text.

Caws is the author of more than 30 books on Surrealism and poetry and editor of as many if not more.

BABEL: A Project of Place, 2008, (maquette), Gahlberg Gallery installation, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL
Lee Upton is a poet and writer-in-residence at the Department of English, Lafayette College, Easton, PA. She is the recipient of a National Poetry Series Award, a Pushcart Prize, and author of several books of poetry and literary criticism.

Alastair Noble is an artist and lives in New York City. He is also Assistant Professor in the Art Department of Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, where he runs the Sculpture program.

His artistic practice has led him to investigate a wide variety of disciplines in particular literature and architecture. He has transposed poetic texts of several modernist poets and writers into sculptures, environmental interventions, installations, performances, prints and drawings. In recent years the text itself has emerged as a major structural element within his sculptural forms. He intentionally references writers whose radical visions helped fashion our present culture and continue to have a particular resonance, for example Mallarmé, Marinetti, Mayakovsky, Wittgenstein and Borges.

He has exhibited extensively over the last 25 years both nationally and internationally. Most recently he has undertaken residencies and exhibitions in Belgium, Bulgaria, Chile and Peru and New Mexico. He contributes articles and reviews regularly to the magazine Sculpture ISC and has organized symposia on the role of public sculpture. He has also lectured and published on the significance of Stéphane Mallarmé and the visual arts.

He received his M.F.A. from Rutgers University, NJ, in 1977 and his B.A. (Honors) from Hull College of Art, England, in 1975.