

A Warm Welcome to the Babylonian Time Capsule

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I could introduce myself as the curator of The Museum of Babylon, one of the most important cultural institutions of a future age. I am aware that pretending to be a mortal of the future is a potentially confusing endeavour, but am hopeful that you will find yourself tempted to play along: In the climate-controlled vaults beneath my office, I am faced with shelf upon shelf of artefacts from the bygone Babylonian Era. From where I stand, this era spans the period from its cradle in the Mesopotamian culture around 6,000 BC, to some point in the future - your future; and I am proud to confirm that The Museum of Babylon has decided to gather a careful selection of our most precious objects and to send them, via time-travel, back to you for research and validation purposes. Thus, dear reader let me hereby announce the arrival of *The Babylon Case*, a time capsule containing these objects and sent from our civilization to yours.

The wooden hexagon-shaped *Babylon Case* is an upshot of the practice of contemporary artist duo J&K, whose work is often produced from an uncontrollable urge to leap into unknown territory. In this case what you would discover behind the scenes is the two artists decoding the Babylonian treasures, and formulating them for presentation, as an installation at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Succumbing to J&K's work means finding oneself in a field where positions shift and slip, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to the confusion, whilst you suspend your disbelief.

J&K's practice forms a multitude of opposing statements, but their evasiveness is followed by an elaborate precision, a baroque foolishness and the insistence on everyday magic. Their performances, videos and photographic collages, in which the artists will often appear as protagonists, can be seen as playful and critical siftings through cultural representation. Most recently, this exploration has brought J&K on journeys through the Baltic Region, and to Egypt - where they, through the lens of a tourist camera, have been depicted on a bench at the Cairo tourist market, pondering over colonial history in the fancy-dress guise of the ancient Gods Horus and Anubis. Their work in Egypt pointed to the tragic absurdity that the world's three monotheistic religions, in spite of sharing the same geographical rooting, seem to be in permanent discord.

The interest in the plurality of meanings within a given system is what has recently led J&K to explore the expansive myth of Babylon, which according to its popular definition is as ambiguous as the pluralistic role that the artists themselves are adopting. As an actual place in ancient Mesopotamia, Babylon represents the birthplace of our civilisation, but with the work of J&K, it is our remote construction of a given place that is in focus as much as the place itself. In addition, J&K argue that our typical Western contradistinction between good and evil is in itself a key to the understanding of the cultural dilemmas we are faced with. For them, Babylon metaphorically highlights the complexity of our own culture, and they suggest that, as some form of antidote, it might even represent a condition *beyond* such binary values.

Babylon is steadily expanding as a place in our collective consciousness. With the more recent development at the actual site of Babylon, in the face of colonial wars and the physical and cultural occupation of Iraq, it has been a natural next step for J&K to turn their focus on the Western museum and the lootings it proudly presents as its legal possessions. In his essay commissioned for this catalogue, Nicholas Mirzoeff states how anyone wanting to understand ancient Babylon must now visit the museums of Western capitals to which the ancient artefacts have been delivered by the tonne since the first archaeological expeditions in 1789. The Museum of the Ancient Near East at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin holds thousands of such items from the German excavations of Ancient Babylonian culture in Mesopotamia, and so it is appropriate that here, in a dimly lit room, J&K have inserted *The Babylon Case - a time capsule for our civilization*.

Within each face of the box, a careful selection of nine glass-framed dioramas invites the viewer to experience the heterogeneity of possible readings of this powerful cultural metaphor. Each of the dioramas develops its own vocabulary to look at the strife of mankind to triumph over God; at Babylon as a mythical city of lust and linguistic confusion; of utopian endeavours towards unification; as a projection screen for occult and spiritual prophecies and the fear of eternal apocalypse; and as a very real site of colonial archaeology and modern warfare.

That *The Babylon Case* is now exhibited in Berlin, is an outcome of the artists' critical research into the permanent displays of Mesopotamian artefacts at The Pergamon Museum. As an independently organised installation it is shown adjacent to the large-scale temporary exhibition "Babylon. Myth and Truth", a joint venture between The Pergamon Museum, The Louvre Museum in Paris and The British Museum in London. Through historical artefacts as well as historical and contemporary artwork, this larger temporary exhibition explores Mesopotamia as a metaphor for the cultural heritage of the ancient orient in Europe, but more significantly it looks at our civilisation's need for the myth of Babylon in order to understand itself.

For J&K, *The Babylon Case* has produced its own internal dialogue, one of which is inspired by Mirzoeff's critique of global visual culture, and his reflections on Babylon as a mirror of empire. The starting point of his essay in this catalogue draws our attention to the immensity of images produced during the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the consensus of its representation in the media. He reminds us that, in contrast to this, the strength of Babylon in part lies in the elusiveness of its facts and the fractured nature of its imagery, and as such should be watched from many points of view.

It is no coincidence that *The Babylon Case* plays with traditional museum aesthetics, whilst being found in the area of the exhibition entitled "Truth", alongside original archaeological treasures from Mesopotamia. Claiming veracity for the fabrications within their work is one of J&K's twisted artistic tools. Through stating their poetic propositions as facts, a surprise effect is created the moment the viewer notices the trickery, and this effect acts as an invitation to us to search for our own interpretations and expand on the multiplicity of possible meanings. In our culture, the modern museum is claimed as a place of enlightenment, but perhaps through its assimilation by entertainment culture, it stands the risk of trivialising the very features that make it unique. In his commissioned essay, Michael Fehr highlights the Babylonian confusion of tongues as a mythical motif for the museum. He calls for a moment of dissociation and ambiguity, which would allow the museum's tower-like construction of knowledge to disintegrate, and make room for a multiplicity of tongues with which to explore the objects on show. In presenting several temporalities alongside each other, J&K capitalise on the subjective license of contemporary art, and cancel out the preconceived hierarchies of information.

Displayed inside *The Babylon Case* is a precious looking clay tablet. Its text contains an intricate prophecy for our civilization's rise and fall, but does so in cuneiform, in an Akkadian language that tellingly is running short of modern terms such as "civilization", "translation" and "failure". Archaeology is a jigsaw puzzle, so much of which consists of interpretational filling between partial slices of knowledge, and at The Museum of Babylon, my colleagues and I are starkly aware of the limited means we have to paint a satisfying picture of the Babylonian Era. What enters the play of history is what has survived the fall of a civilization – a few random objects, a broken clay pot and an ancient shopping receipt are sometimes all that is left, and with these limited means we have to form an interpretation of a whole culture. Sending *The Babylon Case* back to your time, one closer to the source, is part of our attempt at understanding what made a culture as powerful as yours crumble and fall.

In direct opposition to the familiar museological tenet, J&K celebrate you, the reader and viewer, as the genuine authority. Within the context of "myth" and "truth", the artists ask the essential question as to whether civilisation can at all be imagined beyond the cultural framework of Babylon. A curious museum receptacle sent from the future comforts us as evidence that such a civilisation will prevail over some intervening apocalypse. Simultaneously, however, it flags-up the alarming perspective that the current era will at some point be read as a finished chapter, a closed epoch. Like a dried fruit pod, J&K's wooden space capsule is inserted in the museum's fertile ground. As it bursts open, its seeds are released to create a third, expansive space within the institution, cracking open and sprouting somewhere between truth and myth, and pointing a mischievous finger at the polarities that form the traditional representation of the story that is Babylon.