

Exhibition 21 October 2015 – 29 February 2016

Sabatini Building. Floor 1

Constant

New Babylon



Space Circus 1958. Wire and copper, 105 x 90 x 100 cm. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.
Photo: Tom Haartsen. © Constant, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

Constant. New Babylon

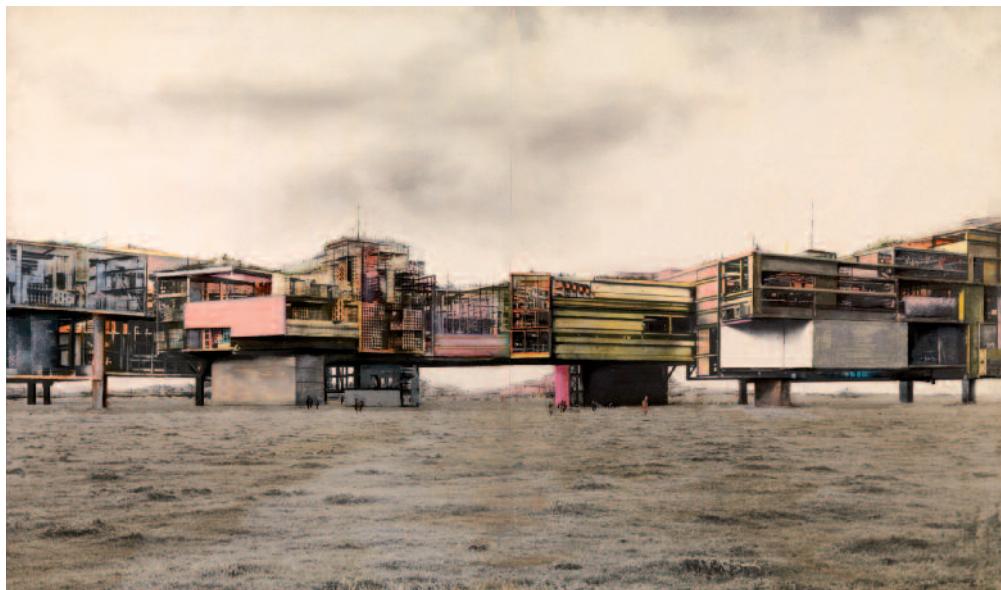
In 1956, Constant Nieuwenhuys (Amsterdam, 1920 - Utrecht, 2005) –co-founder of the group Cobra, and a key figure in the Situationist movement– embarked on *New Babylon*, an ambitious project conceived as an ‘alternative society model’. For more than two decades, Constant worked tirelessly, embodying his ideas in models, topographic maps, drawings, photo-collages, prints, and paintings, as well as in films, manifestos, texts, lectures, and ‘environments’. The fruit of a close collaboration between the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Fondation Constant and the Museo Reina Sofia, the exhibition *Constant. New Babylon* follows the evolution of the project and shows that the ideas it contains were already present in Constant’s earlier work, and did not completely disappear after *New Babylon* officially came to an end in 1974.

In 1948, together with Dutch artists Karel Appel and Corneille, Constant founded the Dutch Experimental Group which soon became part of the international movement Cobra, an amalgamation of experimental groups from Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands whose members included Asger Jorn and Christian Dotremont. Around this time, Constant wrote a manifesto advocating a new kind of art and urging artists to adopt the playful creativity of children and the spontaneity of primitive peoples. While he was part of Cobra, Constant positioned himself against the artists of the De Stijl movement, including Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), but after Cobra disbanded in 1951 he appears to have followed in their footsteps, creating works in which surfaces of abstract colour prevail.

From 1950-1951, his work repeatedly invoked the destruction caused by World War II and the Korean War, which was at its height. Explicitly titled paintings such as *La Guerre* (The War) depict ravaged landscapes on which a new world could be built. Like other Cobra artists, Constant was a great admirer of Picasso’s work, particularly *Guernica* (1937), so much so that one of his war paintings, *L’Incendie* (The Fire, 1950), literally invokes the scene of the burning house and the mother mourning her son’s death.

An Arts Council grant enabled Constant to study in London for several months, where he was struck by the dreary new buildings being erected in the city that presented no challenge to creativity.

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View of New Babylonian Sectors 1971. Watercolor and pencil on photomontage, 134.9 x 222.8 x 1.1 cm. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.
Photo: Tom Haartsen. © Constant, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

Constant's friendship with the architect Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) furthered his interest in the possibilities of architecture. Together with the painter and poet Lucebert, the two collaborated on a 'spatial colorism' experiment as part of the 1952 exhibition *Man and house* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam: van Eyck designed a room that was painted half purple, half blue, and Constant created a brightly coloured mural on one wall. Following a detailed study to determine the colour and dimensions of this work based on correspondence, photographs, and reviews from the time, the room has been reconstructed for this exhibition. In his individual work, too, Constant sought for ways of fully integrating architecture, painting and sculpture (a synthesis of the arts).

In 1956, Constant's old friend Asger Jorn invited him to speak at the third international conference of the MIBI (Mouvement pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste), held in Alba, Italy. Afterwards, the painters Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio and Piero Simondo invited Constant to join an experimental laboratory that they had organised in this city in the Piedmont region, and while he was there he designed the plans for a camp that was to house a group of gypsy families who had settled on the outskirts of the city. As Constant himself said on numerous occasions, this was the germ of *New Babylon*, a project in which nomadism and the creative way of life of the gypsies were a paradoxical anchor and a constant source of inspiration.

Constant. New Babylon

During his stay in Alba, Constant met Guy Debord (1931-1994), who would become de-facto leader of the Situationist International group –which Constant would also be part of– when it was founded in 1957. Together, Constant and Debord developed the theory of ‘unitary urbanism’, which rejected the utilitarian logic of consumer society and sought to bring about a dynamic city revolving around freedom and play. Constant gradually honed his ideas about this city of the future and its inhabitants. After reading a new edition of *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, which had originally been published in 1938 by Dutch sociologist and historian Johan Huizinga, Constant abandoned painting and began producing scale models of the dynamic city of the future.

New Babylon is inextricably linked to its historical and artistic context, a period in which, following the horror of World War II, Europe felt an urgent need to build a new and better world on the ruins of the old one. In this sense, we can see *New Babylon* as a series of suggestions, or perhaps a kind of basic instruction manual to help us to imagine and start building a completely new society through the invention of a completely new kind of urbanism and architecture. Often considered the last great utopia of European art, the project takes the form of a totally automated city in which work has become superfluous. It is inhabited by Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, the new, adventurous, playing human who discovers his creative qualities through social interaction and who never stops travelling and creating.

The life of *Homo Ludens* would not play out in cities as we know them today, but in a global network of ‘sectors’ –the basic unit of the new urbanism– raised on pilotis, which various means of transport would move over and under. The sectors were to be open, communal spaces, allowing ‘New Babylonians’ to build ever-changing environments and paths using mobile architectural elements such as walls, floors, bridges, and stairs. Colour, light, texture, temperature, and air quality would also be adjustable to changing circumstances. These spaces were to interconnect, generating a vast, constantly mutating urban system at a planetary scale. The notion of the labyrinth was also fundamental in shaping this vision.

The painting *Ode à l’Odeon* (Tribute to the Odeon, 1969) was an important turning point in the *New Babylon* project. Although Constant had produced some paintings between 1957 and 1968, it had not been an important medium for him during that period. But from *Tribute to the Odeon* onwards, it became his main activity once again. *Tribute to the Odeon* has its origins in the student occupation of the Odeon Theatre in May 1968. Constant decided to place this event within the architecture of *New Babylon*, sparking a series of paintings in which he represented all kinds of situations set in the city of the future.

In the exhibition held at the Gemeentemuseum in 1974, Constant wanted to present a final vision of *New Babylon* before ending the project, not

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Yellow Sector 1958. Iron, aluminum, copper, plexiglass, ink and oil paint on wood, 21 x 82.5 x 77.5 cm. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.
Photo: Tom Haartsen. © Constant, VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

because he had lost faith in it, but because he had said all he had to say on it. Others would pick up where he had left off. The labyrinth of doors that closed the 1974 exhibition – a section of which has been reconstructed for this show – is highly symbolic in this sense. As Constant himself said: ‘This was as far as I could go. The project exists. It is safely stored away in a museum, waiting for more favourable times when it will once again arouse interest among future urban designers.’

In interviews regarding the 1974 exhibition, Constant said that he still believed in *New Babylon*, but he no longer thought that its realisation was imminent. On the contrary, the advent of this new world was to be preceded by a long period of destruction, which he depicted in every possible way during the last years of the project. Constant often

refers to the Vietnam War in works dating from the early seventies, such as the painting *The Massacre of My Lai* (1972). By this time, the ‘real world’ had decisively penetrated the imaginary world of *New Babylon*, not just in terms of subject matter, but also when it came to the choice of materials. So much so, that Constant began to include newspaper headlines and clippings in his paintings, collages, and drawings.

After entrusting his *New Babylon* project to the Gemeentemuseum, Constant reorganised his studio and once again dedicated himself to painting. Even so, the architectural structures of *New Babylon* remained present in his canvases for some time, and although all traces of them had disappeared by the eighties, he did not lose interest in the subjects of war and revolution.

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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