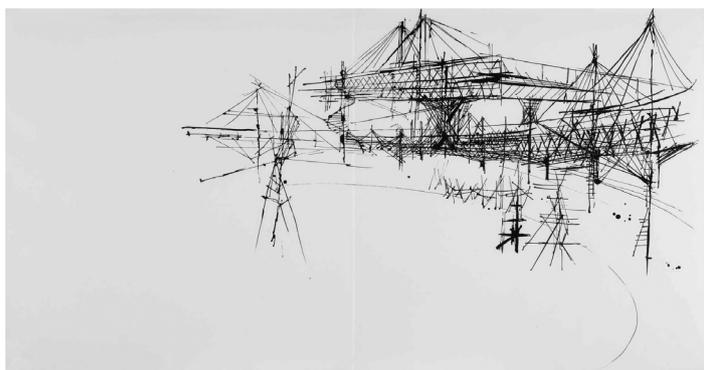

Constant New Babylon (1 of 10), 1963



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The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, better known as Constant (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1920 – Amsterdam, 2005), studied at the Rijksakademie. He lived in Paris in the late 1940s, where he met Asger Jorn and co-founded the CoBrA group along with Karel Appel, Christian Dotremont and other artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. Taking its name from the first letters of those cities, the group was characterised by a highly expressionistic style, inspired by cave paintings and children's drawings, and committed to social and political concerns. CoBrA held a major exhibition in 1949 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam under the title *International Experimental Art*, yet the group dissolved in the early fifties. Constant later became involved with the Situationist International. This group of artists, writers and social activists, with roots in Marxism, Lettrism and the early twentieth-century artistic and political avant-garde, became Constant's vehicle for crossing over the border that conventionally separates architecture from art.

In 1956 Constant began to work on *New Babylon*,¹ a visionary architectural proposal for a future society. After World War II, when throughout Europe cities damaged during the war were being rebuilt, Constant turned to developing a series of prototypes for a utopian city. Abandoning painting, he focused on developing a *situationist* city. Constant maintained that the rational, monotonous functionalism then being utilised would limit a free and creative life. He thus began designing architectural structures for the future. This was *New Babylon*, elaborated in an endless series of extremely detailed models, sketches, etchings, watercolours, lithographs, topological maps, collages, architectural drawings and photo-collages, as well as in manifestos, essays, lectures and films. 'What is *New Babylon* actually?' Constant wrote in 1966. 'Is it a social utopia? An urban architectural design? An artistic vision? A cultural revolution? A technical conquest? A solution to the practical problems of the industrial age?' Constant maintained that *New Babylon* dealt with all of these questions, envisaging a society in which traditional architecture has disintegrated along with the social institutions that it propped up. Every reason for aggressivity had been eliminated in *New Babylon*, making place for a society of creative people who are freed from stultifying everyday work, for a new species: *Homo Ludens* (man the player).

New Babylon is a nomadic world, a labyrinth-like city in constant transformation. A vast network of enormous multi-level interior spaces would propagate to eventually cover the planet. These connecting pieces, called sectors, would have multiple stories with transparent floors and hover above the ground on tall columns of varying design. While vehicles rushed underneath and air traffic landed on the roof, the inhabitants drifted by foot through the huge labyrinthine interiors, endlessly reconstructing spaces and atmospheres. Every aspect of the environment could be controlled and reconfigured spontaneously. This was to be the *ludic* city where the *New Babylonians* would be free to create and recreate the city as they wished.

By the early 1970s, Constant had come to recognise that leaving the liberated *id* to its own devices wouldn't lead to paradise. Two decades after embarking on his vision of a city given over to the pleasure principle, he realised the dark side of the *id* unbound. Before abandoning the project, in his final series of drawings he sketches an apocalypse in black and red: madness, slavery, dehumanisation, the dystopian consequences of unquenchable desire.

Though Constant positioned *New Babylon* at the threshold of the end of art and architecture, it has had a major influence on the work of subsequent generations of architects, provoking intense debates at schools of architecture and fine arts about the future role of the architect. It prefigures projects by Frank O. Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Philippe Starck, Nigel Coates, Greg Lynn and other architects who have imbued individual buildings with the rich emotional impact of urban experience. His project even looked further into the future, toward the cyber spatial network that now encircles the globe.

- 1 As he stated in an interview in 2005 on *New Babylon*: 'It began in 1956 with texts and drawings. One of the first projects, which formed the basis of *New Babylon*, came about in 1956 and was inspired by a gypsy camp in Alba, Italy, where I was then living. Guy Debord, who had founded the Lettrist International in 1952, came to visit me there.... The Lettrists had a mimeographed leaflet called Potlach, and they always sent me a copy. That leaflet interested me. I could sympathise with their criticism of architecture, so I started to write for the magazine I.S. or Situationist International, which was also founded by Debord, sometime later, in 1956 or 1957. It was in this magazine that the first model of *New Babylon* was shown in 1958. Situationism was about the creation of situations. We discussed other ways of living, and from there the discussion soon turned to living environments. And then it progressed to urban architecture. But I had already been studying the relationship between urban architecture and living environments. I had also published on the subject' (Boersma, Linda. Constant, Issue 91, Spring 2005, *Bomb Magazine*.) With Debord he formulated 'unitary urbanism': the theory of the combined use of arts and techniques as a means of contributing to the construction of a unified milieu in dynamic relationship to experiments in behaviour. In the intended social revolution the fine arts would play no role.