

## Constant: The End of the Avant-Garde

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[ RUDY HODEL ]

*'Today's artists have given up the fight, they have become socially integrated. They are no longer out to destroy the "ideological superstructure" – even though no one believes in cultural "value" any more – but above all to preserve the stylistic gains, to preserve the avant-garde itself. The quasi-neo-avant-garde is basically conservative... What they are now fighting for is to capture a position on the art market. The one and only raison d'être of a work of art now seems to be its commercial value – or rather its investment value.'*<sup>1</sup>

To read the Dutch painter Constant's essay 'Rise and fall of the Avant-garde' is a sobering experience. Although it was published in 1964, it seems as if it was written yesterday. One only has to think of the way the media's coverage of art concentrates mainly on money, visitor numbers, record prices at auction and other spectacular matters. And also of the applications for subsidies submitted by the last critical museum directors who try to keep alive the discourse about the future of art and the future of their institutions.<sup>2</sup> This essay seems more topical than ever.

The subject of the 'Rise and fall of the Avant-garde' was Constant's famous New Babylon project. But he was also settling accounts with the 'quasi-neo-avant-garde' of his day. By this he meant both the neo-expressionists and the New Realism 'neo-dadaists', Zero (whose artists worked mostly in monochrome in an attempt to make the relationship between man and nature more harmonious and avoided all traces of individualism in art) and the whole of Pop Art. What is remarkable is that he also repudiates his own past. The CoBrA movement, which from 1948 on rejected academic art and sought to celebrate spontaneity and primitivism, is dismissed as *'the harebrained optimism of those who try to suggest that modern art is overflowing with vitality.'*<sup>3</sup> But the real jolt from reading this essay comes only when one recalls that two years later, in 1966, Constant seemed to explode the whole avant-garde concept. In that year he represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale and exhibited an installation of the New Babylon project. But while wandering around Venice he was suddenly deeply moved by Titian's *Pietà* (1571) in the Accademia and decided to take up painting again. The man who ten years before had consigned painting to the scrapheap of history even had to go out and buy a new easel. As his last avant-garde action and in the seclusion of his studio he devoted himself to colourism, the tradition

Constant,  
*Scorched Earth*. 1951.  
Canvas, 120 x 75 cm.  
Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam (© Sabam  
Belgium 2009).



of representative painting, until his death in 2005. Who was this ever-controversial man, who greatly influenced architects like Rem Koolhaas and who at the eleventh Documenta in Kassel in 2002 was presented as a forerunner of the socially engaged art of the Nineties?

## Creative Power

Constant (the pseudonym of Constant Nieuwenhuys), who was born 21 July 1920 in Amsterdam and died 1 August 2005 in Utrecht, was the most versatile, visionary and important Dutch artist of the second half of the twentieth century. Although he regarded himself first and foremost as a painter, he was just as much of a sculptor, architect and theoretician. In addition he was also the spokesman of avant-garde movements as divergent as CoBrA and the Situationist International. These diverse activities are accurately reflected in the extensive oeuvre he left behind him. For simplicity's sake, his work is usually divided into three periods: the CoBrA phase (which is the best known to the general public), the

New Babylon phase (from 1956 to 1966), and the period after 1966 when Constant at first hesitantly, later definitively, returned to classical methods of painting. But no brief survey can possibly do justice to his versatility.

When trying to create a portrait of Constant it is wiser to emphasise the similarities and to refrain from making the differences in his oeuvre greater than they actually are. Even though he supported or brought into being many groups and movements in the forties and fifties of the last century, he always went his own way. Characteristic of all his work was an experimental starting point that had its roots in the ideas that occupied and inspired him at that moment. Another ever-present factor is the union between emotion and intellect. Right from the founding of the Dutch Experimental Group in 1947 (together with Karel Appel, Corneille, Anton Rooskens and Theo Wolvekamp) Constant clarified and provided a (written) theoretical framework for his work and that of his comrades. A third common factor is that right from the start he believed in the social function of art. In the New Babylon period in particular the artist was expected to give up his own privileges and contribute to the struggle '*for a creative way of life for everyone*'. Helping to create a better world was his most important task. In addition to this 'engaged' attitude and a strong belief in the creative potential of ordinary people, Constant also greatly valued international contacts. Even by present-day standards he had at his command, especially in the 1950s, an extensive international network that was equal to that of the nomadic artist of today.

In 1945, for instance, with the war scarcely over, Constant met the Danish artist Asger Jorn in Paris. Two years later he co-founded the Dutch Experimental Group and in 1945, partly through his contact with Jorn, he became a co-founder of CoBrA (Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam). His association with Jorn and other Danish experimentalists was instrumental in inspiring him to follow their modern interpretation of Surrealism and Expressionism. The fantasy animals he painted in 1946 are not only reminiscent of the Danish examples, they also herald the free, spontaneous and associative art which CoBrA (1948-1951) was to make commonplace. In those days the aim was to allow a painting to evolve as far as possible without any pre-determined viewpoint. Nor was it permitted to aim at any particular aesthetic. A painting was the result of a direct interaction with the materials and the images that came to mind during the act of painting itself.

## After CoBrA

As his relations with Jorn deteriorated in the course of 1949, Constant also began to drift away from CoBrA. He also became more and more conscious of the social inadequacy of the typical CoBrA idiom of plants, animals and mythical creatures. The more these images began to form a language or system, the greater his dissatisfaction with CoBrA became. Constant's characteristic dislike of dogmatism led him to go in search of new images.

In 1950, much to the horror of most of the other members of CoBrA, he developed his own variant on Socialist Realism. Instead of innocent, naïve mythical creatures, in 1950/51 he painted a whole series of pictures referring directly to World War II, among them *Scorched Earth* (1951). The threatening, doom-laden, violent mood of these war paintings is fundamental to almost all his work. World



War II casts its shadow over Constant's entire oeuvre. When he realised that the experimental movement's evocative imagery and the message of his war paintings had little or no effect, he again went in search of something new.

Constant at work, 2001.

Constant began to paint abstract fields of colour which he regarded as studies for the application of colour in space. In 1952 together with the architect Aldo van Eyck he developed what came to be called 'Spatial Colourism'. It was a plea for form and colour as a unity and for colour to play an active role in architecture so as to bring about a new perception of space. For an exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1953 Van Eyck designed a space for which Constant created a painting. Their room was a cube with walls consisting of large L-shaped pieces of dark purple and blue. Between these shapes was space for a painting of four by four metres. About this first involvement with architecture Constant said in an interview in 1980: *'It was rather an eerie space, people usually didn't stay in it for long; sit for a moment on the bench inside and then they were off'*.<sup>4</sup>

## Architecture and the Nomad City

Constant, *New Babylon: Red Sector*. Metal (iron, steel, aluminium, copper), ink on plexiglas, oil on wood, 24 x 96.5 x 77.5 cm.  
Photo by Har Oudejans.  
(© Sabam Belgium 2009).

Feeling that art had become a retrogressive activity, the last refuge of outmoded individualism, Constant turned more and more to architecture. Soon he had expanded his interest to include architecture in a broader sense: the city. After spending some time in London and Paris he began experimenting with space. He made a number of open and dynamic constructions out of aluminium, wire and Plexiglas, which were the forerunners of the New Babylon project.

The whole build-up to this phase is typical of his way of working. Constant is said to have been fond of wandering around bomb sites and areas devastated by the war. On these wastelands, which at first even increased in size as demolition work progressed, he saw new buildings rising which he considered



stultifyingly unimaginative. He observed that a second industrial revolution was taking place in the cities, and that artists were being excluded from participating in it. The artist was unable to take part in the changes brought about by the new urbanisation.

When in 1956 he attended a congress held in Alba by the so-called 'Mouvement Internationale pour un Bauhaus Imagiste' (an organisation set up by his friend Jorn) he spoke for the first time about his ideas for shaping a new culture appropriate to the urbanisation and increasing mechanisation of society. At this congress he also got to know Guy Debord, with whom he developed the concept of unitary urbanism. In a 'declaration d'Amsterdam', in the second bulletin of the *Internationale situationniste*, a movement started in 1957, the objectives of

this unitary urbanism were laid down in eleven points. The aim was to urbanise in such a way that lifestyle and environment would be in tune with one another. For Constant, this notion of the city as generating conditions for a creative way of life for everyone formed the starting point for new activities and new forms of cooperation. In Alba his ideas were already taking concrete shape. At the request of the painter Gallizio he designed a permanent gypsy camp with moveable partition walls so that the space could be divided up according to the number of inhabitants. Constant's romantic preference for gypsy life and the notion of 'man the player' which he derived from Huizinga's 'Homo Ludens' in 1951 became the benchmark of the New Babylon project.

New Babylon was intended to become a Nomad City where people could 'live in freedom, unencumbered by conventions and restrictions'. It was a model for a different kind of society and a new utopian reality. It was to be composed of a number of sectors, each of 20 to 50 hectares, which would be raised about 16 metres above ground level and linked together, spreading in every direction and enveloping the landscape. In this way a metropolis would be created that would span the earth like a net. The ground would remain available for rapid transport and for agriculture, nature reserves and historic monuments. The roofs of the sectors would serve as airfields and walkways. Constant published an article on his project in the *Internationale situationniste* and he also joined this movement. But already in 1960 he felt obliged to resign, criticising the movement for its lack of cooperation and insufficiently radical ideas.

Henceforth Constant was to be the designer, theoretician and spokesman of his one-man-movement New Babylon. He constructed innumerable mysterious models, wrote countless articles, gave lectures all over Europe and exhibited his drawings and models as an architect. But all in vain. When the social revolution failed to materialise and the whole project remained in the realm of ideas, he not only broke with the project but also with the traditional concept of the avant-garde. Once more he felt free to devote himself to his former passion: painting. For the last thirty years of his life he dedicated himself to well-crafted, classically constructed paintings, watercolours and drawings. Yet the break with his own past was anything but total. For the work of this period, no less impressive than what had gone before, also deals with Constant's longstanding themes: war, the nomadic gypsy life, and above all freedom. ■

Translated by Elizabeth Mollison-Meijer

## NOTES

1. Constant, 'Opkomst en ondergang van de avant-garde'. In: *Randstad 8*. Amsterdam-Antwerp, 1964, pp. 8, 9 and 29
2. See the debate sparked in the Netherlands when the 'Stimulation Prize for Cultural Diversity' was awarded to the Mondrian Foundation in 2006
3. See note 1, p. 8
4. Paul Groot in an interview with Constant, *NRC Handelsblad Cultureel Supplement*, 24 October 1980

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