



Constant's Nomadic City

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In the period 1954–1974 the Dutch artist known as Constant (Constant Nieuwenhuys, 1920–2005) elaborated a series of artworks and writings depicting a future urban agglomeration: New Babylon. Stretching over the whole globe, New Babylon hosts wandering individuals who freely move around the interactive space of the hyper-city without any fixed abode, or any reference to an established culture and habits. As the progressing automation of all productive activity allows the people to dispose of free time without any limitation, the main activities of New Babylonians are of a ludic kind.

After a concise introduction, this article concentrates on the written work accompanying the project, by focusing on two recurring key terms: “nomadism” and “play”. These are the “travelling concepts” (Bal 2002) surfacing in a number of texts by other authors, diverse in scope, disciplinary field, and date of composition. Next to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Nomadologie (Mille plateaux)*, 1980), Edouard Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938), the net of relations among texts outlined in this article comes to encompass also Dutch authors such as Menno ter Braak (1902–1940) and Simon Vinkenoog (1928–2009), with the aim of reconnecting New Babylon with its Dutch background, too often underplayed in scholarship on this subject. Urban planning, social trends and the development of counter-cultures in the Netherlands in the Fifties and Sixties offer a better insight into Constant’s internationally revered artwork. Final considerations concern the significance of Constant’s project in relation to the present stage of global urban development, with the aim of providing a few suggestions for further research, as the interest aroused by New Babylon in today’s debate on the future of the city is still alive.

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Si l'on trouvait un lieu - et peut-être en existe-t-il - où la liberté s'exerce effectivement, on découvrirait que cela n'est pas grâce à la nature des objets, mais, une fois encore, grâce à la pratique de la liberté.
(Michel Foucault, *Espace, savoir et pouvoir*, 1994)

Civilization is so new a thing in history, and has been for most of the time so very local a thing, that it has still to conquer and assimilate most of our instincts to its needs. In most of us, irked by its conventions and complexities, there stirs the nomad strain. We are but half-hearted home-keepers.
(H. G. Wells, *The Outline Of History. Being A Plain History Of Life And Mankind*, 1920)

[...] *We are to offer our culture, our tradition, the resource which is in our historic refusal of searching for a state: the most adequate resource of awareness to the nowadays world. That's why we look for a representation, and new ways of representing individuals apart from their belonging to one or to another nation.*
(Emil Scuka, *Declaration of a Roma Nation*, 2001)

Introducing New Babylon

In the period 1954-1974 the Dutch artist known as Constant works at a series of artworks depicting New Babylon, a utopian, or, in his words, “anti-logic” city described by him also in writings:

New Babylon ends nowhere (since the earth is round); it knows no frontiers (since there are no more national economies) or collectivities (since humanity is fluctuating). Every place is accessible to one and all. The whole earth becomes home to its owners. Life is an endless journey across a world that is changing so rapidly that it seems forever other. (Constant 1974, 5)

Constant was involved in two of the major European movements of second wave – post-WW2 avant-garde: CoBrA¹ and the Situationist International² (IS). Artists and

¹ The CoBrA group (1948-1951) founded in Paris by Danish, Belgian and Dutch artists (among whom Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, and Constant) reacted to the recent trauma of Nazi occupation by advocating an engaged art focused on “primitive”, spontaneous artistic expression, and centered on the process of creation rather than on its results. Jorn and Constant later joined the Situationist International. In CoBrA’s manifesto, published in *Reflex* #1 we read: “In this period of change, the role of the creative artist can only be that of the revolutionary: it is his duty to destroy the last remnants of an empty, irksome aesthetic, arousing the creative instincts still slumbering unconscious in the human mind. The masses, brought up with aesthetic conventions imposed from without, are as yet unaware of their creative potential. This will be stimulated by an art which does not define but suggests, by the arousal of associations and the speculations which come forth from them, creating a new and fantastic way of seeing. The onlooker’s creative ability (inherent in human nature) will bring this new way of seeing within everyone’s reach once aesthetic conventions cease to hinder the working of the unconscious” (Constant 1948). For an updated study on the history of the group and works of CoBrA artists, see Stokvis 2017.

² The Situationist International (Internationale Situationniste, IS) constituted in 1956 by Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, Giuseppe (Pinot) Gallizio, Constant and other writers and artists waged war against the art market and establishment before turning into a decidedly more political organization that partly inspired the French student revolt of May ‘68. The role of Constant and other visual artists was especially tangible in the first years in the form of contributions to the concept of Unitary Urbanism. Quoting from an unattributed text in *Internationale Situationniste* #3, December 1959: “First all of, UU

writers convened in those groups with the aim of radically altering the form and the content of arts and knowledge (e.g. *art brut*, art as process; *dérive*, psychogeography) and contributed to the opening of that creative space of political contestation and cultural activity that some European countries experienced in the Sixties. In the Netherlands, Constant's New Babylon project was annexed by the Amsterdam Provos³ in the years preceding 1968. In 1966 it was the core of the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennale. New Babylon had thus entered the transnational artistic world; the radical assumptions and political positioning of the project faded, even if its creator would still write in later years polemical texts accompanying his artworks.

A source of inspiration with regard to the means and objectives of this inquiry lies in the broader field of Cultural Studies, and namely in the idea, put forward by Mieke Bal (2002), of "travelling concepts" as tools for the "cultural analysis" of objects. The analysis she envisages aims at investigating the role of "objects" (more than just texts, images and artworks) in the cultural world:

This means they are not seen as isolated jewels, but as things always-already engaged, as interlocutors, within the larger culture from which they have emerged. It also means that the analysis looks at issues of cultural relevance, and aims at articulating how the object contributes to cultural debates. Hence the emphasis on the object's existence in the present. (Bal 2012, 9)

The interdisciplinary methodology adopted throughout Bal's book is "concept-based" (Bal 2002, 5). This means that case studies are developed through inquiries into the meaning and performativity of concepts across disciplinary, spatial and historical boundaries:

Even those concepts that are tenuously established, suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential *intersubjectivity*. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don't. (Bal 2012, 9)

Concepts, thus, are not fixed and they "travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities" (Bal 2012, 24).

[Unitary Urbanism] is not a doctrine of urbanism but a critique of urbanism. By the same token, our participation in experimental art is a critique of art, and sociological research ought to be a critique of sociology. No isolated discipline whatsoever can be tolerated in itself; we are moving toward a global creation of existence. [...] UU is distinct from problems of housing and yet is bound to engulf them; it is all the more distinct from current commercial exchange. At present, UU envisages a terrain of experience for the *social space* of the cities of the future" (Unattributed 1959). Countless studies have been devoted to the IS; a well-documented specimen is Plant 1992.

³ From *provoceren* (provoke), *provocerend* (provocative), the name of a widespread organization of young people performing ludic, symbolic and pragmatic activities in the city of Amsterdam in 1965-1967. The anarchical activity of the Provos included happenings in which authorities and the consumer society were ridiculed, experiments in the communitarian use of goods (e.g. the *witte fietsen*, white bicycles, standing in the streets and open to free use by everybody who would then leave them for the next passer-by), and campaigns for the decriminalization of soft drugs. Following the increasing consensus for their nonviolent actions and the general discontent towards the harsh reaction by the police, both the mayor of Amsterdam and the local Chief of Police had to resign in 1966. This event confirmed Amsterdam's role as a bulwark of liberty in the Netherlands. For an English-language study on this phenomenon, see Kempton 2007.

What follows here is an attempt at developing, with regard to New Babylon as text, the kind of cultural analysis envisaged by Bal. First, I want to raise questions about Constant's writings with regard to two main concepts therein expressed: "nomadism" and "play". Constant's work has been the object of many studies, some of them focusing on one or more key "word-concepts", such as the two chosen here. My intention is to contribute to the extant research by exploring some unbeaten paths. To do this, I will synchronically address some well- and some lesser known texts from different decades: Menno ter Braak's *Van Oude en Nieuwe Christenen* (1937), Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1980), Simon Vinkenoog's *Liefde. Zeventien dagen op ooghoogte* (1965) and Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), among others. In most cases, no presumption of direct influence among the authors is implied. In the case of Huizinga and Deleuze and Guattari possible links with Constant's work have previously been illustrated by scholars (among others, Van Lente 2013 and Kavanaugh 2008). My intention is here to focus on their connections from a different angle.

Secondly, I will turn to another aspect of the dissemination of the key-concepts developed in connection with New Babylon that deserves closer attention: Constant was involved in the elaboration of actions and ideas for the IS and Provo, and this is visible in his contributions to their press organs. Finally, I will turn to New Babylon's "existence in the present". Scholars, thinkers and architects dealing with contemporary issues, such as the global city and urban networks, and the change in social interconnectedness and mobility, still point to Constant's work as prophetic. I argue that the utopia conceived by Constant has partially come true in the present, but also that, in this process of becoming, that dream has revealed its dystopian face.

Besides letting Constant's project resonate with the work of contemporary divergent thinkers of international allure, my aim is to link it to Dutch authors, such as Ter Braak and Vinkenoog, that are virtually unknown to most readers due to the language barrier afflicting Dutch literature at large. As underlined by Jérémie McGowan, who has the merit of having studied in depth some underplayed aspects of Constant's work:

Notably stripped of its post-war, European and specifically Dutch identity, *New Babylon* is [...] most often offered up for consumption today as an aesthetic object in English translation. The project's political and historical contexts, like its massive textual component, are typically kept to one side. There has been a tendency to dismiss Constant's writings, in particular. (McGowan 2011, 28)

New Babylon is actually outlined through several texts and graphic works such as maps, drawings and maquettes playfully mimicking the products of contemporary architectural and urban planning. The New Babylonian environment is conceived as a space open to mobility and manipulation by its inhabitants. Words and images convey the idea that it is a dynamic space, proliferating on the terrestrial surface, originating an immense labyrinth made of modular unities: the sectors. The sectors are connected in an ever-growing network and are internally movable and mutable as far as light, temperature and setting are concerned. People move around this continuous space without any pattern or aim, while relations and groupings are formed and interrupted: the composition of the population changes constantly and originates a New Babylonian culture unable to establish any connection to the past or to a birth- or dwelling place: "Nobody can return to what was before, rediscover the place as he left

it, the image he'd retained in his memory. Nobody now falls into the trap of habit" (Constant 1974, 14).

A thought-provoking point, deserving some explicatory remarks, lies in the name given to the project. A key to understand its implications, especially within the context of Dutch culture, is offered by Constant in an interview for a short film made in 1962.⁴ He points to the contrast between Zion (or Jerusalem), the city of God, and Babylon, "renowned as the city of sin" in the Scriptures, but historically recorded as "the cosmopolitan city of liberty, the cultural center where the first civic code, the code of Hammurabi, was written. [...] Now 2500 years later," he adds, "we live in the era of space and technique. At the horizon looms an unknown liberty. [...] We can play with the thought of a terrestrial paradise".⁵ A visual hint to the significance of ancient Babylon as an inspiring paragon for his work is offered by Constant's projects for modular "hanging sectors" in maquettes and drawings from 1960-1 bearing the title *Hangende sector*. A series of Dutch etchings from the seventeenth century, some of which are hosted in the Rijksmuseum's collections,⁶ concentrate on the "hanging gardens" of Babylon, reportedly one of the seven wonders of the world. The motive of suspended terraces for greenery also recurs in Constant's descriptions of New Babylon. But a deeper and provocative reference to Dutch identity is covertly at play here. Constant is toying with a long-standing tradition, stemming from early modern times, according to which Amsterdam (and the Netherlands), home to fleeing Calvinists as well as Jews from all over Europe, was the "Jerusalem of the West".⁷ All general considerations aside, selecting Jerusalem's, or Zion's, antagonist, Babylon, as a model for his "new" city, implicitly also meant transforming the established symbolic role of Amsterdam in history.

A nomadic city

To get a deeper insight in New Babylon, a first important research focus can be found in Constant's words about the origin of the project. In 1956 the Dutch artist visited his friend Giuseppe (Pinot) Gallizio in Alba (Italy). Gallizio, an experimental painter and the co-founder of the Situationist International, was striving at the time to obtain a place to set up a camp for the nomadic families that stopped yearly from the Alba City Council. Constant was welcomed in the camp and was struck by the way in which the nomadic group dealt with space:

[...] they were assigned a bit of grassland on the banks of the Tanaro, the little river that goes through the town: the most miserable of patches! It's there that in

⁴ *Met Simon Vinkenoog naar het New Babylon van Constant, (Accompanying Simon Vinkenoog to Constant's New Babylon)*. A film by Wim Smits (camera), Simon Vinkenoog (commentary), Lies Westenburg (director), 15 min, 1962.

⁵ "In tegenstelling tot Zion, de stad Gods, een stad waar ora et labora, bid en werk, als hoogste moraal gold, heeft Babylon de reputatie van de stad van de zonde. [...] Maar in de geschiedenis staat Babylon gekend als de kosmopolitische stad van de vrijheid, het cultuurcentrum waar het eerste burgerlijke wetboek, dat van Hammoerabi, is geschreven, Nu, 25 honderd jaar later, leven we in het tijdperk van ruimte en de techniek. Aan de horizon doemt een onbekende vrijheid. [...] We kunnen spelen met de gedachten aan een aards paradijs aan een Nieuw Babylon, de stad van de geautomatiseerde tijdperk [...]" (transcription and translation are mine).

⁶ E.g. Johannes Jacobsz van den Aveele, *Hangende tuinen van Babylon*, undated, and Crispijn van de Passe (I), *Hangende tuinen van Babylon met op de voorgrond een leeuwenvjacht*, 1614.

⁷ On the pervasive "Zion metaphor" and "Hebraic self-image" in the Dutch culture of the Golden Age, at the time of the war for the independence of the Netherlands from Spain, see Schama 1998: 95-97, 103.

December 1956 I went to see them in the company of the painter Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, the owner of this uneven, muddy, desolate terrain, who'd given it to them. They'd closed off the space between some caravans with planks and petrol cans, they'd made an enclosure, a "Gypsy Town". That was the day I conceived the scheme for a permanent encampment for the gypsies of Alba and that project is the origin of the series of maquettes of New Babylon. Of a New Babylon where, under one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodeled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale. (Constant 1974, 1)

According to Constant, the road to New Babylon stretched over the ruins of a Western culture of which we cannot but admit the total failure. Finding inspiration in the nomads and their way of inhabiting space, he is explicitly advocating an opposition to dominant views and lifestyles. As befits a provocative artist, he could implicitly be condemning the silence over the genocide of a quarter of the Roma population in Europe in the *zigeunerlagers* of the Third Reich; Constant seems here particularly interested in nomadic life as a mode of interaction with space, society and culture, and in the political potential of their increasingly contested presence in the outskirts of cities in rapid growth. That is evident when he adopts as a motto a speech by Ionel Rotaru (a.k.a. Vaida Voivod III), the self-proclaimed leader of the Communauté Gitane, whose activity spans just the same years: "We are the living symbols of a world without frontiers, a world of freedom, without weapons, where each may travel without let or hindrance [...]".⁸

From its first conception, the New Babylon project finds in the presence of contemporary nomads an inspiring living example of a better approach to living and socializing. But since New Babylon is not conceived as an actual home for Roma, Sinti, Travellers or other traditionally nomadic groups in Europe, it is on the approach to movement that we must focus: the word refers to someone or something without a fixed settlement, characterized by continuous displacements; nomads roam "aimlessly, frequently or without a fixed pattern" (as the definition in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary goes). This qualifies the intense mobility that is the main characteristic of both space and human element in Constant's project. It is evident that Constant was deeply inspired by the anti-capitalist and politically significant subversion of the categories of home and work enacted by contemporary nomads, a subversion which is apparent enough to all, in their words and acts. New Babylonians seem to share (except for the reliance on clans) that "nomadic mind-set" of the Irish travelers that Maurya Wickstrom declines as:

a desire to remain unhoused and travel when and where one wishes, a resistance to wage-labor, disinterest (until now) in owning land or any other property that entails staying in one place, alternative modalities of knowledge and knowledge production instead of/in addition to formal education and literacy, the precedence of deep forms of sociality situated in extended families over any affirmation of the individual, especially as defined by geography or work. (Wickstrom 2012, 139)

The insistence on nomadism in Constant's writings leads us to inquire on the possible contiguity/non contiguity of his use of the word with other thinkers that make use of "nomadism" as a concept. None of them, however, turned their gaze to the

⁸ Quote from an interview to Ionel Rotaru, published by *Algemeen Handelsblad*, Amsterdam, 18 May 1963 (Constant 1974, 1).

inspirational existence of nomadic peoples in Europe in their times (and to their cultural capital) as Constant actually did in the course of his later artistic life. In the New Babylon scholarship, which counts a plethora of studies and references, this aspect is constantly underplayed. As McGowan convincingly states in his dissertation, mainly focused on this aspect of Constant's theorization and practice:

Constant's sustained relationship with Romani culture, as well as his first-hand encounters and personal correspondence with Romani individuals, emerge as some of the most enduring, yet repeatedly disregarded aspects of the artist's life and work. (McGowan 2011, 9)

An antecedent of the later debate on "nomadism" as an approach to life and thought, is to be found in the work of an outstanding figure in the pre-WW2 Dutch literary landscape: essayist Menno ter Braak.⁹ In the dialogue opening his collection *Van oude en nieuwe christenen* (*Of old and new christians*, the 'c' intentionally not capitalized) "nomadism" and "play" are the key elements of a reflection on the boundaries of Western thought that intellectuals may strive to surpass by accepting dangerous paradoxes, such as the oxymoron "serious play", which is spontaneously adopted by children (Ter Braak 1937, 22). They combine together an inclination for playing seriously with a nomadic attitude; an inability to settle in established mental and geographical frames that characterizes the "morals" of children, who never engage in a search for the "meaning of life". Especially revealing, with regard to the New Babylonian vision of culture and morals, is the opposition proposed by Ter Braak between the two poles of "nomad-child-play-paradox" and "sedentary-adult citizen-duty-meaning of life" (Ter Braak 1937, 25). Further on, after dismissing all romantic images of the nomadic existence, Ter Braak, underlines the usefulness of "nomad" as a concept in view of an intellectual escape from totalitarian restrictions and in search of free territories of morals and thought:

Even the most sober man is obliged to acknowledge that the nomad must have, out of necessity, a different morals with regard to what is fixed (e.g. the country) from the petty bourgeois living in the outskirts of Paris or Den Haag. As this image can be of use for us in this context, we could say that the nomad in us resurfaces (after that pedagogics have violently killed the child in us) exactly where the settled bourgeois more arrogantly strives to impose himself as 'the human' by definition: in the conceptual world, the outwardly signs of which we partake with him. The nomad leaves his dwellings in search of a new country; we go in search of a new conceptual region, ready to be inhabited by those that have been driven away from the old country by its infertility (or better, hyper-cultivation). [...] we have to leave those regions where everything has acquired a meaning that we cannot share. (Ter Braak 1937, 38-9; my translation).

If we now turn to post-war thinkers, we cannot but refer to Deleuze and Guattari's reflections that go under the title of "Treatise on Nomadology" in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and those of Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*. We may incidentally remark that both these seminal texts were published decades after Constant's New

⁹ A literary critic and the founder of the *Forum* magazine (1932-1935), as well as the second cousin of the historian Johan Huizinga himself, with whom he regularly corresponded, Ter Braak was a strenuous opponent of the Nazi-Fascist ideology and committed suicide in 1940 on the day of the German invasion of the Netherlands.

Babylonian phase.¹⁰ In Deleuze and Guattari's "Nomadology" (Deleuze and Guattari 2016), the "nomads" opposing the State are Genghis Khan, the Roman or Anglo-Saxon warrior-kings, the Bedouins. The historical agency of these individuals and tribes against the State becomes a mobility of thought based on revolutionary premises. As such, it is anachronistically connected to a contemporary intellectual attack against the establishment, to an opposition between moving and fixed ideas. An interesting overlap with Constant's writings is to be found, in particular, in the final pages of "Nomadology", dealing with Nomad Art. Here, the historical dimension is brought to bear on the "mental space" of the contemporary city dwellers confined in a "striated" environment but free to reconstruct a "smooth space" as the one Constant imagined:

Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces: to live in the city as a nomad, or as a cave dweller. Movements, speed and slowness, are sometimes enough to reconstruct a smooth space. Of course, smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries. (Deleuze and Guattari 2016, 500)

Ten years after the appearance of this influential book, Glissant criticizes Deleuze and Guattari for their erroneous view of nomadism as a liberated relation with space (Glissant 2010, 11). He sees it, instead, in the case of what he calls circular nomadism, as a form of obedience to contingencies, but at the same time a not-intolerant, peaceful inability to settle down, and a powerful means to engage in a dialogue with the Other. It is all the more surprising that even Glissant pays little attention to Roma presence in the industrialized world. He focuses instead on another aspect that Constant had previously underlined as a feature of the New Babylonian approach, that of relation:

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings. If it is at variance with territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root (which makes processes of identification so difficult today), this is because in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows that he will never accomplish this – and knows that this is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides. (Glissant, 2010, 20)

Simon Sadler points to the communicative function of space in Constant's city: "[...] architecture would become a medium for social contact, providing new Babylonians with something to do together. That might even have turned architecture into an alternative to verbal language" (Sadler 1998, 149). In approaching the theme of relation through language from his peculiar postcolonial stance, Glissant offers grounds for an implicit connection with the very name of Constant's city: "[...] the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took the place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually" (Glissant 2010, 19). This statement echoes the words Constant used in the 1962 film, stressing once again the analogy-difference between "ancient" and "new" Babylon: "The

¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari's seminal *A Thousand Plateaus* was first published in 1980 as *Mille plateaux*, but Deleuze had adopted the definition "nomadic thought" in relation to Nietzsche as early as 1972. Glissant's *Poétique de la relation* came out in 1990.

confusion of languages here is not a punishment but a source of unexpected discoveries and situations".¹¹

A Situationist and a "Provo" city

As we see, in 1962 Constant did not avoid the term "situation", although he had officially broken up with the Situationist International as early as 1960. In the two years of his involvement in the activities of the group and in the editorial board of the IS bulletin, he had provided several drawings and texts that constituted the architecturally planned proposal for Unitary Urbanism (UU), advocated by the Situationists. The underlying concept and the proposed projects explicitly oppose Le Corbusier's idea of functional urbanism: "Do we intend this to be a new functionalism, which will give greater prominence the idealized utilitarian life? It should not be forgotten that, once the functions are established, play will succeed them" (Constant 1958, 2). "Play", a concept underlying Situationist actions, such as the *détournement* ("rerouting", turning existing art into a situationist construction of milieu) and the *dérive* ("drift", haphazardly wandering about the city), makes its appearance here as a keyword that will often recur in texts pertaining to New Babylon. In the IS, Constant is in charge of concretely providing an environment-to-be for play: "[...] the reduction in the work necessary for production, through extended automation, will create a need for leisure, a diversity of behavior and a change in the nature of the latter, which will of necessity lead to a new conception of the collective habitat" (Constant 1958, 2). The ludic nature of the inhabitant's interaction with space is thus supplied by automation, as well as through a marginalization of traffic (cars, if needed, run underneath the sectors, "individual helicopters" fly above them) and by the flexibility of every structure:

The city of the future must be conceived as a continuous construction on pillars, or, rather, as an extended system of different structures from which are suspended premises for housing, amusement, etc., and premises destined for production and distribution, leaving the ground free for the circulation of traffic and for public messages.[...] The terraces form an open-air terrain that extends over the whole surface of the city, and which can be sports fields, airplane and helicopter landing-strips, and for the maintenance of vegetation. They will be accessible everywhere by stair and elevator. The different floors will be divided into neighboring and communicating spaces, artificially conditioned, which will offer the possibility of creating an infinite variety of ambiances, facilitating the *derive* of the inhabitants and their frequent chance encounters. The ambiances will be regularly and consciously changed, with the aid of every technical means, by teams of specialized creators who, hence, will be professional situationists. (Constant 1958, 2-3)

In later years, the reference to "professional situationists" will disappear from Constant's texts, leaving an active role in the game virtually open to everybody. The 1960 description of the Yellow Zone, focused on an actual maquette made by Constant, provides a more detailed and vivid description of interiors and ludic activities:

The two labyrinth-houses are formed by a great number of irregularly-shaped chambers, spiral staircases, distant corners, wastelands, cul-de-sacs. One goes

¹¹ "De spraakverwarring is er geen straf maar een bron van onverwachte vondsten en situaties". For reference see *supra*, footnote 4 (transcription and translation are mine).

through them adventurously. One can find oneself in a quiet room, clad in insulating material; the loud room with its vivid colors and ear-splitting sounds; the room of echoes (radiophonic speaker games); the room of images (cinematic games); the room for reflection (games of psychological resonance); the room for rest; the room for erotic games; the room of coincidences, etc. An extended stay in these houses has the tonic effect of a brainwashing and is frequently undertaken to erase the effects of habits.

The water games are found in the open air between these two houses, the terracing above having an opening which allows the sky to be seen. Jets of water and fountains are interspersed here with hoardings and constructions in bizarre shapes, including a heated grotto of glass where one can bathe in deepest winter while watching the stars. (Constant 1960, 1)

After the connection with Situationism was severed, another radical movement was to employ Constant's project for its own ends. In the years 1965-66, Amsterdam was shaken by the ludic, anarchist actions of Provo,¹² a group of youngsters resenting the growth of a consumers' society and generally rebelling against an established set of values, symbols and norms: from the royal family to property, publicity, sexual taboos and restrictions on cannabis consumption. Begun as a series of more or less inconsistent happenings, often in the form of gatherings around the performances in disguise of the self-proclaimed "antismoke-magician" Robert Jasper Grootveld in the Amsterdam Spui square, Provo soon developed into a more defined anarchist movement. The nonviolent provocative actions often led to a clash with authorities, unleashing harsh repression by the police. Writers of the older generation, such as Harry Mulisch and Simon Vinkenoog, defended the protesters. Vinkenoog, who played a fundamental role in those unruly times in Amsterdam, mediating between the world of art and literature and protest (a friend of Allen Ginsberg's, he introduced beat poetry in the Netherlands), often refers to Constant and the New Babylonian vision in his "seventy days" diary written while experimenting different drugs (Vinkenoog 1965). He had already written an introductory essay for a collection of lithographs by Constant in 1963 (also republished in the leaflet accompanying the 1966 Venice Biennale Exhibition), and acted as a sort of patron for New Babylon. Among other slogan-like utterings, his daily annotations prove how easily Constant's theorization could fit into (and contributed to) the effervescent atmosphere of impending change that swept through Amsterdam. He jots down:

Amsterdam, seen from above, just has to be populated anew to become Constant's New Babylon. Except for a few houses that I know, I saw no mortal around, not because I was too high, but because nothing moved. [...] Help Robert Jasper and the others prevail. Grant the city some movement. Don't let it become a tin box, with paper tram stops, Meccano traffic circuits, un-swam streams, hotel and motels. (Vinkenoog 1965, 444-5)¹³

By mentioning Constant and Robert Jasper Grootveld in the same lines, he celebrated the union between New Babylon and the counter-cultural agitators of the

¹² See *supra*, footnote 3.

¹³ "Amsterdam, uit de lucht bezien, moet even opnieuw bevolkt worden als New Babylon van Constant, ik zag derhalve in wat huizen die ik ken, geen sterveling, niet omdat ik te hoog was maar omdat niets bewoog. [...] Help Robert Jasper e.a. slagen. Gun de stad wat beweging. Laat het geen broodtrommel worden, met papieren tramhaltes, meccano-verkeerscircuits, niet-bezwommen vijvers en ho-motels" (my translation).

younger generation. Constant sympathized with Provo and accepted to collaborate with their bulletin in 1965 and 1966. He brought previous writings on New Babylon to bear on the new “situation” generated in Amsterdam by Provo actions, and welcomed their New Babylonian approach:

A journalist asked me if I knew of a social space in this society that resembled the social spaces I thought there should be in New Babylon. And I said: ‘Yes, the square around the Amsterdam urchin [Spui square]’. Because you play there just as in New Babylon they will play on a larger scale. (Constant 1965, 134)¹⁴

“Nomadism” and “play” are once again the pillars of the new society he proposes to the young readers, mimicking in his style the all-caps slogans that abounded in the bulletin:

New Babylon city will not be oriented towards utility but towards play. It is not a utilitarian society, like the present, but a ludic one. The game will be played by everybody, in all forms.

RECREATION (risible word) has no meaning anymore, because everything here is CREATION.

People will be playing as they roam about the Earth, just like nomads [...].¹⁵ (Constant 1965, 133)

In his contribution to the Provo bulletin the following year, Constant sums up in a series of points the main features of the new city, allowing different forms of socialization and acculturation, and uses them as a motivation for the discontent and rebellious attitude of the younger generation: “The above points explain why the teenage revolt against the fossilized standards and conditions of the past is aimed chiefly at the recovery of social space – the street – so that the contacts essential for play may be established” (Constant 1966, 3). It is the “revolt of the homo ludens” (Constant 1965, 132).

Constant takes to extreme the suggestions contained in the essay *Homo Ludens* published in Dutch by Johan Huizinga in 1938. This seminal text cannot be considered as a peculiar element of Dutch cultural heritage, so deep is its influence on Western culture in general. However, the number of references to Huizinga’s interpretation of culture as play, scattered in Dutch literary, historical, philosophical and sociological works, from its publication until now, is overwhelming. Constant’s writings betray, in my opinion, a direct knowledge of the text and not, as it is often the case, a slavish adoption of the successful term coined by Huizinga. With an eye on the use Constant made of this milestone in the history of ideas, it is possible to select some relevant passages from the book. Huizinga defines “play” as a primary category of life:

[...] we have to do with an absolutely primary category of life, familiar to everybody at a glance right down to the animal level. We may well call play a

¹⁴ “Een journalist van Het Parool vroeg mij of ik een sociale ruimte in deze maatschappij kende, zoals de sociale ruimtes die er in New Babylon volgens mij moesten zijn. Ik zei: ‘Ja, het plein rond het Amsterdamse Lieverdje.’ Want daar wordt door jullie gespeeld zoals dat in New Babylon op grotere schaal zal gebeuren” (my translation).

¹⁵ “De stad New Babylon zal niet meer op het nut, maar op het spel gericht zijn. Het is geen utilitairistische maatschappij, zoals deze, maar een ludieke. Het spel zal er door ieder bedreven worden, in alle vormen. REKREATIE (belachelijk woord) heeft er geen betekenis meer, omdat alles er KREATIE is. De mens zal er spelend over de aarde zwerven, als een nomade” (my translation).

“totality” in the modern sense of the word, and it is as a totality that we must try to understand and evaluate it. (Huizinga 2002, 3)

He then underlines that whoever plays, wants to play: “all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it” (Huizinga 2002, 7). Although dependent on the will of the player, play is at the same time necessary, and in its broader assumption as a social activity, it originates culture:

It adorns life, amplifies it with its meanings and associations, and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for the society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function. (Huizinga 2002, 9)

In Huizinga’s vision play is a limited activity, confined to peculiar times and places, namely the playground (Huizinga 2002, 9-10), but he also envisages the possibility of an “invasion”: “But at any moment, even in a highly developed civilization, the play-‘instinct’ may reassert itself in full force, drowning the individual and the mass in the intoxication of an immense game” (Huizinga 2002, 47).

It is a borderless and timeless creative game that Constant views as the main activity of the New Babylonians, who can freely develop their *ludens* component. They roam continuously among the sectors, in a form of pacific and casual errantry: the sectors do contain spaces and structures dedicated to healthcare, education, media, dwelling places and emporia, but the larger extension is left for “a social space with moveable articulations: the playground of *Homo Ludens*.” (Constant 1974, 9).

In some of his later texts Constant feels the urge to give his viewers and readers a key to access New Babylon as a utopian realm and as a political art: it is impossible to realize it in the present, he says, but the project is brought to bear on the present as a criticism to capitalist society, to conventions about emotional and ethical ties, to urbanism reflecting the class organization, creating different cities for economically divergent groups: “New Babylon is the work of the New Babylonians alone, the product of their culture. For us, it is only a model of reflection and play” (Constant 1974, 17).

Conclusion: The way to dystopia

In the course of the following thirty or forty years, the city-world imagined by Constant has become much more than a simple “model of reflection and play”. It soon took real form in the Netherlands, but its sociopolitical implications were lost. The project was originally a response, a provocative but solidly conceived one, in terms of form and content, to the plans for urban development adopted by the Dutch government (often in collaboration with the private sector) since the late Fifties. Those plans formed the basis of today’s Randstad (Ring City, the conurbation comprising the major Dutch cities). Constant criticized the strict functional division of urban space and the central role that car traffic took in planning by envisaging a smooth, open and limitless zone for living and all sorts of (ludic) activities, where cars played a marginal role. Some of the architects involved in rethinking the centers, stations and transport infrastructures of Dutch cities in the same time span partially shared his views or even found inspiration in New Babylon. However, the underlying anti-consumerism, resulting from the absence of economic structures and constraints

in the “anti-logical” existence of New Babylonians, found no echo in the urban development and renovation of those years. The accumulation of shops and offices in the (once) public space became the main feature of futuristic projects in the Sixties and Seventies such as the Hoog Catharijne complex in Utrecht and the Bezuidenhoutkwartier with the Babylon complex in Den Haag.¹⁶ It proved to be a long-term trend in Dutch urban planning, as today’s controversial Zuidas project (South Axis, business district arising in Amsterdam) demonstrates. According to Schuyt and Taverne:

The central area of the Netherlands became thus a combination of hotels, restaurants and cafés, retail, commercial services and culture that, thanks to the huge growth in scale of architecture and infrastructure stood as a model for a number of similar projects in the Dutch cities.¹⁷ (Schuyt and Taverne 2000, 187).

After becoming a concept in its own right, “New Babylon” travelled from the field of engaged art to the hard reality of urban planning and of the commercial exploitation of urban spaces. Its implications changed accordingly. As Donker Duyvis states:

New Babylon became a misunderstood concept. Popularization and commercialization were thus unavoidable. Shops proudly adopted the name “New Babylon”. Against this brutal affront there wasn’t much Constant could do. In The Hague, after the demolition of the old central station, rose a futuristic office complex. Working and living near a high-speed train track. In the big hall totally automated boards with the names of metropolises like Amsterdam, Utrecht and Rotterdam are waving. From the escalator, people can get directly on a shuttle tram or bus that speeds on asphalt viaducts that, preferably in pairs, breach their way into the center of The Hague. Naming this gigantic black office block Babylon is, to be euphemistic, a wrong interpretation of the word ludic used by the developer of a project. Babylon as a prostitute, capitalism its pimp.¹⁸ (Donker Duyvis 1979, 173)

By the end of the Seventies, increasingly larger urban conglomerations in the industrialized world, as well contemporary metropolises, such as those in Asia, confirm that Constant had foreseen a global spatial and urbanistic trend. Furthermore, in the Eighties, also the virtual environment of the Internet quickly began growing and developing the labyrinthine and nomadic quality of New Babylon at a different level

¹⁶ This complex has undergone further development in the last fifteen years. Its name today is “New Babylon”. A site gives information to those who want to visit or move their home and activity there: www.newbabylon.nl.

¹⁷ Daardoor ontstond in het centrum van Nederland een compositie van horeca, detailhandel, commerciële dienstverlening en cultuur die, door de enorme schaalvergroting van architectuur en infrastructuur, model heeft gestaan voor tal van soortgelijke projecten in Nederlandse steden (my translation).

¹⁸ ‘New Babylon werd een onbegrepen begrip. Onontkoombaar was derhalve popularisering en commercialisering. Winkels noemden zich trots ‘New Babylon’. Een gotspe waar Constant weinig tegen kon uitrichten. Na de afbraak van het oude staatsspoorstation in Den Haag verrees er een futuristisch complex van grote kantoren. Werken en wonen vlak bij een supersnel transport. In de grote stationshal wapperen volledig geautomatiseerde bordjes met namen van wereldsteden als Amsterdam, Utrecht en Rotterdam. Via een automatische roltrap stapten men in de sneltram of in de snelbus, die vrij baan hebben over betonnen viaducten die zich, liefst paarsgewijs, een weg door de Haagse binnenstad hebben gebroken. Dat de enorme zwarte kantoorkolos bij het station de naam Babylon draagt, is op zijn zachts gezegd een verkeerde interpretatie van het woord ludiek door een project-ontwikkelaar. Babylon als hoer, het kapitaal als pooier’ (my translation).

(Schuyt and Taverne 2000, 486). By then Constant, having sold most of the related artworks to the Gemeentemuseum of The Hague, had reverted to brush and paint, and turned to the exploration of the human figure and of the work of older masters.

It is evident that the uniformity and mobility foreseen in New Babylon could not alone enhance the creativity and freedom of its inhabitants, once they came into being. Cities without a center, expanding cities turning into homogeneous hubs around airports and along highways, futuristic infrastructures with no identity: architect Rem Koolhaas names this new stadium in urban development “The Generic City”. In his description, the echo of Constant’s words is still audible, but the effect is totally reversed.¹⁹ Generic city is “nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability”: “It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting – or unexciting – everywhere” (Koolhaas 1995, 1250).

In the Generic City some kind of game is played. It is very different from the New Babylonian intensive interaction with space: the restless swarms of *homo consumens* play the game of buying and pursuing elusive goals, as Zygmunt Bauman states (2007). To protect their playground, the “Consumens” raise walls to keep beggars, nomads, immigrants at a distance. The elite sectors of this city are full of non-places, which are not waiting for their inhabitants to act upon them, but rather act upon the inhabitants, erasing social relations and collective history: stations, airports, malls, and other triumphal arches of the global economic system, discussed by Marc Augé in his *Non-lieux* (1992). In the end, New Babylon has partially come into being. Many of its external, technological and infrastructural aspects have become a reality, but in the process the ideal city has lost an indispensable component: the vision of a political, social and artistic choice.

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¹⁹ Rem Koolhaas found inspiration in Constant’s work, and also met him on the occasion of an interview in 1966 while the artist was working on New Babylon (Lootsma 2007).

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