

## Constant *New Babylon*



CONSTANT  
*New Babylon / The Hague*, 1964  
Watercolor on paper on chipboard  
220 x 279.9 cm  
GEMEENTEMUSEUM DEN HAAG

- DATES:** October 20, 2015 – February 29, 2016
- PLACE:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Sabatini Building. Floor 1
- ORGANIZED BY:** Gemeentemuseum Den Haag and Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía
- COLLABORATORS:** Fondation Constant and RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History)
- CURATED BY:** Laura Stamps and Doede Hardeman  
The section *Flamencos, Gypsies, Romanies: The New Babylonians* has been curated by Rosario Peiró and Pedro G. Romero
- COORDINATION:** Belén Díaz de Rábago and Beatriz Jordana
- SPONSORS:** Mondriaan Fund and Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
- RELATED ACTIVITIES:** Workshop: *New City, New Life*  
Aimed at: High school students aged 14-17  
[Further information](#)

The **Gemeentemuseum Den Haag** and the **Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía** present an exhibition dedicated to the figure of the Dutch artist **Constant** (Constant Anton Nieuwenhys, Amsterdam, 1920 – Utrecht, 2005). Under the title of ***New Babylon***, the show focuses above all on the artist's most emblematic project, his concept of the city of the future. For nearly twenty years (1956-1974), Constant made models, paintings, drawings and collages that showed his idea of the planning of this new city, a large and complex labyrinth that transformed the world into a single network. The land would be collectively owned, work would be automated and carried out by robots, and people would be free to devote their time to creative play.

The exhibition, for which the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag has lent 65 works, and which has been organized in collaboration with the **Fondation Constant and the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History)**, is intended to increase public knowledge of this project, which has aroused growing interest among artists, architects and curators in recent years.

The principal nucleus is a vision of the *New Babylon* as a “work of art” within the social context of its conception. All the materials mentioned above are therefore complemented with fragments of historic films, archive materials and two reconstructions made specially for this exhibition, the result of new research carried out for the show. Included are *Een ruimte in kleur* [A Space in Color], an installation originally created for the exhibition *Mens in Huis* [Man and House] at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1952) in collaboration with Aldo van Eyck and Lucebert, and a reconstruction of a section of the *Deurenlabyrinth* [Labyrinth of Doors], whose original was constructed for the *New Babylon* exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum (1974).

However, the show is not limited only to the period from 1956 to 1974 to which *New Babylon* is normally assigned. It also covers other periods with the aim of showing that the ideas expressed in this project were already present in Constant's oeuvre from a much earlier date, and did not completely vanish in the years after 1974.

### **Main steps towards *New Babylon*: 1948-1956**

Although it does not offer an exhaustive overview of Constant's early period, the exhibition illustrates the main steps taken by the artist towards *New Babylon* from 1948 onwards. During the period 1948-1951, Constant formed part of the international CoBrA movement. The Dutch branch of this collective, known as *De Experimentele Groep Holland* [The Dutch Experimental Group], was founded on July 16, 1948. Constant wrote its manifesto, published in the magazine *Reflex*, where he already advocated a new social order and a new way of “making art” inspired by the creative play of children and the so-called “primitive” peoples. In the text, he also

argued that the most important thing for the artist should be the creative act in itself rather than the resulting painting or sculpture. These initial ideas were eventually to shape the concept of *New Babylon*.

The interest of this period lies also in the fact that the pictorial works characteristic of CoBrA, which were paintings expressive of imaginary beings, gave way in Constant's oeuvre to something rather different: the crude reality of war. In his work of the years 1950 and 1951, the artist frequently alludes to the devastating violence of the Second World War, and also to the Korean War, which was taking place at that moment.

Asger Jorn, an old friend and companion of Constant's in CoBrA, invited him in 1956 to attend the third congress of the MIBI (International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus) in the Italian town of Alba. For this reason, Constant and his family lived for several months there, where they observed the wretched living conditions of the Gypsy community. His first model for *New Babylon*, *Project for a Gypsy Camp in Alba*, was inspired by a wish to help improve their situation.

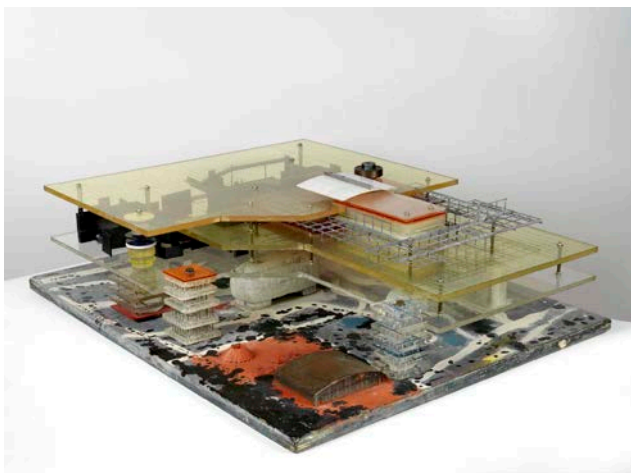
The exhibition also contains a section devoted to the influence on Constant's work of a diffuse cultural imaginary which is potentially identifiable with Spanish culture. The 1956 conferences in Alba, mentioned above, are seen to be of central importance, as is the influence of his dealings with the Gypsies during those months. Constant himself referred to it as the detonator of the *New Babylon* project, and motifs associated with Gypsies, Romanies and Flamenco reappear notably in his work of later years.

### **New Babylon: 1956-1974**

*New Babylon* is related formally with the period 1956-1974, and there is therefore a certain tendency towards a unitary vision of all Constant's production during those years. This does not seem altogether accurate, since a clear evolution is appreciable in his works during this phase. The model designed for Alba was inspired by a firm romantic belief in progress, and the works produced by Constant over the two following years illustrate this positivism. He discovered space as a theme and created his so-called *spatial sculptures* (constructions on the theme of space) owing largely to the fact that space was beginning to be within man's reach.

In 1958, Constant joined the Situationist International of his friend Guy Debord. Encouraged by him, he developed the theory of unitary urbanism, and after reading Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, he started to produce a whole series of models of a new "city". *New Babylon* was going to be a labyrinthine structure supported by pillars. The *Neo-Babylonians* would live in the upper part, while traffic and productive processes, totally automated, would take place below or "in space". The people

would moreover have the ability to modify their environment day by day. They would be nomads, constantly moving from one part of the “city” to another. Freed from the need to work, they would devote their lives to play with a changing group of companions. Everything would be designed to favour life in total freedom and the development of the creative potential inherent to all human beings. Although Constant used the most advanced materials available to him for his models, such as colored Plexiglas, he affirmed that it would be the inhabitants of *New Babylon* who defined the physical appearance of their city, whose form would be much more advanced than he was able to show. Constant used films, photographs and slide shows to emphasize the futuristic character of the city he imagined.



CONSTANT  
*Rode sector*, 1958  
Iron, steel, aluminium, copper, plexiglas, ink and oil on wood  
27,1 x 96,5 x 77,5 cm  
Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

Constant’s *New Babylon* was first exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1959, in a show which persuaded the situationists to organize a major collective exhibition at the same museum. Nevertheless, internal divisions within the group prevented the project from being carried out.

Constant left the group in disappointment because one of the fundamental philosophical principles of

*New Babylon* was that artists could not exist in isolation but had to form a whole with the creative mass of the population. He therefore continued to search for new forms of collaboration. He worked, for instance, with the Dutch left-wing group *Provo*, and even ran for election with the group. The *Provos* in their turn gave part of Amsterdam the name of “New Babylon”. Unfortunately, these ties were also destined to break when it became clear they were separated by unbridgeable philosophical differences.

Since many people interpreted his ideas too literally and tried to apply them in a systematic fashion, Constant ended up resorting more and more to drawing. He made sketches and plans in which he suggested infinite possibilities, demonstrating that *New Babylon* was not merely a city but a new world order that not even he was able to imagine in its entirety. In the late 1960s he started painting again, always taking *New Babylon* as his subject, and turning once again towards reality. Thanks to the use of newspaper cuttings, the Vietnam War became a recurrent motif of many of his collages, and also started to acquire protagonism in his pictorial work. *New Babylon* became a place devastated by violence and looting. In some interviews, Constant declared that he still believed in *New Babylon*, but he no longer thought that

the achievement of a new world order was imminent. In the final phase of his project, Constant depicted destruction in every imaginable form. At the same time, his painting became more and more stylistically traditional, drawing inspiration from the Old Masters.

### **1974 and later years**

In 1974, the Gemeentemuseum organized the *New Babylon* exhibition. Constant intended to exhibit the whole project, but finally renounced the idea. This was not because he had stopped believing in *New Babylon* but because he thought he had already said everything that could be said on the subject. Other people, the *Neo-Babylonians*, could resume the project one day. In this respect, the *Deurenlabyrinth* [Labyrinth of Doors] which concluded the 1974 exhibition, and which is reconstructed here, had a clear symbolic value.

Also included in the show is a small selection of paintings from the 1970s and early 1980s in which it can be seen that *New Babylon* continues to occupy an important place in Constant's work as a "framework" for traditional scenes.

### **Catalogue**

On the occasion of the exhibition, a catalogue is being published in both Spanish and English with reproductions of the works exhibited and texts by the curator, Laura Stamps, Willemijn Stokvis, Mark Wigley and Pedro G. Romero, together with a conversation between Pascal Gielen and Rem Koolhaas and a biography of Constant written by Trudy Nieuwenhuys-van der Horst, his widow and the president of the Fondation Constant. It also includes a selection of texts by the artist himself.

Madrid, October 20, 2015

**For more information:**

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