

The Dialectic of the Experiment, 1965

Constant looks back at the preceding period in his career and the radical transformation that took place in his artistic development during the 1950s. He declares that while he can visualize 'unitary urbanism', the present state of society is fundamentally different from the societal situation essential to the realization of such a revolutionary programme. Consequently, unitary urbanism remains limited to isolated experiments and a programme. The creative process is shifting from reality to a conception of reality. This 1965 text foreshadows the end of the *New Babylon* project, a process that begins in 1969 and becomes definitive in 1974 with a retrospective exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in The Hague.

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'The problematic period in the history of modern art is over and is being followed by an experimental period. That is to say that from the experience (*expérience*) gained in this state of unfettered freedom will flow the rules by which the new creativity will abide. From what emerges, as yet more or less unconsciously, according to the dialectic method, a new consciousness will be shaped.'

This paragraph concludes the manifesto I wrote in 1948 for the 'experimental group in Holland', published in the group's organ, *Reflex*. Now, after 17 years, I feel it necessary to quote these words, not only because they form the best foundation for an explanation of my work since then, but also to put an end to the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that hinder a correct understanding of the cultural situation since the Second World War. When you see art historians and critics insisting on continuing to write about 'experimental art' as though it concerned a particular pictorial style, when you see a uniform mess of 'action-painting' displayed as 'experimental art' in some museums, you realize the extent of the confusion that surrounds this subject. It is high time to establish clearly that **there is no experimental art**, that an experimental art never existed.

The artists who designated themselves with the label 'experimentals' (*experimentelen*) shortly after the war did this in order to express their scepticism about any style, indeed about any stylistic innovation. The experiment is therefore primarily the negation of style. Adventure replaces logical development, ruthless abandon replaces complacent certainty, and the acceptance of the chaotic space replaces the clear line.

Two essential hallmarks of the experiment are named in the quoted text. First of all, the experiment is empirical; it derives its value from experience, the *expérience*. Elsewhere the same manifesto states: 'The act of bringing forth is more important than what is brought forth'. The experience the artist gains through the creative act enables him to elevate himself to a higher level and therefore achieve a clearer picture of himself and of the situation in which he finds himself. The relative nature of the 'artwork' itself, the result of the creative act, is entirely in line with the anti-stylistic character of the experiment. Those who have sought to circumscribe the experiment in order to exploit it – the cultural officials, the dealers and collectors, as well as certain artists – have an interest in denying the relative value of the result. Therefore, it cannot be emphasized enough how from the very beginning,

any style, any aesthetic norm was rejected. In so doing the artists went an entirely new way, a way they continue, by and large, to follow to this day. The artist has refused to be bound any longer to any norm whatsoever; on the contrary, he is reacting violently to aesthetics, in whatever form they take; he focuses all his activity on the annihilation of aesthetic principles.

Indeed, the experimental phase that began after the war is essentially distinct from the episode of the pre-war 'avant-garde'. This distinction is clearly expressed in the second hallmark of the experiment: **the experiment is a dialectical method**. This means that the experiment unfolds along opposite lines and not in a straight line as is the case in the evolution of a style.

The prewar avant-garde groups still based their activity on aesthetic theses which, though they may have differed from one another, were individually determinant for each group. The new element that the experimental artists brought within the culture was precisely the reassessment of aesthetics as relative through the introduction of the aesthetic antithesis.

The antithesis is of course dependent on the thesis that precedes it: the experiment is always based on that which is excluded by the prevailing aesthetics. The moment the existing culture takes possession of the experimental antithesis – the moment the antithesis is thus declared a norm, and people begin to speak of an official, recognized 'experimental art' – a new antithesis is needed in order to continue the experiment. As soon as the anti-style becomes a style, the anti-anti-style emerges, the negation of the negation. When you consider that in the period of cultural restoration following the war – the period in which the experimental group was formed – it was precisely the abstract-geometric tendencies – with De Stijl at the forefront – that set the tone, you can understand why expressionist tendencies predominated among the experimentals of the time. These are not to be seen as typical of experimental activity in any way. They are simply connected to an image of the time and in fact they now seem dated. Equally understandable, however, should be why at the moment when 'experimental art' became accepted as a new aesthetics, the experimental artists shifted the emphasis to anti-expressionist methods.

The experiment can only exist as an antithesis of the prevailing aesthetics; the experiment is therefore essentially dialectical. The moment the creative process is entirely liberated from aesthetic preoccupations, the experiment loses its point and its existence. As this moment approaches, the rhythm of successive antitheses accelerates. We can observe this easily through a cursory study of art history over the last 10 years. We see that every 'new' artistic tendency is more short-lived than the last, that artists ultimately feel compelled – just like fashion designers – to bring out something new every year.

The experimental period in modern art – the last episode of the individualistic culture – therefore shows not a picture of an evolution, as in previous periods, but an accelerated series of antitheses. This series cannot be prolonged indefinitely, of course; this is an accelerated process that must sooner or later reach a climax. This climax will be reached when every style is deemed relative in advance and therefore no norm can be valid any longer, when the antitheses succeed one another at such a rapid pace that it becomes impossible for epigones to take possession of the results of the experiment. At that moment – which has already been reached – thesis and antithesis converge and become synthesis.

The experimental period is followed by a period of synthesis

During this period the individualistic culture will lose its foundation – ‘genius’ will have become inconceivable – individual arts will dissolve, ‘teamwork’ and other forms of collaboration will come to define the image of the culture.

The experimental period is an interim phase between waning individualism and emerging collectivism. So it is not just a period of destruction, of the annihilation of existing traditional art forms. Parallel to this annihilation, other, collective forms of creativity will be shaped, in conjunction with the forming of a new creative consciousness, which was already touched upon in the quoted excerpt above. We can see such forms – however insufficient and incomplete as yet – in the ‘happening’, the ‘ambiance’, the ‘event’. At the same time, the increasing devaluation of aesthetic norms opens the way to all sorts of combinations of styles and artistic media into constructs of a more complex nature. A first step in this direction was the *détournements*, playing with products from previous stylistic periods ripped from their context, as practised by the Situationists. The most radical (hypothetical) synthesis of creative means is the conception of ‘unitary urbanism’. This concept promoted by the Situationists was first clearly defined in an ‘Amsterdam Declaration’ composed by G.E. Debord and myself and published in issue no. 2 of the journal *Internationale Situationiste* in 1958. In it, unitary urbanism is described as ‘the complex, ongoing activity that consciously recreates man’s environment according to the most advanced conceptions in every domain’. This declaration also clearly states that the end of individual art forms is a fact and that the creative people have a new realm of activities to explore. This is no longer about ‘art’ or ‘aesthetics’ but about a much broader concept: the transformation of social life as a whole. The proposed Situationist programme envisions experimenting with the human environment as a whole as well as with new patterns of behaviour compatible with the new decors for life. The ultimate objective of these experiments is the creation of a unitary urbanism. Naturally, such a revolutionary programme can only be implemented in a social situation that is essentially different from the situation in which we live. As long as this new situation has not emerged, unitary urbanism remains limited to a programme and to isolated experiments. This programme, however, forms the only possible basis for the continued development of creative activity. The creative process shifts from reality to a conception of reality. Existing reality has gradually fallen so far behind the reality that is potentially possible that creativity within the context of current social reality is impossible. The culture is becoming ‘utopian’; artists are focusing more and more on projects that for the moment are labelled ‘unfeasible’. Today’s creativity can only manifest itself as an invasion of, a conflict with, the reality of today. The New Babylon plan that concludes this exhibition should be seen from this perspective.

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