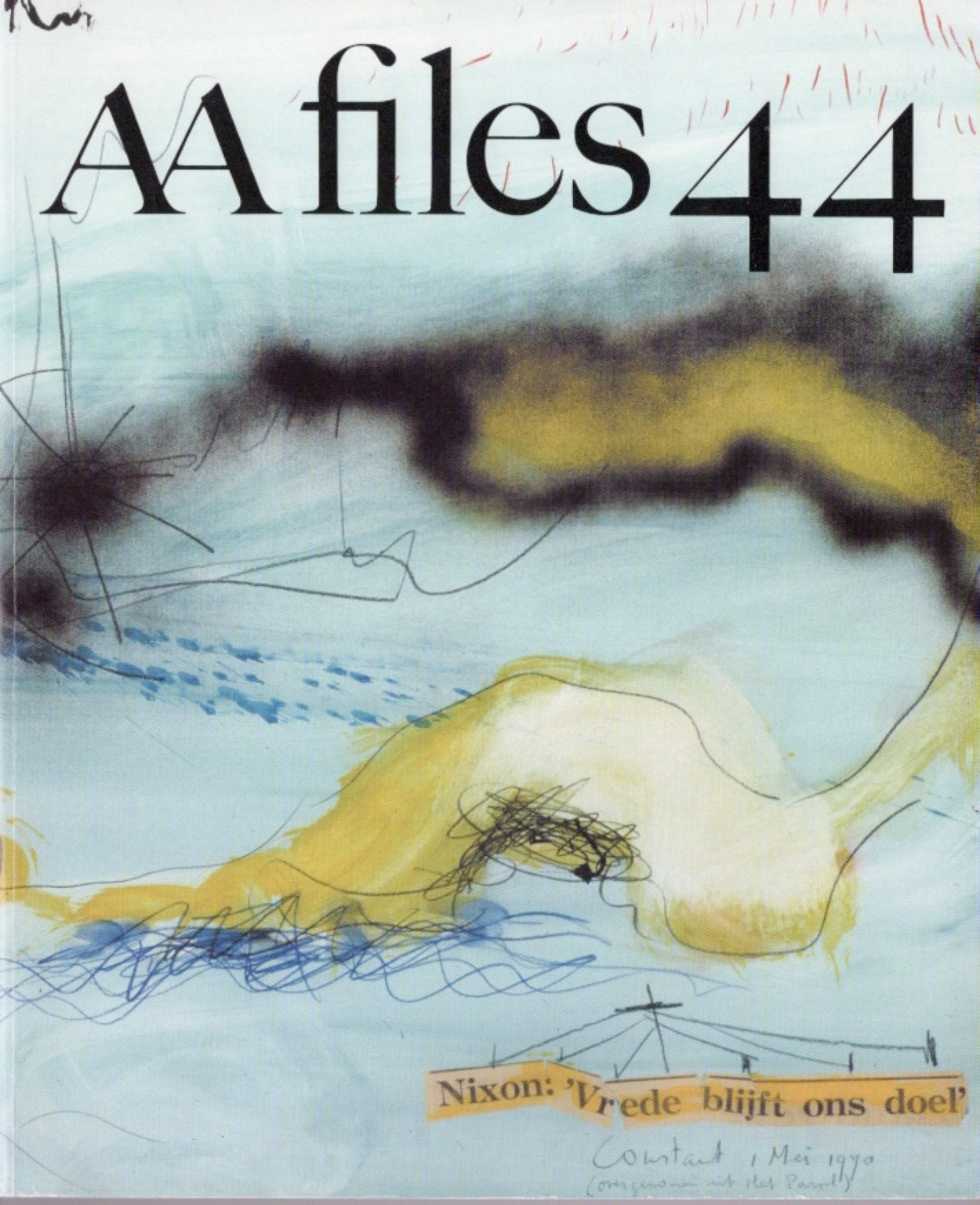


AA files 44



Nixon: 'Vrede blijft ons doel'

Constant 1 Mei 1970
(overgenomen uit het Parool)

No more theory; nothing but practice

Constant after New Babylon

Mark Rappolt

Articles in *AA Files* do not normally require an introduction. It is apparent, therefore, that the following article is both unusual and in need of some explanation. That said, it should come as a surprise to no one that the work of Constant is featured in this journal.

Recent years have seen a rapid resurgence of interest in Constant's New Babylon, the vast, Utopian design of 'another city for another life'. That interest has been manifested in a slew of lectures, conferences, exhibitions and publications on the project. Just two of the latter – Mark Wigley's *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* and Jean-Clarence Lambert's *New Babylon: Constant, art et Utopie* – were reviewed in *AA Files* 41 by Simon Sadler (himself the author of a book that considers the project in the context of Constant's two-year association with the Situationist International).

New Babylon, however, is not the primary focus of the text presented here. There are no illustrations of the models, collages, photographs and drawings that record the project; there is no architecture, only paintings. The text itself records a conversation between Constant and Jean-Clarence Lambert, a poet and art historian who has collaborated with the artist to produce a series of publications that form the most complete record of his production. During the course of their conversation they discuss Constant's work of the last thirty years, starting with those paintings that followed the conclusion of the architectural phase of the New Babylon project (which, having slowly evolved during the 1950s, ended in 1969). What emerges from this discussion is a history of how the paintings of today – bearing little formal resemblance to the imagery of New Babylon – are descended from the earlier project, culminating in Constant's statement that 'today it seems that I've succeeded better in visualizing New Babylon in my paintings than in my models'. In his studio in

Amsterdam, Constant further elaborated on this intriguing statement:

'I stopped making models because they did not give the human perspective. The paintings give a better impression of that. The question was how to introduce life. With my son Victor, I put the models in water and surrounded them with wood. We coloured the water with blues and greens. We looked at the reflections in the water. I tried to introduce life using loudspeakers and sound – music and other traces of life – but it didn't work and I thought it impossible with models. The models were technical and not human. I had worked for one year on the last model, but at that moment I stopped, and started painting. *Ode à l'Odeon* is the first painting I made after that. It is still New Babylon, but filled with people. When I explored my own models I saw things that no one else could see in the models alone. So I thought why not use my own means to convey this instead of the means of an architect. Architects thought I was developing structures, but in actual fact I was developing atmospheres and searching for the presence of life.'

Although phrased in a language that recalls the theories of the *dérive* and of unitary urbanism that Constant developed with Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International, the sentiment of this explanation has much in common with some of Constant's earliest work, as a member of the Dutch Experimental Group and COBRA.

It is a little over fifty years since Constant and his COBRA colleagues first exploded onto the European art scene with the International Exhibition of Experimental Art at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in 1949. In the aftermath of the Second World War, COBRA (the name is an abbreviation of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, the national capitals of the founder members) set out to produce what Constant described as 'the art of a revolutionary period, simultaneously the reaction of a world going under and the herald of a new era'. It was to be a people's art, a union that would be beneficial to both parties: the people

would be granted the right to expression that had previously been the heavily defended prerogative of an intellectual and social elite; and art, placed in the hands of the untrained, would give greater latitude to the expression of the unconscious and, consequently, 'wider perspectives for the comprehension of the secret of life'. With COBRA, painting would stand on the border of art and life. In terms of Constant's production, the twin symbols of this new art were the painting *Barricade* and his famous statement that 'a painting is not a composition of colour and line but an animal, a night, a scream, a human being, or all of these things together'.

Barricade was painted in situ at the end of a corridor that marked the entrance to the Stedelijk exhibition (which was designed by Aldo van Eyck); the letters COBRA were spelled out on the right of this approach. The painting depicts two crudely drawn figures – which, in common with much COBRA imagery, have a slightly bestial character – with bulging eyes and bulbous noses, leering at the viewer from behind two cage-like structures. The central figure, at once threatening and playful, thrusts forward into the gap at the centre of the painting, raises a clenched right fist and punches through the empty space with his left. The painting symbolizes a moment of change and renewal, the festive entry of the people – in their most basic form – into the gallery, an unofficial art cavorting in an official space.

People have remained a key concern of Constant's work, from the collective adventure of New Babylon (which, in the sense that it presents an enormous unofficial public space, is a fulfilment of the promise of *Barricade*) to the paintings of crowds that occupy a prominent place amid his more recent work. *La Foule I* (see page 35), for example, is a perfect articulation of the surrender of the individual to the group: in the foreground there are clear signs of individual difference, primarily articulated in terms of colour

(skin, hair, clothing) and gender. As the eye moves towards the background, these differences are slowly erased, paler colours dominate, washing away difference, detail and merging into the yellow zone of the horizon.

The revolutionary salute of the figure in *Barricade* is repeated in a much later work, *L'Insurrection* (see page 35). Here, however, the carnivalesque spirit that pervaded the earlier work has been replaced by a more violently confrontational atmosphere. A crowd of figures, fists to the fore, chase a small, dispersed group of armed soldiers. This shift is characteristic of Constant's painting since New Babylon. Alongside the festive images of music and love there are the images of a violent world, battered and sore, that is populated by the blank and ghostly bodies of junkies, exiles and orphans. In the case of *Les Enfants Perdus* (pictured opposite), Constant explains how such images come about through the same struggle to capture an essence of humanity that drove his experiments as a member of COBRA and during the New Babylon project:

'On TV I saw children in Romania, gangs of children seated together, and the sense of fear, anger and pity led me to decide that it would be a painting. I thought about it for some weeks and saw an image appear as I started painting. It was a group of children. But gradually they began to disappear until there were only two left. I had also painted a city in the background, as I had seen on the TV, but I thought that it was not appropriate. Those children have nothing. There should be nothing. There is nothing.'

New Babylon was a speculation about a new era. Much of Constant's recent work continues to deal with the animals, nights and screams of the world around him: the failure of the present to provide the conditions for that speculation to become a reality, and an impetus for experiment and change.

The inclusion of the article that follows owes much to the patient help and support of Victor Nieuwenhuijs, Editions Cercle d'Art, Jean-Clarence Lambert and Constant.

Les Enfants Perdus, 2000. Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm.

