

Constant Nieuwenhuys

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A militant founder of the Cobra group of avant-garde artists whose early nihilism mellowed into Utopian fantasy

Soon after the war ended, the Cobra group burst upon European art with anarchic force. The movement's venomous name was an acronym from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, the cities where its principal members lived. And by the time Cobra's existence was formally announced in Paris in 1948, the young Dutch artist Constant had become one of its most militant protagonists.

Constant did not hesitate to voice the most extreme beliefs. Haunted by the war and its bleak aftermath, he declared in a 1948 interview that "our culture has already died. The façades left standing could be blown away tomorrow by an atom bomb but, even failing that, still nothing can disguise the fact. We have lost everything that provided us with security and are left bereft of all belief. Save this: that we live and that it is part of the essence of life to manifest itself."

The Cobra artists soon demonstrated their own exuberant, heretical vitality. Inspired by the uninhibited power of so-called primitive art, as well as the images produced by children and the insane, they planned an idealistic future where Marxist ideas would form a vibrant union with the creation of a new folk art.

Constant, born Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, discovered his first motivation in a crucial 1946 meeting with the Danish artist Asger Jorn at the Galerie Pierre, Paris. They exchanged ideas and Constant became the driving force in establishing Cobra. With his fellow Dutchmen Karel Appel and Corneille (the nom de plume of Cornelis van Beverloo), he ensured that the group's core members "met regularly in the winter of 1947 on Friday mornings in the dole office, in the middle of the fishermen and builders who couldn't work because of the weather".

The following year the Dutch members of Cobra met at Constant's house to found the Experimental Group in the Netherlands. But they were cosmopolitan in outlook, and fascinated by the work of Picasso, Dubuffet and the patients at the St Anne mental institution in Paris.

Constant painted in a deliberately free, rough style, concentrating on leering and voracious animals or a hybrid creature he called Bird Woman. Working with the wildness of an urban graffiti artist, he did not share Appel's passion for colour but favoured heavy linear forms, while also producing refined ink drawings and lithographs. In 1947 he began his prolonged involvement with wire sculpture and assemblies of wood remnants as well.

Travel in the postwar years often proved difficult, but he and his fellow-insurgents made restless trips, held meetings, staged group exhibitions and contributed to the eight clamorous issues of *Cobra* magazine.

Their determination to overcome the repressive influence of class-ridden Western society can be found in the title of Constant's article in the magazine's fourth issue: *It's Our Desire That Makes the Revolution*.

Constant and Appel, who were particularly close at this time, yearned to work on a large scale. In 1949 they collaborated on colossal, freewheeling murals in Constant's Amsterdam house, where monsters pursued wild-haired women across walls and ceilings.

Then, in a remote Danish farmhouse owned by the ceramicist Erik Nyholm, Constant worked with Appel and Corneille on an even more manic sequence of turbulent paintings throughout the interior. They celebrate an overwhelming liberation from the rigid rules of so-called civilised life. Rawness, spontaneity and instinctive appetites are hailed in all these delirious images.

In the event, 1949 was the *annus mirabilis* for Cobra. At the beginning of November, Willem Sandberg, the progressive director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, staged the movement's first big international exhibition. Designed by the architect Aldo van Eyck, the show was pugnaciously defiant. The cover of its catalogue had a photograph of an open mouth sticking out a large, shameless tongue.

Cobra's aim was to affront bourgeois society, and the publication was duly banned — principally because it reproduced Titian's seductive *Venus of Urbino* with an old, contorted head placed on the goddess's body. Rolling African drums accompanied the opening at which the Belgian Cobra artist Christian Dotremont gave a speech deploring "the general curse of these bad times". He concluded that "in the light of this situation a good fat blob of paint acquires its full significance. It is like the scream from a painter's brush."

Visitors to the show were confronted at the end of a long passage by Constant's titanic painting called *Barricade*. Two hideously distorted, rasping figures dominated the canvas beneath a crescent moon. One, clasping the moon's tip with his beefy fist, stirred memories of the communist hammer and sickle in viewers' minds.

Within days the enraged critics attacked the exhibition without mercy, complaining that it contained nothing except "scribbles, claptrap and daubs".

The apoplectic controversy inspired Cobra's members to expand their operations, calling themselves Experimental Artists International. Continuing Dutch hostility prompted Constant, Appel and Corneille to leave for Paris in 1950. Here they occupied a condemned factory building in the seedy, rat-infested Rue Santeuil. But disagreements on fundamental issues

meant that the second large group exhibition, at Liège in 1951, signified the end of Cobra. Afterwards, Dotremont wryly recalled that “Die in beauty was our last slogan”.

Constant, working now in Paris, became obsessed by visions of fear and war. The walls of his small room were painted with these terrifyingly violent images, but from 1952 onwards he recoiled from their traumatic impact.

He now started working towards a vision of Utopia. In 1956 he joined Asger Jorn in the International Movement for a Bauhaus of the Imagination, and a year later he allied himself with the Situationist International. Working now with Guy Debord, he made a series of scale models envisioning an ideal city of the future. He called it “New Babylon”, and looked forward to a time when technology would liberate humanity from drudgery. Widespread creativity, repressed for so long, would thrive.

After this supremely optimistic project in 1969, Constant returned to painting and adopted a more meticulous, traditional style. Cézanne, Delacroix, Rubens and Titian now became his heroes, and Constant’s late work lost its formerly rebellious sting. But his vision of Utopia, where everyone would at last become playful in the fullest sense of the word, never left him. And it chimes, in essence, with the rousing energy of his youthful Cobra adventure.

Constant Nieuwenhuys, artist, was born on July 21, 1920. He died on August 1, 2005, aged 85.