

Constant, Avant le Départ

by Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele
First Run / Icarus Films, Brooklyn NY, 2006
VHS / DVD, 81 minutes, b/w, col.
Sale, \$398; Rental, \$100
Distributor Website: <http://www.frif.com>.

Reviewed by Anthony Enns
Department of English
University of Iowa

anthony-enns@uiowa.edu

The latest documentary by Dutch filmmakers Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele marks a significant departure from their previous work. Their 1995 documentary *I Have a Problem, Madam*, which won the Golden Calf Award for best short documentary at the Dutch Film Festival, examined the struggles faced by Ugandan women in a male-dominated society, and their 2002 film *Made in Holland Wordt Dutch Design* focused on labor issues and globalization. *Constant, Avant le Départ*, on the other hand, is an intimate portrait of Dutch painter Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, who died on August 1, 2005. The film chronicles the last months of his life, as he contemplates death and reflects on his life and work.

In 1948 Constant founded the Experimentele Groep Holland with Corneille, Karel Appel, and his brother Jan Nieuwenhuys. In November 1948 they joined Christian Dotremont, Joseph Noiret, and Asger Jorn to form the CoBrA group. Tensions developed between Constant and Jorn in the summer of 1949, however, when they vacationed together with their wives on the island of Bomholm and Jorn started an affair with Constant's wife Matie, whom he later married. Constant relates this story in the film, noting that Matie took two of their three children with her when she left. He subsequently resigned from the group and abandoned painting altogether, claiming it "had nothing new to offer." [1]

In the 1950s Constant became increasingly interested in urban space, and he began constructing sculptures to express the dynamic experience of the modern city. In December 1956 Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio took him to a gypsy camp, and Constant's models of this encampment became the first in a series of maquettes of an ideal city called "New Babylon where, under one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodelled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale." [2] According to Constant, the modern city ignores the psychological needs of its inhabitants, and New Babylon was designed to meet those needs by infusing creativity and play into the experience of urban life. This theory led Constant to become a founding member of the Situationist International in 1957, and later that year he collaborated with Guy Debord on "The Amsterdam Declaration," a manifesto that emphasizes the need for "collective creativity" in urban planning. [3] Constant remained in the group until 1960, when he was expelled by Debord. Although Debord rejected Constant's New Babylon designs, claiming that he was nothing more than "a *public-relations man* for integrating the masses into capitalist technological civilization," [4] Henri Lefebvre argues that this action was merely a political move to help Debord cement his own authority. [5] Constant discusses his theories of urbanism in the film as he watches his son Victor filming his New Babylon designs, and he adds that this city was never intended to be a prediction of the future but only to show that urban space should be playful, like a game. There is evidence, however, that he was firmly committed to the realization of this project until 1966, when he gradually became aware that automation would not result in "freedom from slavery and toiling," but rather in "poverty and boredom." [6]

Constant subsequently returned to painting, and the film primarily focuses on this part of his career. Constant's work from this period frequently deals with politically engaged subjects, like the Vietnam War, famine in Africa, and refugees from Kosovo, and in the film he discusses both his theories of art and his working methods. He describes how he stares at the blank canvas until an image gradually emerges and how he always begins painting the edges of the frame before moving towards the center. The film also shows Constant putting the finishing touches on his final painting, *Le Piège* (The Trap), and it follows his last visit to see Titian's *La Pietà* at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, a painting which he greatly admires and which he once studied for days at a time. Looking over his own oeuvre, Constant discusses his favorite works and claims that the best paintings "with great simplicity illustrate maximum expression"—something that few painters ever accomplish. Although he hesitates to say whether any of his works achieve this goal, it appears that a similar aesthetic also informs Schmidt and Doebele's film. While their approach is extremely simple and straightforward, the end result is a profoundly moving portrait of the artist at the end of a long and successful life.

References

1. J.-C. Lambert, "Constant and the Labyrinth," *Situationists: Art, Politics, Urbanism*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, trans. Elaine Fradley et al. (Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani, ACTAR, 1996) p. 100.
2. C. Nieuwenhuys, "New Babylon," *Constant: New Babylon* (Den Haag: Gemeentemuseum, 1974), rpt. in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, trans. Paul Hammond and Gerardo Denís (Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani, ACTAR, 1996) p. 154.
3. C. Nieuwenhuys and G. Debord, "The Amsterdam Declaration," *Internationale Situationniste* Vol. 2 (December 1958), rpt. in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, trans. Paul Hammond and Gerardo Denís (Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani, ACTAR, 1996) p. 80.
4. G. Debord, A. Kotányi, and J. Nash, "Critique of Urbanism," *Internationale Situationniste* Vol. 6, 3-11 (August 1961), rpt. in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, trans. Paul Hammond and Gerardo Denís (Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani, ACTAR, 1996) p. 109.
5. K. Ross, "Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview," *October* Vol. 79, 69-83 (Winter 1997) p. 76.
6. S. Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998) p. 153.