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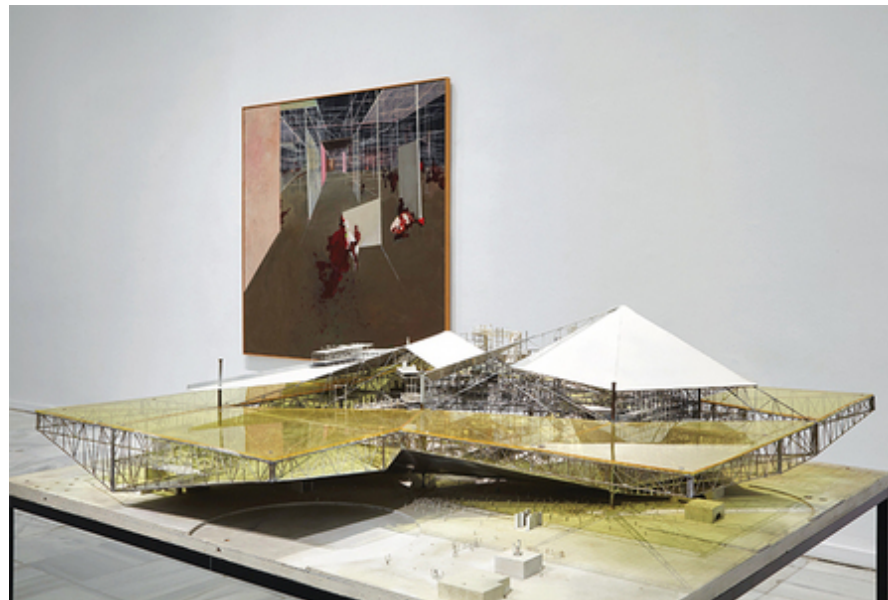
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MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE ARTE REINA SOFÍA



View of “Constant,” 2015–16. Foreground: *Grote gele sector (Large Yellow Sector)*, 1967. Background: *Entrée du labyrinth (Entrance to the Labyrinth)*, 1972. Photo: Joaquín Cortés.

New Babylon, the interdisciplinary project created by the Dutch artist Constant between 1956 and 1974, remains one of the most singular, ambitious, and self-critical architectural visions to come out of the cultural ferment of the period: a liberatory vision pursued in the form of tabletop models, architectural renderings, films, collages, written descriptions—even paintings, despite his avowed rejection of painting at the time. Constant’s idea was to transform the world into one global, interconnected city characterized by continual migration and spontaneous play. Strategically opposed to the rational measures of postwar reconstruction, New Babylon simultaneously conveys the inherent dangers of realizing such a dream. “Constant: New Babylon,” which will travel to the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in the Netherlands in May, did not shy away

from the paradoxes inherent in such a project, but illuminated its productive multiplicity through a detailed examination of the work's trajectory.

The exhibition, curated by Laura Stamps and Doede Hardeman, presented New Babylon within the larger context of Constant's evolution from the Cobra movement (1948–51) to his return to painting starting in 1969 and his disillusioned abandonment of the New Babylon project in 1974. During the Cobra period, his groundbreaking paintings of symbolic violence and confrontation reconfigured the political insights of Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, currently on view in the museum's permanent collection. Around 1952, however, Constant turned to the very geometric-abstract art that Cobra had critiqued. Expertly installed, the exhibition revealed hitherto unrecognized continuities that span such apparent contradictions, illuminating the full range of the experiments that he designed to both reenvision and reshape everyday life.

The exhibition meticulously reconstructed for the first time two Dutch museum installations, *Een ruimte in kleur* (A Space in Color), produced in 1952 with architect Aldo van Eyck and the artist and poet Lucebert, and *Deurenlabyrinth* (Labyrinth of Doors), which concluded the final exhibition of New Babylon in 1974. The vivid purple and blue walls and ceiling of the 1952 installation allowed viewers to imaginatively enter into the unorthodox ambiances proposed in the rest of the exhibition. *Deurenlabyrinth* features hinged L- and T-shaped temporary doors. Though adapted for current museum codes (recalling movable segments of the white-cube gallery, its doors do not fully close), it nevertheless conveys the frisson of moving through a disorienting space defined by unexpected encounters with strangers. The exhibition also includes models for the playful installations Constant produced in Amsterdam in the 1960s, at the first moment when such aleatory spaces could enter the museum, simultaneously enlivening it and becoming domesticated by it. These reconstructed experiments convey the ongoing importance of the museum as a space for the hypothetical exploration of alternate realities.

A room devoted to Constant's experiences in Italy, in 1956, just before the founding of the Situationist International, productively links the ideas underlying New Babylon to the artist's transformative encounter with Roma culture, whose political cause was championed by Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio in Alba. Constant's experimental model of a Roma camp relates directly to his later designs for monumental circulatory spaces that hypothetically colonize existing cities in the name of nomadic freedom.

In Constant's hands, the tabletop model, the speculative architectural drawing, and the slide show became tools with which to address the question of how to design an architecture that people can continually redesign themselves. His photomontages and dramatically lit models of fantastic suspension structures raise the key question of utopian versus dystopian futures, revealing the fact that any large-scale architectural intervention radically constrains human existence even when it attempts to liberate it. The more he attempted to envision the reality of the inner spaces of New Babylon, the more it became defined by images of torment and brutality. As the 1960s drew to a close and the Vietnam War raged, he realized that his architectural visions could only remain utopian—at least for the moment. Inspired by new technologies, children's play, and neo-Marxist theories of the ideal society, Constant argued that the most important act was creation itself. Art should not depict it, but unleash it; architecture must not limit behavior, but make everything possible.

—*Karen Kurczynski*