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Economies of the Wild:

Speculations on Constant's *New Babylon* and Contemporary Capitalism

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1. Beginning New Babylon, or, 'Speculative Art History? What did you expect?'

In 1958, the Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), who usually went by the name of Constant, designed a temporary habitation for a group of Roma people based in Alba, Italy. It was to be a flexible and transportable construction; a sort of tent, easy to take apart and easy to rebuild but big enough to shelter the entire Roma community that would be traveling with it. The design, though never executed, was the beginning (the prequel, one is tempted to say) of a much more ambitious and far more comprehensive project: New Babylon.

Part architecture, part painting and part writing, New Babylon is the name for an entire ecosystem of ideas, aesthetic visions, conceptual fragments and architectural images.¹ For a period that lasted over a decade Constant concentrated all of his efforts on elaborating New Babylon in writing, through painting, collages, composite maps, lithographs and in architectural scale models. His writings give an exposition of the urban planning behind the new, global city that was to be New Babylon. In his essays, Constant describes New Babylon's ingeniously constructed, air-conditioned atmospheres, its economic and technological foundations and how these would require the abolishment of capitalism as we know it. The paintings and lithographs that belong to the New Babylon series give us a view of the city from different angles and in varying lighting conditions, a crucial aspect of the atmospheric design Constant had in mind for his city. What is striking in this regard is that the colours in these painting are reasonably subdued, with Constant opting for egg yolk yellows and differing shades of ochre and amber rather than the more saturated primary colours we have come to associate with utopian painting since modernism. And yet Constant's colours vibrate; they appear to emit light, reminding one of the darker colourism of the later work of Titian (the

¹ A large number of the New Babylon series, 72 works in total, are in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (The Netherlands). The inventory and images can be consulted online: <http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/en/masterpieces/themes/new-babylon>.

quality of which is still the subject of debate).² As such, subdued but vibrant, these paintings give the viewer an aesthetic sensation of the new, transmutable atmospheres and living spaces that New Babylon would consist of. More reminiscent of constructivism, Constant's scale models represent sectors, intersections, and plazas of the future city; together with the paintings and drawings, these scale models give an idea of how it would feel to move through the city and to change its architecture based on one's needs (a happy privilege of its users).

In sum, New Babylon comprises a decade of work: theoretical work, artistic work but above all, and more to the point, the work of imagination. I believe that the best way to talk about New Babylon and do justice to its consistency and diversity is to refer to it as a body of works (paintings, collages, drawings, scale-models, writings...) that constitutes an ecosystem of ideas on the nature of art, creativity and a post-sedentary society. As such, New Babylon is what the art institutions of our times would call an artistic research project.³ Only this time around, we are not dealing with the neoliberal cul-de-sac of contemporary knowledge production that wishes to subject even aesthetic knowledge to the barren strictures of contemporary capitalism; this time, we are dealing with the real thing: an audacious and wildly imaginative research project that can serve as an antidote for despondent resignation to the rules of neoliberal research poisoned by ideologies of market and measure. New Babylon is an artistic research project purposely working in multiple artistic mediums at the same time; it employs and puts to work the distinct forms of conceptual and aesthetic knowledge that writing, architectural design and painting can produce to patiently close in on its goal: a radical critique of existing society that takes play and creativity as the principles for political change.

This sort of speculative, multi-medial way of elaborating an idea is driven by what I want to call an economy of the wild: an economy of knowledge in which aesthetic and conceptual insights interact, are rubbed against each other, collide as well as collaborate with

² For Constant's early ideas on color, see his essay "On spatial Colorism", an English translation of which can be found in Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (010 Publishers: Rotterdam, 1998). On Constant's love for Titian, see the interview by Hans den Hartog Jager in *Verf: hedendaagse Nederlandse schilders over hun werk* (Atheneum: Amsterdam, 2011) and Thomas Doebele's documentary *Avant le départ* (Amsterdam, 2005), in which Constant visits and discusses Titian's *The Entombment* (ca. 1520). On the importance and aesthetic controversy around the later work of Titian *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, ed. by Sylvia Perino Pagden and Giovanna Nepi Sciré (Marsilio: Venice, 2008)

³ In today's educational context, the idea of artistic research has become the favored strategy of art institutions to legitimize their educational programs. The proliferation of MFA programs in artistic research in Europe and elsewhere may partly be thanks to the fact that the pedagogy and methodology behind it remained undefined whereas its rhetorical power, its legitimizing force seems to be phenomenal. A cursory look at the rhetoric in writings on the topic paints a bleak picture. Artistic research, one reads, is a 'social innovation', something that 'does not imply strict rules, but basic guidelines' (See Mika Hannula, 'River Low, Mountain High: Contextualizing Artistic Research', in *Artistic Research*, ed. by A. Balkema & H. Slager (Rodopi: Amsterdam 2004)); and 'not knowing what exactly artistic research is, is a good thing', in fact it is a 'challenge' (Michael Swab in the editorial to the inaugural issue of *JAR: Journal for Artistic Research*, 2011, URL: <http://www.jar-online.net/index.php/issues/editorial/480>). All of this may be true, but it has not stopped the educational apparatuses to define research in a narrow way, along the lines of market and measure.

no predetermined outcome, but with the aim of producing a rich reserve of aesthetic and political insight – each insight a fragment from the collision between different regimes of knowledge and imagination, triggering reflection on art, artistic research and creativity both in the 1960s and in our own time. Understanding knowledge production as an economy, Steven Connor pointed out more than two decades ago,

allows and obliges the critic [or, in this case, the artist-researcher - B.I.] not only to order and distribute the elements of his field of study in an inert relationship of equivalences and distinctions, but also to show the processes of exchange, circulation and interested negotiation which brings these relationships dynamically into being.⁴

As a rule, such artistic research projects arise from concerns inane to the social formation of the times. This is, in any case, how I choose to understand Marquard Smith's suggestion that 'each historical moment has its own epistémè of re-search.'⁵ The research undertaken by Constant via New Babylon adumbrates the endeavor of the 1960s counter-culture to think the impossible, to go beyond capitalism by recalibrating ideas of communality, creativity and urbanism. But because of this historically determined 'epistémè of re-search', New Babylon also speaks to our own times, which seem to maintain a privileged relation with the 1960s: the 'Sixties' dream of a society revolving around creativity and flexibility, mediated by non-hierarchical 'spaces of flow', has become our reality, its cognitive and epistemic tactics have become our nightmare.⁶

The best way forward, I believe, is to see whether we can develop an art historical heuristic that will allow us turn this double-edged dream-cum-nightmare of the sixties and our current juncture into a productive knowledge constellation; that is to say, a form of looking, reading and writing that makes possible a critical speculation on the conditions and imminent future of our own social formation, our own regimes of thought, urban life and economic production. In New Babylon, dream and nightmare congregate around the notions of creativity and flexibility, the principles for an exodus away from capitalist oppression for Constant, but the leading principles for contemporary capitalism's advancement and integration into even the smallest fibers of our social lives. Like Constant's New Babylon project, the structural role contemporary capitalism grants to flexibility and creativity were made possible through a series

⁴ Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992), pp. 57-58

⁵ Marquard Smith, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History: The Work of Research in the Age of Digital Searchability and Distributability', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2013, nr. 12, p. 377.

⁶ This is arguably one of the most forceful conclusions of Fredric Jameson's analysis of capitalism and culture in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso: New York, 1999). For a less explicitly Marxist approach to the appropriation of the counter-culture of sixties by postmodernist epistemic principles see Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Duke: Durham, 2004).

of ongoing technological innovations. While Constant's analysis of the 'age of automation'⁷ led him to predict that 'creativity' would transform from the exclusive property of artists into a general and democratized good of all citizens, leaving behind the strictures of a capitalist modes of production and top-down urban planning, we must draw a different conclusion. Creativity and flexibility, both flourishing in urban centers all over the globe, are today at the very heart of contemporary capitalism, their tyrannical force being due to it having superseded top-down planning.

In the form of capitalism that today shapes the material grounds and cognitive horizon for our political imagination, citizens mostly reside in (the close proximity of) a medium-sized city that is connected to other cities scattered over the globe by means of communication networks; and in these cities they are continuously tested on their skills for creativity and flexibility, both in the workplace and at home. Today, indeed, creativity and flexibility have become the pinnacles of a new form of capitalism. For the purpose of this essay, I will call this contemporary capitalism. Giving it the predicate of 'the contemporary' I want to raise awareness that the social and economic principles of creativity and flexibility, proper to capitalism today, tend to hold us capture in the *here-and-now*, in the 'not too distant future', in short: the contemporary, thereby short-circuiting our political imagination. Why would that be? The short answer, for now: today's laborers (cleaners, sales agents, writers or teachers) all work from 'project to project', projects being medium-sized tasks that require collaboration and the success or failure of which is own responsibility. It is 'the project' that generates the moral virtues of contemporary capitalism (creativity and flexibility) and it impoverishes our political imagination. It does this by its double take on time: everything is on short-term basis, yet at the same time, we need to rush from project to project, get involved in multiple projects at the same time, overlapping each other, and so on.⁸

My hypothesis is that 'the project', and thus the dictate of the contemporary, is what determines our own historical 'epistémè of re-search'. To contrast this with the *uncontemporary* elements we find in a work of art like New Babylon, that is what to my mind constitutes the task of a speculative art history.

⁷ Constant, 'Unitary Urbanism', p. 148.

⁸ In *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2014), Judy Wajcman studies how 'the rhythm of our lives, the very meaning of work and leisure, is being reconfigured by digitalization.' Unlike most recent studies on accelerated capitalism, which focus on how the individual subject or worker manages her time, Wajcman's study focuses on the time squeeze with the household as her unit of study. This allows her to demonstrate that the flexibility and creativity required of today's workers is not restricted to those working in the tertiary sector, or even to workers per se; it but has become a generalized conditions to which every member of the average household in the United States and Europe has become subjected.

New Babylon enabled Constant to elaborate upon ideas on architecture and urban space that would have never been possible had he been a practicing architect or urban planner.

Understandingly, though, critical attention for the project came from historians working in these domains.⁹ Some of Constant's writings on New Babylon also appear in anthologies on situationism, a movement that he helped found but quickly abandoned.¹⁰ But what if we wish to take New Babylon for what it is, an interdisciplinary and multi-media artistic research project? What if we wish to develop a historical heuristic that takes New Babylon for the artistic research project that it wanted to be? And what if we wish to bring the ideas and insights of New Babylon to bear upon our own time? How would we go about developing such an approach to art?

Frankly, that seems an audacious undertaking, perhaps impossible to execute because New Babylon spans over a decade and consists of essays, roughs and drafts executed in different mediums spinning off in multiple directions. That is to say, it is difficult precisely because New Babylon's ideas and insights result from a recalcitrant collision between different artistic mediums and their corresponding regimes of knowledge. In the remainder of this essay, I have a less ambitious aim: to take just one strand of thought from New Babylon's wild economy of ideas, to hold it up against the context of its own time and then to discuss it in conjunction with our own time. My reasons for insisting on reading New Babylon as a map to the present, my reasons for treating this project as our 'uncontemporaneous contemporary', as it were, have everything to do with how I believe we should give meaning to the concept and practice of speculative art history. Rather than using the speculative to gain free-passage to the metaphysical domains of the good, the beautiful or the sensory, far removed from anything approximating history, I am more interested in speculating on the *radical historicity* of works of art such as New Babylon to see how their ideas, not in spite of but of because of their very historical situatedness, reverberate in our own time and become the starting point for breaking with tyranny of the contemporary, for a 'resistance to the present.'¹¹ This must also mean that speculative is not only reserved for the critic or historian, whose task it is not to remain stuck in the disciplinary deserts of either historicism or formalism, but to establish a 'diffractive conjunction' between the aesthetic and political moments she find in a work of art and the

⁹ The most comprehensive study of New Babylon is by architectural historian and critic Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (010 Publishers: Rotterdam, 1998), another treatise on New Babylon in the sphere of urban theory is the section devoted to it in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (M.I.T. Press: Cambridge, 1999), p. 122.

¹⁰ For example, a transcript of Constant's 1960 lecture "Unitary Urbanism", which outlines the economic and urban principles of New Babylon, was published in Mark Wigley's *Constant's New Babylon* and then reprinted in Tom McDonough's reader on *The Situationists and the City* (Verso: New York, 2009) pp. 112-122.

¹¹ I am borrowing this expression from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Verso: New York, 1995), p. 104

political moment of her own time.¹² The speculative must also be present in New Babylon. And is teased out precisely through a dynamic conjunction of two political and aesthetic moments executed through analysis and interpretation: the aesthetic and political momentum of New Babylon, on the one hand, set to work against the aesthetic and political impasse of our own time on the other. While this diffractive reading must organize itself around the concepts of creativity and flexibility, our task is to show the distinctive approaches to those concepts in contemporary capitalism and in New Babylon. The best way to drive home this distinction is by looking at the how New Babylon arranges the concepts of creativity and flexibility not around the coordinating concept of the ‘project’ but around a politicized idea of play. Play, or more accurately, the politicization of play as the starting point for political and aesthetic critique, is what lies at the heart of New Babylon.¹³

2. Politicizing play

In reality, the modern urbanist regards the city as a gigantic centre of production, geared to the efficient transport of workers and goods, to the accommodation of people and the storage of wares, to industrial and commercial activity. The rest, that is to say creativity, life, is optional and comes under the heading of recreation and leisure activities.

The fact that constant growth in leisure time in this age of automation poses an acute problem, that young people are protesting more and more vociferously against the interminable boredom of present-day life, must in itself be sufficient reason for us to overhaul those famous urban planning functions and to resist a view of the city as a machine for living, a “machine à habiter” as Le Corbusier put it.¹⁴

New Babylon was not simply the result of Constant’s enduring dissatisfaction with the principles of modern urbanism and the International Style of architectural design. He was not averse to the specific technical advancements achieved by urban planners in the first half of the

¹² The metaphor of diffraction was introduced by Donna Haraway and adopted by Karen Barad, who defines her ‘practice of diffraction’ somewhat noncommittal as ‘reading diffractively for patterns of difference that make a difference’. See the interview with Karen Barad in *New Materialism: Interview and Cartographies*, ed. R. Dolphijn & I. van der Tuin (Open Humanities Press: Michigan, 2012), URL:

¹³ In what follows I focus on the political potential of Constant’s idea of play, which leaves me little room to discuss the influence of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938), on Constant’s idea of play. Nevertheless, an obvious starting point for a further analysis of play in Constant’s work would be a comparative reading with Huizinga.

¹⁴ Constant, ‘Unitary Urbanism’, in *The Situationists and the City*, p. 114.

twentieth century, just as he was not dismissive of avant-garde movements and its relevance for the early twentieth century. But the specific procedures they developed led to a form of calculated top-down planning that resulted in seemingly functional but in reality, restricting and deterministic grids. Constant's endeavor was to recuperate these technical advancements while starting out from a very different approach to city life.

The city, Constant argued, 'is not a functional object.'¹⁵ By the middle of the 1930s, however, and under the influence of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) led by the influential architectural historian Siegfried Gideon and the well-known architect Le Corbusier, city planners in the Netherlands were busy designing the extension plans of demographically booming cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam. In accordance with the principles of the 'functional city' that were outlined in the CIAM's Athens Charter from 1933, of whom he was one of the main contributors, Amsterdam's city planner Cornelis van Eesteren had begun to implement his plans for an enlarged Amsterdam, the environment in which Constant would spend his teens. But Van Eesteren's solution to the social and demographic challenges of Amsterdam were inspired by the calculated and blueprint oriented, top-down form of urban planning typical of the CIAM.¹⁶ Constant's approach to the city would be very different. The city, he argued, should be approached as 'a plaything'.¹⁷

To understand New Babylon and its strive for a creative and flexible living environment the concept of play is key. What Constant rejected was the top-down, inflexible nature of the functional city as much as the predictability of it. It confined users to living in a blueprint, predesigned by one man in a specific historical and political moment. It does not invite to play. Allowing for little improvisation, and functionally designed only with the dominant economic and social system in mind, the functional city must be rejected, Constant concluded. But to reject it means that we labor on an alternative; and that task, he argued, also requires us to analyze the economic conditions under which change becomes possible. My aim below is to show that Constant's coupling of economic and aesthetic concerns are brought together under the heading of play. Play is, as it were, the paradigm around which the critical task of New Babylon (to analyze its own political moment through multiple artistic media) and its aesthetic task of New Babylon (to imagine a different future by gathering different forms of knowledge and playing them off against each other) are congregated. Together, and precisely because of

¹⁵ Constant, 'Unitary Urbanism', p. 114.

¹⁶ For an excellent overview of Cornelis van Eesteren's work as Amsterdam's city planner and as one of the intellectual forces behind the CIAM, see Kees Somer, *The Functional City: The CIAM and Cornelis van Eesteren, 1928-1960* (NAi Publishers: Rotterdam, 2007)

¹⁷ Constant, 'Unitary Urbanism', p. 114.

their discordant, fragmentary take on a unique historical moment, they constitute an economy of the wild.

Constant quickly realized that the economic conditions that would make play possible would have to be very different from the conditions upon which mankind had hitherto been forced to build its society. Instead of an economy of scarcity, play requires an economy of affluence. If there is affluence, that means that there is an affluence not only of goods but also of time: time to spend on other activities than labor and the manufacturing of goods, as there are plenty; in other words, leisure time, or indeed, time for play. Only under such conditions does it become possible for play to be the basis of society. Adopting a discourse and research approach that is closely aligned with the kind of New Left Marxism that was freeing the theory from its restrictive and outdated jargon, Constant analyses the ‘means of production’ of existing societies and queries the changes in technology from the past two centuries.¹⁸ In his book-length study on the subject, *Opstand van de Homo Ludens* (1969), Constant concludes that the changes in technology have led to a boost in productivity, making the time ripe to overthrow capitalism as we know it in favor of a society based on play.¹⁹

To understand this congregation of divergent ideas and insights a little better, I will discuss a part of *New Babylon* that up until now has received very little attention in art history: the writings that belong to the project. My reasons for zooming in on those writings have not only to do with the fact that they have been undervalued; more importantly, I think that reading Constant’s ruminations on *New Babylon* attentively we can come to understand why Constant believed that *New Babylon* was not just an utopian dream but the articulation of a possible future for society in the mid-1960s. This seems striking, and it is, of course; but perhaps not entirely, as at the very least it is worth pointing out that Constant’s methods are widely different from those of utopianism.

The distinctiveness of the approach taken by Constant - so very different in so many respects from other writings of situationism but so familiar with its discourse and desires as well²⁰ - is brought out splendidly in his criticism of ‘social justice’. All uprisings against the powers that be, Constant explains, were motivated by a desire for social justice. But he quickly adds, ‘in times when there is a shortage in productive capacity, justice for all means scarcity for

¹⁸ Constant’s essays bear some resemblance to the work of Herbert Marcuse in the way they combine cultural analysis with an interest in technology and economy, though it is notably less critical. For Marcuse’s writings on technology and play, see

¹⁹ Constant, *Opstand van de homo ludens* (Brand: Bussum, 1969).

²⁰ To get an idea of how Constant’s work on the city compares to that of Guy Debord, for example, a comparative reading of Debord’s ‘Introduction to a critique of geography’ and Constant’s ‘Unitary Urbanism’ would be very productive. For both texts, see *The Situationists and the City*.

all.²¹ In a society dominated by scarcity and poverty, there is little room for play. The implications of this idea are far reaching, at least for Constant. One of its conclusions, not stated explicitly by Constant but, I believe, implied in the quote below, is that the political imagination of modern utopianists has hitherto been shaped around the presuppositions and conditions of a society struggling with scarcity, which forced them to translate their liberatory ideas into rigid, inflexible economic regimes of control. In times of scarcity, Constant writes,

social justice inevitably means giving up on play, on creativity and culture. The Utopia of Thomas More is a strictly organized labor camp where individual freedom has been sacrificed for the good of productivity. The only ‘play’ known to Utopia is the allegorical fight between virtue and vice, which always ends in a victory for virtue and has *therefore bereft play of its very essence.*²² (Italics added)

So, what is essential to play in Constant’s opinion? The answer to that question must allow for the beginning of our analysis of *play*, both in Constant’s work as in our understanding for speculative art history.

It seems to me that the answer must be that, for Constant, the contingency of play is its essence: the contingency of play taking place, as much as the indeterminacy of its outcome. If we bring this to bear upon the concept of politics that can be inferred from New Babylon, then conclusion seems that in New Babylon *the outcome of a political struggle - which is to say, the outcome of an argument or disagreement within a community, as much as the fact that it takes place at all - must be contingent, undetermined.* Or else, New Babylon is just another utopia.

This is the first step in my reading of Constant’s concept of play. The fact that it was developed in the context of the New Babylon project, seems to imply that it has an important role in it. I would go as far as to say that with Constant’s concept of play, we are at the heart of the paradigm that lies behind New Babylon. For our political imagination, however, indeterminacy and contingency had remained unimaginable as long as the conditions of productions did not change. During the last century, Constant argues, technological advances in the means of production, or the ‘era of automation’ as he more generally calls it, have opened a window for radical political thought to escape it being determined by scarcity. With the possibility of a transition from an economy of scarcity to an economy of affluence, human beings not only acquire more free time; more essential is that the concept of play as an

²¹ Constant, *Opstand van de Homo Ludens*, pp. 52. My translation.

²² Constant, *Opstand van de Homo Ludens*, pp. 52-53. My translation.

undetermined, contingent activity, now moves to the very heart of New Babylon's conception of politics.

Constant's writings on New Babylon and its playing man are guided by an astute awareness of the interdependence between economic and social formation of a community and its way of organizing its use of creativity and political imagination. 'Professional artists', he argues, 'are the product of a specific financial economy.'²³ The era of automation and its effect on art unfolded in two stages for Constant. In the first stage a large amount of capital is required to create the necessary infrastructure for automated production; and this leads to the decline in investment in art, which in turn leads the artists to dissociate themselves from the ruling classes. Artist now became more sympathetic to the laborers working in poverty. I doubt, though, that this part of Constant argument is tenable. At the very least we must observe that the market for art grew explosively in 19th century Europe. At the same time, cities such as Paris, London, and Berlin witnessed a geographic boom and a democratization of its educational institutions in art. That dissymmetry that existed between these two, a growing market and a growing supply, along with the very unpredictability of success, is most likely what led a number of experimental painters to associate themselves with the workers and its movements for social justice.

The most important point for Constant's New Babylon project, however, is that the postwar era signaled the beginning of a second phase of the era of automation. While the avant-garde reached its zenith in the interwar years, we can simultaneously witness the rise in production made possible by new technologies and forms of organization in the workplace. But the impact on culture of technological advances in the workplace, in infrastructure and in transportation, only becomes clear during the decades following the Second World War, when Europe's and Asia's economies were rebuilt. Countries like West-Germany in the West and Japan in the East quickly developed their own economic strategies for recovery (ordoliberalism in the case of Germany, the just-in-time Toyota strategy of Japan). Further advancement in the technology of production, Constant optimistically concluded in his writings of the 1960s, can only lead to a reduction of human labor involved in the production process, and that will leave all of us with a lot of time on our hands. This is why at this point, Constant argues, creativity and flexibility can both become the general property of all citizens and the way they spend their lives. What once belonged exclusively to the artist (creativity) or to urban man (flexibility), now becomes available for everyone; and the reason is, indeed, the rearticulation of time in an affluent society like New Babylon, which now becomes available in large amounts for all.

²³ Constant, *Opstand van de Homo Ludens*, pp. 31. My translation.

This concept of time, once again, changes the nature of play, making it possible for play to become a political concept. Play is now not only understood as contingent; it is also understood as delimited, generalized. While in a society that operates under the conditions of scarcity time is a valuable good because of its scarcity, time loses nothing of its value in New Babylon's affluent society. Quite to the contrary the fact that it is available in large amounts alters the nature of time and what takes place in it, such as play. Play can take several hours, several days or just a brief instant; and it is, as I pointed out above, always contingent. This constitutes the second part of my interpretation of play in Constant's New Babylon project.

Together, these two principles - the contingency of play and its creation a political moment which time is stretched, being available in large amounts - are the basis for a politics of play developed by Constant through New Babylon. operating alongside of each other, these two principles create a politicized concept of play that I believe can be brought to bear upon the concept of project that dominates contemporary capitalism. Play, though similar to the project in its use of creativity and flexibility, is also able to constitute a radical aesthetic and political critique on the project precisely because of its alternative notion of time. Unlike the multitude of professional projects we must undertake in contemporary capitalism, projects that constantly overlap and require us to rush from one task to the next, New Babylon's generalized condition of play escapes the principles of scarcity and moral responsibility that shape the concept of a project in today's economic and social formation.

The figure of the artist, has as much been determined by the social and economic formation of the West as anything else. In an economy of scarcity only very few resources can be spent on art. Accordingly, being an artist remained an exclusive, lonely and somewhat adventurous occupation for the daring few. With the increase of free time, in the case of New Babylon at least, the situation changes. But not necessarily to the favor of the artist. In fact, for Constant the generalized creativity that has been made possible through the advancement in the technologies of production, not only lead to a change in society as we know it; they also signal the end of the figure of the artist that is coterminous with this society. This has an impact on how Constant develops the architectural and painterly forms of knowledge production that also belong to his project but to which I have not paid any attention yet.

In a society that no longer holds a meaningful role for the artist and his products of singular aesthetic beauty, the employment of aesthetic activities such as painting must now be distributed among its citizens. In fact, aesthetic activity and play lie in each other's conceptual proximity. Play is nothing but a generalized condition of what we also find in an aesthetic situation: creative employment of the imagination, absence of predestined purpose and a lack of an interest in it, the feeling of pleasure in all of its different forms, and so on.

When one looks closely at the paintings, drawings and scale models of New Babylon, what strikes the eye is that Constant then developed these in accordance to the principles of play that I expounded upon in this essay. This means, for example, that New Babylon is not an architectural project for a new city in the normal sense, since it does not want to predetermine the use and modulation of space and light that is usually seen as the task of an architect and city planner. At best, Constant's scale-models give us a fragmentary idea of the architecture of New Babylon, showing us only how the most basic supporting structures rise up from the ground and reach into the sky to support a platform on which the daily life of New Babylon's inhabitants will take place. Constant's scale-model for the Yellow Sector of New Babylon for example, designed in 1958 and in the permanent collection of the Gemeentemuseum The Hague, shows a transparent juxtaposition of overlapping plexiglass roofs, divided into different multifunctional space through the use of simple metal structures on each of the platforms. New Babylon's reality, its bustling activity, necessarily remains an abstract reality for the viewer; but in New Babylon's actual reality, the users of the Yellow Sector can change it in accordance to their needs. This sort of unpredictable, flexible architectural environment is, indeed, what the iron supporting structures are supposed to make possible. As an artist-designer, then, Constant's maquettes are experiments in designing for creative citizens rather than for passive consumers. As such, they are fragments from an alternate political imagination, guided by play rather than scarcity.

Constant's roughs and drafts for New Babylon focus on the supporting structures of the different sectors of the city. But unlike the scale-models, his sketches and lithography's possess a dynamic quality, as if they were moving, bristling with life. Ladders are found everywhere, connecting one platform to the next, shooting off in multiple directions; and the business of the transportation arteries of a sector are rendered visible by means of expressive lines that suggest rapid, continuous movement. This is the main task of the sketches and lithographs: not just to give another, two-dimensional idea of what the sectors of New Babylon look like, but to render visible its state of flux and continuous activity. The paintings that Constant made throughout the sixties, finally, all attempt to capture an atmosphere of New Babylon.

3. Living, 2015 A.D.: aesthetics and the architecture of capitalism

From the very start of his career, Constant had been a prolific artist writer and organizer. In the late 1940s he collaborated with the Danish painter Asger Jorn to establish the Cobra movement, for which he also drafted a manifesto. On a national level, Constant had been actively involved collaborating with Dutch poets and writers to establish the 'experimental group', for which he

also wrote several texts and founded a journal (*Reflex*). That Constant would continue to write while working on *New Babylon* is therefore not so surprising. But what distinguishes his writings on *New Babylon* from his earlier manifests, is that they now form an intrinsic part of his artistic inquiry. Constant used these writings to elaborate the principles of the new society that *New Babylon* would be, and he was able to do so by developing a notion of play that not only altered the principles of politics and economy, but also the role of the artists and architect itself. On the basis of this altered role of the artist and architect, Constant developed what I insist on calling an artistic research project.

If we now take a step back to ask what Constant's *New Babylon* tells us about the relevance and therefore import (though not necessarily impact) of art for our own times, in our own entrenched fields of knowledge acquisition - then what can we conclude? The speculative element of *New Babylon* is not only to be found in the interpretation of the critic or art historian; and accordingly, its relevance for our time cannot only be accounted for by the keen interest of a critic who desires to read Constant's project in conjunction with our own time. The speculative element of *New Babylon* lies in how it chooses to deal with the aesthetic and politics of its own time. Herein lies the import of a project like *New Babylon*: combining different artistic media, it not only produces different forms of knowledge proper to these media; by playing off against each other the moments of fragmentary insight that each sketch of *New Babylon* produces, the project becomes a *work* of art, something that takes on a life in our mind and sparks our imagination in unexpected ways. As such starting to function as a work of art, an *oeuvre*, rather than a static object that lends itself to creative analysis.

The more we view of *New Babylon*, the more sketches and scale-models we study, the longer we ponder over Constant's use of color and how it tends to break with a modernist tradition in colorism (a tradition which, if we stop to think about it, has had a notable influence on the meaning we tend to attach to color, even though it represents only a very small part of painterly tradition: the post-Courbet and pre-Constant era), the more *New Babylon* becomes a *paradigm* for artistic research project. Only this time, the paradigm dictates that an artistic research project engages itself with its own time in such a way that it rethinks the premises of one's time through the prism of different artistic media and the different forms of knowledge that they can yield. As such, an artistic research project like *New Babylon* necessarily remains a singular, indeed aesthetic undertaking: no general laws of research can be inferred from it, and its engagement with its own time makes it highly particular or situated.

And yet this last observation deserves some qualification. Looking at the principles for urbanism that Constant developed through *New Babylon*, we cannot fail to notice that a good deal of those principles has actually been realized: flexibility of space, so-called spaces of flows, migratory possibilities etc. *New Babylon* almost reads like a blueprint for post-industrial

society. And in a way it is. Only, the ideas that Constant (and many authors and artists of the 1960s along with him) articulated were at that particular time elements of a moment; they constitute a political moment.

As it turns out, capitalism is very adept at recuperating those moments and aligning them with its own course of action. But so, perhaps, is art, or certain artistic researches, such as New Babylon. *New Babylon* brings together fragments of a political and aesthetic moment: fragments from the specific social formation of the Netherlands (a country that was struggling with a spectacular demographic and urban growth and was forced to review its entire urban planning system demographic in the mid 1960s), fragments from life in Amsterdam (a growing city that would soon witness one of the first counter-culture movements of the sixties, the Dutch Provo's which, not surprisingly, would embrace *New Babylon* as their ideal society); but also remnants from a wider, more sociological discourse on the rise of the post-industrial society (Bell), the tertiary industry, immaterial labor and the New Left in general. And yet to bring this to the attention of the reader does not yet make for a speculative art history; what would make it speculative, is if we would delve into *New Babylon* to find those ideas, sentiments and of the time reflected in it in such a way that they turn into truly novel, new ideas that can help us understand our own political and aesthetic moment. In the case of New Babylon, I believe its acuteness for our own moment lies in its creative employment of ideas of flexibility, flow and bottom-up approaches to social issues. Admittedly, if we stop to think about it, *New Babylon* paints a pretty bleak picture for us: many of its creative and exuberant ideas have in the meantime been appropriated by capitalism, the very system Constant thought would be overthrown by New Babylon. In the neoliberal situation we have nothing but flexibility. But at the same time, New Babylon's concept of play allows for a counter-narrative to the project-based work frenzy of contemporary capitalism. It provides an element of the un-contemporaneousness in a world and economic system dominated by the tyranny of the contemporary. As such, it was and remains a speculative project.