



## Baseltopia: Searching For Utopia (and Dystopia) at Art Basel 2015

The great hall of the world's most influential international art fair might seem like the last place one might find utopia. Indeed, it almost seems antithetical to the art fair environment, as a realm of commercial activity predicated on exclusivity and lavish displays of luxury it is hardly the setting for utopian ideals (unless your idea of utopia includes sold-out booths and a fully stocked VIP lounge). While the fair itself might not serve as the inspiration for a utopian society, several projects at this year's Art Basel invoke the notion of the imaginary, the ideal, and the impossible.

Natalie Hegert / MutualArt

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Constant working on *Ovoid Construction*, 1957. Courtesy Collection Fondation Constant; © Constant/Fondation Constant c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2015. Photo: Tom Haartsen.

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*DO WE DREAM UNDER THE SAME SKY*, Rendering, 2015. Courtesy Rirkrit Tiravanija, Nikolaus Hirsch, Michel Müller and Antto Melasniemi.

Before entering the fair proper, visitors will encounter a *DO WE DREAM UNDER THE SAME SKY*, a project by Rirkrit Tiravanija in collaboration with German architects Nikolaus Hirsch/Michel Müller and Finnish chef Antto Melasniemi. Housed under a modular bamboo and steel structure installed on the Messeplatz at the entrance to the fair, Tiravanija's project operates under the principles of a sustainable, ecological, community-minded, self-sufficient sharing economy—a kind of inverse of the economy of the art fair inside.

Under its bamboo scaffold, visitors are encouraged to partake in the communal offerings of Thai food and fresh herbal tea, gathered from an on-site garden and brewed in water heated by solar energy. There is no set menu or price list: in lieu of the exchange of capital, compensation for these communitarian comestibles is self-determined by the consumer, who can make a donation, or even help in the cooking, serving, or washing up. *DO WE DREAM UNDER THE SAME SKY* forms an extension of *the land*, an artistic community located near Chiang Mai in Thailand, founded by Tiravanija and artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert, that “engages with the idea of an artistic utopia” built on and actively exploring models of ecological sustainability. It might seem a rather unsustainable practice to commission a large-scale structure under which fair patrons and artists will practice a utopian gathering during a week-long art fair, but the materials will be reused: at the end of the fair’s run, the installation will be dismantled and then shipped to Thailand, where they will serve as the basis for the construction of a new workshop building for *the land*.



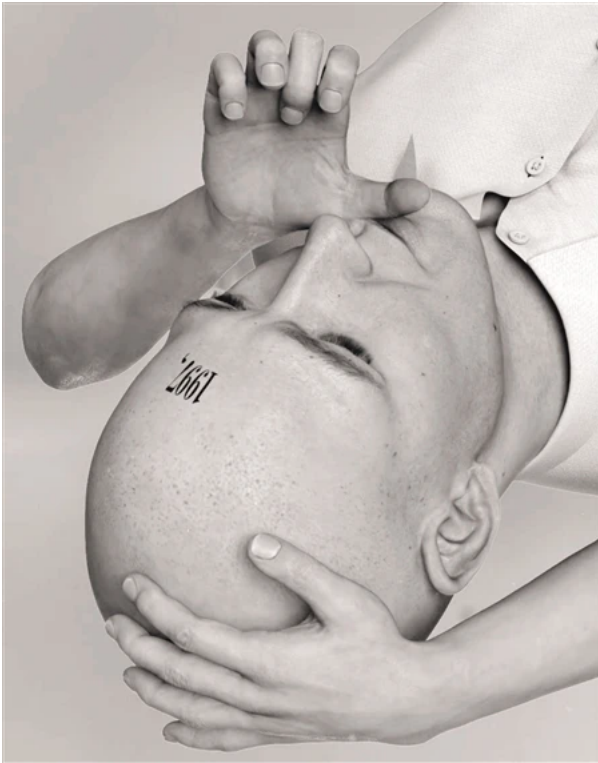
Constant, *Grundriss New Babylon über Den Haag (New Babylon over The Hague)*, 1966. © Constant/Fondation Constant c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2015. Photo: Tom Haartsen.

Artists have been imagining utopia since the term was coined centuries ago, but few have dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to its practical design. One such artist was Dutch artist-architect Constant, who spent the years 1956 to 1974 designing and theorizing a radical vision of a utopian urban environment he called *New Babylon*. Visitors to Art Basel will be treated to an unprecedented gathering of Constant’s architectural models, paintings, drawings, photo collages and other works, some previously unseen, presented by Amsterdam-based Borzo Gallery, in the Features section of the fair. Constant, a one-time member of the CoBrA group and the Situationist International, proposed that people of the future, freed from menial labor by mass automation, would engage in a nomadic existence, drifting through sectors of the city in search of play and pleasure, denoted by shifting zones of light and color. Constant expressed his expansive vision of a new urban environment through the innovative use of unconventional and industrial materials like metal, concrete, Perspex, and plastic. He eventually ceased working on the *New Babylon* project, realizing that the current social conditions of humanity would not support such a revolutionary program, and resigning the project to the realm of the utopian—an imaginary ideal. Part of Art Basel’s Salon Program includes a talk concerning Constant’s *New Babylon* on Thursday, June 18, from 6-7pm.



Kader Attia, *Arab Spring*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua; Photo: © Oak Taylor-Smith 2013.

The line between utopia and dystopia is notoriously thin, and utopian ideals often propel acts of violence and vandalism. Kader Attia's large-scale installation *Arab Spring* (2014), which is included in the Unlimited sector of Art Basel, presented by Galleria Continua, seizes upon a moment of revolutionary iconoclasm, where utopian desires turn destructive. Attia's installation, comprised of the same glass display cases that were destroyed at the Egyptian Museum during the riots of the 2011 Arab Spring, which he ritualistically breaks with bricks and stones in a performative reenactment of the raid, brings to mind the tenuous grip humanity holds on its own history, and its readiness to destroy that history in the hope for something new.



Ed Atkins. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet.

But the ultimate defining characteristic of utopia, and its converse, is its non-existence. The word “utopia” in fact derives from the Greek for “no place” (the word “dystopia,” meaning “bad place,” arising from the confusion caused by the homophonous “eutopia,” or “good place”). In a sense, then, a “utopia” could be any fictional world, existing in the future, in a parallel universe, or even just in the imagination. At the same time, its definition seems to predicate that any utopia is also an impossibility, existing only in a hypothetical space. That imaginary space, where conjecture conspires to show us what “could be,” is, of course, fertile territory for art that revels in such speculative future thinking. This kind of hypothetical, future-facing work will certainly be encountered in many forms at Art Basel, from the digital surrealism of Ed Atkins (presented by Cabinet in Unlimited) to the precarious constructions of Sarah Sze (presented by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery).



Sarah Sze, *Model for a Second Chance*, 2015. Courtesy the artist and the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.

Alyson Shotz's *Imaginary Sculptures* (2014-2015, presented by Carolina Nitsch Gallery), like all utopias, exist only in language. Installed throughout the city, part of the Parcours program of Art Basel, simple signs with short texts describing imagined sculptures that acknowledge the theoretical sculptures' implausibility as actual artworks—"a sculpture made of a cloud" or "a sculpture that is dispersed in the air"—while opening the mind to the possibility, inviting the viewer to imagine if such a thing could, in fact, possibly be.



Alyson Shotz, *Imaginary Sculptures*, 2014-2015. Courtesy the artist and Carolina Nitsch.

Art Basel is open to the public from June 18 – 21, 2015 at Messeplatz Basel. The floorplan is available [here](#).

Art Basel Parcours is installed around Basel's Münsterplatz, and is free and open to the public. A map to the installations can be [downloaded here](#).

*DO WE DREAM UNDER THE SAME SKY* is free and open to the public daily from June 14 – 21, 2015.

–Natalie Hegert

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## Related Artists





**Ed Atkins**

British, 1982

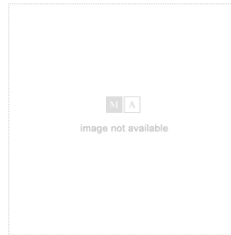
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**Kader Attia**

French, 1970

**FOLLOW**



**Nikolaus Hirsch**

**FOLLOW**



**Kamin Lertchaiprasert**

Thai, 1964

**FOLLOW**

