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Mapping Utopias: From New Babylon to Black Rock City

Abstract: New Utopian plans for liberated urban spaces emerged during the post-war era with the work of the Lettrist (LI), Situationist International (SI), and specifically Constant Nieuwenhuys, a Dutch painter turned architect and sculptor who understood urban planning as intimately linked to nomadism, play and creativity. Influenced by the bombed detritus of European capitals and the possibilities of new technology, Constant's plans for a future society were post-revolutionary, with unseen automated factory production and spaces for innovation that were elevated on stilts. Constant's conflicting ideas are referenced and emulated in Black Rock City – a short-term encampment erected every year for the Burning Man festival in the desert of Nevada. These multileveled zones would allow for the blurring of public and private space as well as zones of work and leisure.

Keywords: Utopia, metropolis, nomadism, play, spectacle

“Sedentary man is dying out; we are becoming nomads once more, wandering over the earth, not looking for rest but for dynamic motion.” – Constant¹

Burning Man – a temporary metropolis with a city plan, laws, sanitation, safety, gift economy and emergency system – is the playing out of earlier Utopian city plans within a 21st century model. As an intentional community it functions to create a social order and provide a zone-based structure for its inhabitants. Unlike earlier precedents, this Utopian experiment operates within compressed time – lasting for one week before it is then disbanded. The ability of Black Rock City to appear and disappear proposes an alternative model for the waning possibilities of more permanent Utopian structures.

New Babylon was a twenty-year visionary project that resulted in drawings, assemblages, sculptures and paintings – but no permanent structures. Originally called *Dériville* or Drift City, it was renamed after the biblical Babylon that had negative connotations. Constant believed that through its rebirth it could assume positive,

¹ Constant, “On Traveling,” *Studio International* 185 955 (May 1973): 229.

Utopian associations. The basic premise of New Babylon is the creation of new mega structures that would be erected above the common, bourgeois world. By participating in the endlessly transformative structures, one could live a life free from the restrictions of existing society. This physical liberation would result in a psychological arena for play and creative activities. New Babylon, the technological modern metropolis, is comprised not of neighborhoods or communities but of “sectors [...] of total liberation. People inhabit an environment that is entirely free of oppression and over which they have full control. With the press of a button, they can adjust the level of temperature, the degree of humidity, the density of smells and the intensity of light; with a few simple operations, they can alter the shape of a room, deciding whether it is to be open or closed.”²

Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys (1920–2005) was born in Amsterdam. After one year at the *Kunstnijverheidsschool* (Arts and Crafts School) he attended the *Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunst* (State Academy of Fine Arts) graduating in 1941. After the war, Constant travelled to Paris where he met Asger Jorn (1914–1973) – a friendship that would become a seminal artistic association. In 1948, Constant, Jorn along with Christian Dotremont (1922–1979) and Joseph Noiret (1927–2012) formed CoBrA – a name made from the first letters of their hometowns. The group of artists worked collaboratively from 1948–1951 on projects that emphasized freedom of expression and a childlike approach to art making. He understood, like other artists of his generation, that “art has a liberating function because it stands on the opposite side of a suppressed society; it is deeply connected with the public’s daily life and has an inherent characteristic of ‘catharsis’, like describing a good society and identifying with freedom.”³

New Babylon and other Utopian projects borrowed key ideas from new technology, science fiction and other literary genres, utilizing them as jumping off points – a way of moving from text and the imagination to a physical manifestation of the future. Clifford Simak’s 1952 novel *City* was one of those seminal texts that grounded artists and architects interested in post-war urban plans. Simak’s writing, which focused on the use of technology as a form of liberation, was picked up by Constant and incorporated into the plans for New Babylon. Simak (1904–1988) was an American science fiction writer whose best-known work, *City*, is a compilation of short stories that focus on the exodus from earth through time travel. His interest in technology and time travel, the ability to jump to different worlds, is one of his key literary tropes. In the *City*, ants overrun the earth while only robots and intelligent dogs are left to tell the stories of humans.

By 1952, Constant’s interest shifted from painting to spatial architectural and three-dimensional sculpture – an evolutionary move that embraced new ideas about Utopian places and the promise of technology. “While the evolution of knowledge could partly explain the scientific renewal in the art of the mid-20th century, the Utopia of a

² Hilde Heynan, “New Babylon: The Antinomies of Utopia,” *Assemblage* 29 (April 1996): 28.

³ Ding Guoqi, “Art’s Commitment to Liberation in Marcuse’s Philosophy,” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 7 (2015): 30.

new world and a new man following two world wars was also important. There are many ways to show that this political utopia, where science [...] appeared as a sort of guarantee against fascism and dictatorship.”⁴ Constant’s urban plans for New Babylon, which grew and evolved from the 1950s until the 1970s, were in direct contrast to Le Corbusier’s much more Cartesian concept for the immovable Radiating City, which he based loosely on the human body – foretelling the burning man effigy at Black Rock City. This interest in public space would form the foundation for the Playa at Burning Man where one can “sense, displace, create play space and perform art space.”⁵ For many members of the counterculture it was time “to stop talking about the future and actually make it happen: no more speculation, no more paper Utopias.”⁶

Homo Ludens (Man as Player)

Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), the Dutch historian and cultural theorist, wrote in depth about the relationship between art, play and spectacle – a central theme for the Situationists and specifically to Constant. Huizinga promoted the use of play as a primary component in the construction of culture – a key concept evidenced in New Babylon and Black Rock City. His most influential work, *Homo Ludens* (Man as Player) was published in 1938 and was a seminal work in the history of games. *Homo Ludens* formed the basis for Constant’s experiments with New Babylon – a Utopian city structure that allows space for play. The melding of Huizinga’s *homo ludens* and Constant’s New Babylon became one of the foundational belief systems for the Burning Man Festival at Black Rock City – an anti-consumerist space where “the line between work and play is blurred.”⁷

Working in the late 1950s, Constant produced countless plans and models in his obsessive pursuit of New Babylon, in which the supports take on a positively historico-philosophical significance. New Babylon was designed around “a network of enormous multilevel interior spaces [that] propagate so as to eventually cover the planet. These interconnected sectors float above the ground on tall columns, while vehicular traffic rushes underneath and air traffic lands on the roof. The inhabitants drift by foot through the huge labyrinthine interiors, perpetually reconstructing every aspect of the environment by changing the lighting and reconfiguring the mobile and temporary walls.”⁸

⁴ Camille Prunet, “The Living in Art since the 1960s: A Deep Link to Politics,” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 7 (2015): 59.

⁵ Pauline Maclaran and Stephen Brown, “The Center Cannot Hold: Consuming the Utopian Marketplace,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, 2 (September 2005): 320.

⁶ Alastair Gordon, *Spaced Out: Radical Environments of the Psychedelic Sixties* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), 122.

⁷ Robert V. Kozinets, “Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, 1 (June 2002): 24.

⁸ Mark Wigley, *Another City for Another Life: Constant’s New Babylon* (New York: The Drawing Center, 1999), 4.

Most of New Babylon's designs were focused on the concept of change and personal choice as the key factors in a Utopian social order. "The uprooted and nomadic life of the New Babylonians, free to roam and alter their surroundings at will. Liberated from work, no longer tied to fixed places of habitation, relieved of the oppressions of the family structure, the citizens of this new community would be free to abandon themselves to the *dérive* and the play spirit."⁹ The constantly shifting environment of New Babylon made possible a psychological liberation from the constraints of a stable and predictable daily life. It offered the promise of true freedom based on play, the gift economy and personal choice.

Constant's New Babylon believed in the power of technology to make an artificial paradise or "world interior [...] in which all the rooms are air conditioned, with artificial lighting and atmosphere; staying there would be tantamount to existing within an architectural rhizome that constantly meanders and drifts unpredictably."¹⁰ The inhabitant of New Babylon was free to drift and play with no need for a stable home. New Babylon was also "a dynamic labyrinth that is always being restricted by the spontaneity and creativity of its inhabitants, who lead a nomadic existence based on a continual rejection of convention and of any form of permanence."¹¹

Cacophony Society and Anti Consumerism

Inspired by Constant's New Babylon and the Situationist International, the Cacophony Society anti-consumer neo-anarchists formed a later version of a club at San Francisco's *Communiversity* – a free, alternative school that began in 1969 at San Francisco State University. As a loosely affiliated group they drifted across the city as "regular explorers of San Francisco's stranger and more out-of-the-way abandoned buildings, stores and bridges and provided a ready support group of friends and helpers for any artistic endeavors any one of them might be planning."¹² Their ideas about staging and performing events, like those of many other Utopians, were based on literary and cinematic references which they envisioned coming to life.

Andrei Tarkovsky and the *Stalker*

The 1979 science fiction film *Stalker* would be seminal in the development of the Cacophony Society and later Black Rock City – the conceptualization of the zone,

⁹ Libero Andreotti, "Play-Tactics of the *International Situationniste*", *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 56.

¹⁰ Stefan Zweifel, Juri Steiner and Heinz Stahlhut, ed., *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimmur Igni – The Situationist International, 1957–1972* (Utrecht: Centraal Museum, 2007), 97.

¹¹ Heynan, "New Babylon: The Antinomies of Utopia," 28.

¹² Brian Doherty, *This is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 39.

“that looks like the rest of the world, but in which bizarre, inexplicable things occur.”¹³ The Russian Dystopian film, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, is based on *Roadside Picnic*, a science-fiction novel by brothers Boris and Arkady Strugatsky. The film’s main character, the Stalker, named after Rudyard Kipling’s *Stalky and Co* stories from 1899, is the guide for the journey of the Professor and the Writer – two lost souls in search of inspiration and fame. The Zone’s central area (repeated as the Black Rock City *playa*), referred to as the Room, is a magical space in which wishes are granted to anyone who can enter its parameters. It is “an animate space at once external and internal to the protagonist and modifiable according to his state of mind.”¹⁴ The Room’s otherworldly properties are based on an understanding that we have conscious and unconscious desires. The characters in the film are veiled behind pseudonyms during their journey to the Zone – a practice that will be repeated in Black Rock City, where participants assume alternative identities during the duration of the Burning Man experience.

San Francisco’s Burning Man

Inspired by Huizinga, Constant and the *Stalker*, Larry Harvey and his friend Jerry James founded Burning Man in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco – a counterculture nudist enclave near the Golden Gate Bridge. “It was 1986 and the summer solstice came around [...] so Larry approached Jerry and with no specific reason or motive suggested they build a figure of a man, take it to Baker Beach, and burn it [...]. It was a spontaneous act of radical self-expression.”¹⁵ By 1990, the Baker Beach Burning Man event had grown and “many attendees took to crawling along the bluff overlooking the shore in order to see the spectacle.”¹⁶ By chance, some of the founders of the event became “familiar with [...] Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, a dry lake bed around 100 miles northwest of Reno – a vast, lifeless, cracked void.”¹⁷ During Labor Day weekend in 1990, a trip was planned to the Nevada desert, with the following announcement: “An established Cacophony tradition, the (*Stalker*) Zone Trip is an extended event that takes us outside of our local area of time and place [...]. We will be accompanied by the Burning Man, a 40 foot tall wooden icon which will travel with us into the Zone [...]. This excursion is an opportunity to leave your old self and to be reborn through the cleansing fires of the trackless, pure desert.”¹⁸

In the mid 1990s the loosely organized Burning Man event turned into the

¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴ Simonetta Salvestroni and R.M.P., “The Science Fiction Films of Andrei Tarkovsky,” *Science Fiction Studies* 14, 3 (November 1987): 300.

¹⁵ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 28.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

Burning Man Project as plans for the annual event became more systematized and complex and included a newspaper, *The Black Rock Gazette*, and a promotional organization. “By 1996, Burning Man had owners and an organizational chart. The art party had morphed into a business.”¹⁹ Burning Man, afraid of liability, got an insurance plan and a company was formed to run the business of Burning.

No Spectators

By 2000, Burning Man had begun to seriously organize as an experiential business with a clear set of rules including: “No Spectators (an injunction to participate; No Vending; Radical Self-Expression, Radical Self-Reliance, Piss Clear (an indicator that body hydration has been maintained by drinking water frequently) and Leave No Trace (ecological responsibility for removing your own garbage.)”²⁰ The once loose affiliation of Cacophonists was turning into an organized Limited Liability Corporation with guidelines and liability waivers. The physical layout or urban plan for Black Rock was crystalized in 1999, when the event took on its current ground plan – “a closing circle with the Man at its center and gap behind him.”²¹

As Burning Man grew and developed, moving from San Francisco to the Nevada desert, it also expanded from three days to a week and from 80 people to 70,000 citizens. The demographics of the Burners had also changed – shifting from Bay Area hippies to techies from Silicon Valley. By 1996, the techies chose Burning Man as the place to relax and engage with their primal selves as well as network with likeminded coders and hackers. Burning Man, although promoted as a chance to unplug, has also become a type of incubator for new ideas. “Elon Musk credits his time spent at Burning Man for the idea behind Solar City, and the developer of Couchsurfing.com says Burning Man’s gift-based economy inspired his free-lodging service.”²²

Fly Ranch as Satellite Utopia

Recently, the word is out that Burning Man is spawning an ancillary permanent community ten miles away from its current site in Nevada. “Surrounded by the Jackson Mountains, the Black Rock Range, the Granite Range and the Calico Range, the Black Rock outcropping and prostrate plaza at its feet serve as the visual locus on an enormous desert [...]. It is here that people escape the concrete canyons and grids of

¹⁹ Ibid., 96.

²⁰ Robert V. Kozinets, “Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, 1 (June 2002): 24.

²¹ Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 149.

²² Trevor Hughes, “Burning Man lures techies with siren song of going unplugged,” *USA Today*, August 26 2015.

time-managed lives.”²³ It reminds us of New Babylon which “ends nowhere (since the Earth is round); it knows no frontiers (since there are no more national economics) or collectivities (since humanity is fluctuating). Every place is accessible to one and all. The whole Earth becomes home to Earthlings.”²⁴

The satellite location, called Fly Ranch, has amenities including hot and cold springs and active geysers. The plans for the new site could include an annex or arts center for the Black Rock City community. The grounding of the event into a solid and permanent site, even if auxiliary, opens the door to the possibility of calcification and ultimate obsolescence. Unlike New Babylon, which remains Utopian as an imaginary, unbuilt space, Black Rock City can become rooted. Utopia, by nature, is fleeting, and slipping into the space of permanence with solid buildings, organizations, roads and administrative hubs piles a level of Dystopian nostalgia onto the creative possibilities of the Burning Man Festival.

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²³ Peter Goin, “Where the Pavement Ends,” *Geographical Review* 92, 4, (October 2002): 545.

²⁴ Constant, “New Babylon,” in *The Theory of the Derive and other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, ACTAR, 1996), 158.

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