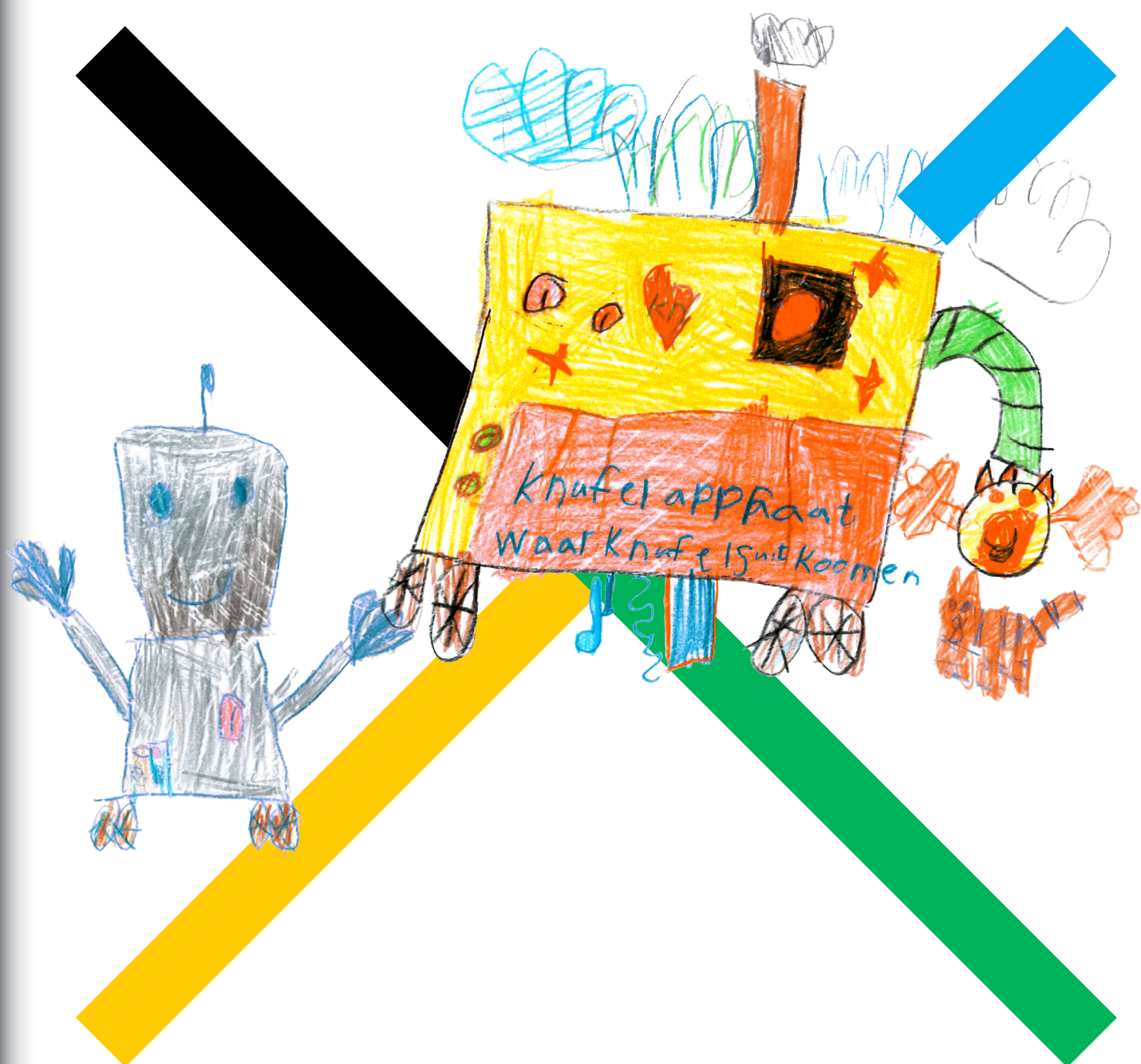


The Polyphonic Object



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Curator

Tom van der Molen has a PhD in art history, and a specialist in Govert Flinck. Tom is senior curator at the Amsterdam Museum and coordinator of the research stream on 'storytelling and collection' at the AMResearch Center. He specializes in unveiling the untold stories of history and historical artifacts, focusing on migration, identity, and social change to show how these forces have shaped Amsterdam's evolving urban landscape. He is a favored writer and guest lecturer at universities and cultural institutions.

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Amy Brookes (she/her) is an architect and lecturer in architecture. As an educator, she explores the role of narrative and empathetic engagement in design, using science fiction literature to provide a critical point of reflection on cities we currently inhabit as well as the future worlds we may be constructing. As a researcher, she examines the way in which the fictional worlds we construct influence and reflect the world we inhabit, writing about utopian thought and the imaginary in architecture through science fiction literature and film.

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María Mazzanti is an architect, editor, and educator based in Amsterdam. She works across publishing, critical spatial practices, and writing, often collaboratively, translating research into public formats, shareable narratives, communicative objects, and publishing frameworks for collective engagement. She is an editor at large in *Failed Architecture* and the managing editor of *VOLUME* magazine. She teaches in the interior architecture departments of the Bachelor program at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the Master's program at the Sandberg Instituut. She was a research fellow in the same institutions between 2021-2022. María has taught at Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, the University of Antwerp, the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, the Aarhus School of Architecture, and HSE University in Moscow, among others.

Doi
doi.org/10.61299/oA5523Atk76

Plan for a new babylonic structure on the territory of current Amsterdam

Amsterdam Museum Journal

In 'The Polyphonic Object', three analyses by experts from different perspectives and (academic) fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their practical and theoretical analyses, they uncover the different stories behind *New Babylon* by Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys who worked on this project between 1956 and 1974. He envisioned a Utopian future of interconnected cities where land is collectively owned and labor automated allowing the population to "play", inspired by Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.

Issue #6 Summer 2026



© Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005)

Plan for a new babylonic structure on the territory of current Amsterdam, 2021

Amsterdam Museum, purchased from the artist, 1968

Between 1956 and 1969 Constant Nieuwenhuys developed his vision of New Babylon: a future city that would enable a new type of mankind: creative, playing and nomadic. In 1968 he made this sketch of the New Babylonian structures, called sectors, on the map of Amsterdam, a commission from the museum.

Tom van der Molen (Curator)



Fig. 1 During the opening exhibition of the Amsterdams Historisch Museum in the former city orphanage Queen Juliana of the Netherlands (on the right) and director Simon Levie (to her left) study Constant's *Plan for New Babylon*, 1969. Archives of the Amsterdam Museum.

Playing with ideas of a future city

In 1968, the Amsterdam Historical Museum (now Amsterdam Museum) gave a commission to Constant (1920-2005) to project his vision of the future, New Babylon, on the city of Amsterdam. It was quite a literal projection: the museum ordered a large photograph of a map of the city through the municipal office of city development and sent it to the artist (Haak to Constant, 1968). The artist used it to draw sectors of New Babylon on it, with colored pencil, India ink and watercolor. In a calendar for the year 1971 published by the city of Amsterdam, the work was reproduced for the month of December and accompanied by an explanatory text by Constant himself:

"The map shows a comparison between a city for a sedentary (working) population and the New Babylonian network, interwoven from sectors that are uninhabited but traversed by a nomadic population of 'homini

lidentes.' New Babylon has been called a 'play city.' If one assumes that life is play, then one might more accurately use the term 'living city.' The cities built and being built in utilitarian society permit life at most, and even then, life in the limited sense of a struggle for existence. New Babylon emerges after the revolution that puts an end to this struggle and opens the way for the unfolding of creativity, which is what will truly make life human life. The sectors of New Babylon form the artificial world that man creates for himself as a backdrop for this creative unfolding, as an instrument and as a medium."

New Babylon was thus intended to make a new type of society possible, and even a new type of human. It would be a society where automation had made human work unnecessary. Instead of working, mankind would play. Constant was inspired by Johan Huizinga's famous book on the playing human, *Homo Ludens*, in which Huizinga considers playing as the basis of culture (Huizinga, 1938). Constant envisioned New Babylon to be the architecture that made such creative playing possible. This would not take place in the cities as we know them, but above them, in changeable sectors that rest on pillars. The sectors are communal spaces for a nomadic humankind; there are no borders and there is not much room for individuality, the creativity is as communal as the spaces (Darbé e.a. 2016).

The work was first displayed in the museum in the first exhibition in the former civic orphanage in 1969/70. The exhibition, *Weg wezen. Recreatie vroeger, nu en straks*

[Get out of here. Recreation in the past, present and future] had tourism and recreation as the subject. Constant's drawing of Amsterdam as a utopian play city was a fitting addition. In the exhibition, the drawing discussed here was displayed together with a 'playful staircase' made for the occasion. The staircase, shaky and not particularly leading anywhere was a playful anti-utilitarian exhibit (fig. 2).¹



Fig. 2 The Playful staircase in the exhibition *Weg wezen. Recreatie vroeger, nu en straks*. In the background the Plan for New Babylon, 1969. Archives of the Amsterdam Museum.

It is remarkable that a history museum decided to acquire a vision of the future for the city in 1968. Now, almost sixty years later, the Plan for New Babylon has become historical after all, which has radically changed its meaning. No longer is the work forward looking, but a historical account of futuristic ideas. It allows us to consider what came of that future, what elements (if any) of New Babylon we can recognize in our own time.

First, automation has indeed taken a tremendous flight but has not fulfilled the promise of a revolution to liberate us from work. Instead, it has changed the nature of our work and our skills. Among those skills are those that come in handy in playing and creativity. Machines and computers have led to a loss of craftsmanship and among the

downsides of Artificial Intelligence is that the skills in making arts or writing have come under pressure. The passage of time seems to have worn Constant's techno-optimistic outlook, although the progress of technology has been and is accelerating. Perhaps it is still early days, too early to give a good assessment of what technology can bring humankind.

We do (still) often have time to play and do so in abundance in the city. Festivals and other leisure activities are rampant throughout the city of Amsterdam. Tourism might, perhaps a bit over-optimistically, be considered a nomadic form of playing. This all surely leads to joyful (communal) experiences and the chance to be a *homo ludens* in the city but also to many complaints, especially at places where playing collides with the vested interests of people that dwell, work or play differently in the city. Modern playing in our city is heavily intertwined with the *Homo Faber*, the human-that-makes that was the antithesis of Constant's idea of the *Homo Ludens*. Holidays are only possible in relation to work, and playing in the city is heavily dependent on economic systems that Constant would have hoped to leave behind.

Another interesting part of Constant's New Babylon is that it is strictly anthropocentric. Although he appears to have had the awareness of not placing his structures above green structures such as parks and bodies of water, in his utopic vision there are no traces of the role of non-human animals and plants. Many modern thinkers envision a future where humankind (again) forms kinship and community with non-human life (e.g. Wall Kimmerer 2013; Van Dooren 2014; Haraway 2015). In New Babylon there is no such opportunity. The plants and animals stay on the ground, while the humans are elevated to the sectors above it.

Such current ideas about the life of humans in relationship to their environment

greatly influence the perspective of the old utopia of New Babylon. What was intended as a playful environment can suddenly feel sterile, like an airport terminal. Cities have become cleaner, more technological, again within the capitalistic framework that Constant would have liked to leave behind, which might account for the sterility that might not have been what Constant envisioned at all. René Boer coined the term *Smooth City* for this, a place where the urge for perfection has undermined the possibilities for individuality (being different), for friction or for providing alternatives to what is mainstream (Boer 2023).

Constant had hoped for the dawn of a new type of human, free from the shackles of work, family life, borders and civic responsibilities to make room for playing, adventure. What is missing in smooth cities, amongst other things, is the connection between humans as well as the connection between humans and their environment. This connection can also be friction, which can well be used as a playful base for creativity and development of the city.

New Babylon promised a salvation of the pains of being human (or any animal): having to toil to have food and shelter, in a world full of risks and dangers. Risks and dangers, however, are also part of playing and fuel that play. But who knows what future utopians might say? Utopias appear to be very time sensitive. When Constant started his New Babylon project in the late 1950's he might have had hopes of actually helping create a new world. In 1974 when the project was exhibited at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (now Kunstmuseum Den Haag) in The Hague he considered it finished, as an art project. In 1980 Constant states:

"This was as far as I could go. The project exists. It is safely stored away in a museum, waiting for more favorable times when it will once again arouse interest among future urban designers."

The project, however, does more than that; it allows us to consider what utopian ideas for cities might do and where they are limited. It ceased to function as a utopian vision of the future itself but is there as a reminder of the limits of our own utopias.

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Endnotes

- 1 The text label "Use of the stairs is outside the responsibility of the museum" visible on the photo is an interesting reminder that the museum's institutional responsibility formed a contrast with the utopian idea that responsibility was shared.

Amy Brookes

(Lecturer and Architect)

I have not visited New Babylon. Despite the proliferation of models, paintings, collages and drawings which comprise Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon* project, I have seen it only through the work of others. Perhaps it is appropriate for a city overlaid onto our contemporary every-day, that it should hover in my mind's eye as an amalgamation of images seen in conference presentations, website thumbnails, and low-resolution print outs, a name evoked without needing to be grounded in the specificity of a particular object. And so, this essay is not about a specific encounter with Plan for New Babylonian Structure on the City Area of Current Amsterdam, but my own continued encounter with *New Babylon* through other works of speculative fiction.

"She tried to understand the attraction of minimal topology, but it just looked... unfinished... Familiar things grew more improbably gossamer. Everything was intertwined tensegrity meshes that cross braced themselves when stressed."
(Doctorow 2017, 140)

For all its monumentality, I do not understand *New Babylon* to be a wholesale rewriting of what has come before; our world still lingers in the shadow of this future. So, I turn away from *Caves of Steel* (1953), *The World Inside* (1971), *Catacomb Years* (1979), or *Terrarium* (1985), these stories where the cities of the present have been stripped down and rebuilt, for better or worse, as the Cities of the future. While there are similarities in the scope of re-imagining of what urban space might be, these models of the Mega-City are too permanent and inflexible. Instead, I find myself drawn to the communal dwellings in Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* (2017). Here, those

who leave 'default' build based on need and desire, without planning or predetermination. As such, these structures are in a continual state of change, perpetually being repaired and remade. While these buildings are small in scale, I find in this work a way to understand *New Babylon* as both transformative and in transformation, a utopia of practice, not fixed but able to be undone and made again.

"In the small square, a refuse can blazed... Bron saw the rope from the overhead black... swaying... Someone was sliding, slowly, down: gold chains hung from her toe-rings. At the end of each, small mirrors spun in the firelight... (others had joined the singing. And still others.) ... His ears and tongue felt carbonated. His scalp crawled with joy...."
(Delany 1976, 18)

The inhabitants of *New Babylon* have also been remade. In a post-scarcity society humanity has been transformed into Homo Ludens, continually and creatively in a state of play. This is not the ecotopian vision of works like *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), where ideals of personal fulfilment and creative delight are made possible by cultural shifts towards social balance and ecological awareness. Instead, these are inhabitants unencumbered by crisis of self or planet, free from drudgery and responsibility, able to remake their world with creative abandon. I attempt to imagine such people and find echoes in the theatre troupe from Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976). They emerge from the city without warning to stage elaborate productions for an audience of one, using psychotropic drugs, light, sound, and their own bodies to remake the experience of space. Delany describes

how Bron, plagued with dissatisfaction, self-absorption and unhappiness, finds himself suddenly immersed in this artwork, disoriented and destabilised but still out of step with its liberatory qualities. I cannot help but see myself standing alongside him, in the presence of unfettered art I am held at remove by my longing to understand the mechanisms which make such a world possible, too needful to join them.

*"[She] approached the door,
and drawing close she was
struck by its opacity, the way
it did not reveal what was on
the other side, and also did not
reflect what was on this side,
and so felt equally like a begin-
ning and an end."*
(Hamid 2017, 98)

Perhaps I cannot reach this state of playful abandon because it is predicated on a universal state of abundance, manifest in structures which over-sail borders of property and state. It is a dissolution of boundaries which resonates with Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), where mundane doorways across the world begin to take on transformative qualities, able to immediately transport people from one location to another. The destination of each doorway is unknown, and to step into the darkness of the portal holds no guarantee of welcome on arrival. But even when the perils of the journey are imagined to be removed the violence of bordering remains, and police cordons and refugee camps wrap themselves around these doorways. There is radical power in *New Babylon's* vision of a world without borders, without the rapacious inequalities of nation states or capitalist structures of property ownership, and I stumble at this threshold, confronted by the distance between here and there.

*"There were no words for what
was happening. The paintings
were living things. Painting was
a verb and a noun and both
aspects of that word were
present... The whole gallery was
haywire, a riotous spectacle of
flashing colour."*
(Gidney 2019, 129)

But it is this radical imaginative leap which maintains *New Babylon* as a live project, potent and present. It occupies that slippery temporal position of all images of the future, both an archival document attesting to the concerns of its own historical moment, and a possible future manifest within the present. But while the imagined world of *New Babylon* ranges unconstrained, the materialised fragments are mired within systems of control. Works like *Plan for New Babylonian Structure* are held within institutional space, while the complexity of custodianship dictates how they are disseminated. As part of the *Speculative Space* project (2022-ongoing) we have discussed what it means to enclose an object in the glass of a vitrine, or in the more intangible but no less perversive enclosures of intuitional systems and logics of ownership. This is the double-edged sword of maintenance, that labour to preserve an object by reproducing the systems within which it is held. But still, as described by Craig Laurance Gidney in *A Spectral Hue* (2019), these artworks of elsewhere are living things, transcendent and transformative. It is this quality which persists even when I encounter *Plan for New Babylonian Structure* as a fugitive object, glimpsed on a hand-out or a conference slide. They thrum and resonate, these fragments of a possible world.

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Maria

(Architect)

When looking at Constant's *Plan for New Babylonian Structure on the City Area of Current Amsterdam*, one cannot help but think of Jorge Luis Borges' short story *On Exactitude in Science*. Borges tells of an empire so devoted to cartographic precision that its map eventually reached the scale of the empire itself: A 1:1 useless cartographic device. The following generations, who were not so fond of cartography, Borges writes, abandoned these vast maps, leaving them in disuse and to decay under the vagaries of the weather, surviving only as the ruins of cartographic precision. Behind Borges' story lies a familiar modern fantasy: the desire to represent the world and control it by rendering the territory measurable and predictable. Nevertheless, he radicalizes the impulse of the map by making it completely obsolete.

Borges' fable reveals the limits of a map that aspires to have a perfect correspondence with reality. In a similar spirit, Constant's drawing of a New Babylonian structure for Amsterdam points to another limitation of the map: that certain ways of imagining everyday life may exceed the possibilities of spatial representation.

Constant's map of Amsterdam presents us with two opposites: the more Cartesian city, organized in blocks, canals, and streets, depicted with black lines, all inscribed over a piece of white paper. Superimposed on this floorplan of Amsterdam, appears a discontinuous network of colored megastructures, organized in big volumes that rotate and create smaller clusters. The megastructure is drawn with watercolors, making it transparent and allowing us to see the black lines of the more conventional map underneath. Constant's drawing of Amsterdam lacks the modern authority of a master plan; some parts do not fit perfectly, the colors overlap, the scale is ambiguous, the relationship between the old city and the new structure

seems unresolved, one never fully understands how the proposal works. The drawing adopts the conventions of the urban plan while simultaneously undermining them with its own indeterminacy.

After leaving the Situationist International, Constant devoted himself almost entirely to the development of *New Babylon*, a project he worked on from the mid-1950s until its major exhibition in 1974. Inspired by Johan Huizinga's concept of *Homo Ludens*, Constant imagines a future utopian society liberated from manual labor, where creativity, play, and experimentation would become central to everyday life. Through an extensive body of models, drawings, collages, and texts, *New Babylon* explores the role art might play in intensifying daily life and enabling new forms of collective expression (Stichting Constant n.d.). *New Babylon* presents us with a society in continual transformation. A transient social order resisting being fixed in one category, or as this text argues, in one image.

Borges situates his story in an empire, maybe because empires depended on the map as a mechanism for ruling, but also because the empire relied on other mechanisms to control the territory: roads, aqueducts, networks, and communication systems, some of the infrastructures that have endured the passage of time. These are the objects of the 'civilized' or the components of the grids that sustain the complex functions of everyday life. Grids make the world functional. They are made of steel and concrete, of numbers and paperwork. The modern city is, in many ways, an accumulation of overlapping grids: of streets and property lines, of energy, water, finance, labor, and data. Constant's *Plan for New Babylonian Structure on the City Area of Current Amsterdam* can be read as an attempt to emancipate the city from the fixed values established by the grid, or more simply, a plan to live off this grid.

In *Paper, Scissors, Blur*, Mark Wigley argues that *New Babylon* challenges the role of architectural drawing. Remarkably, “it was not until [the models] were completed at the end of 1959 that Constant produced any drawings” (Wigley 2001, 11). The drawings came after the project itself. Rather than simply projecting a future city, they sought to give form to a society organized around play, perpetual transformation, and collective ownership.

In architecture, drawings usually come first. They project a future, prescribe uses, organize circulation, define the functions, and anticipate life before it takes place. In *New Babylon*, the social and political imagination precedes representation. Constant first imagines a different social order, produces models and images, and only afterwards searches for a two-dimensional spatial graphic language capable of depicting it. The problem Constant faces is therefore not how to design a city, but how to represent a radically different organization of life when the traditional language to do so seems insufficient.

The awkwardness, ambiguity, and sense of incompleteness of the drawing of Amsterdam can be understood as symptoms of this representational crisis. Rather than a failure, the drawing records Constant's search for a language capable of accommodating a ludic society.

Constant refuses to represent it through the exactitude normally associated with infrastructural and technical drawing. The indeterminacy of the image destabilizes the functional logic of the plan. The infrastructure remains, but it is partially withdrawn from the grid of measurement, productivity, and control. The watercolor used to depict the megastructure contributes to this ambiguity. Unlike the crisp lines of conventional plans, watercolor resists precision. The future Amsterdam imagined by Constant is flooded by another cartographic imagination.

There is a disciplinary logic behind maps and spatial representation. The world Constant is representing, however, does not fit in that logic, therefore, his drawing of Amsterdam stands with a certain awkwardness. It is difficult to interpret it in detail. Both Borges and Constant share an interest in the point at which the capacity of representation of the map collapses under the weight of its own ambitions.

The utopian future proposed by Constant Nieuwenhuys is one where labour is not necessary and where private property is abolished. Collective ownership is the rule. These communities created around a shared commons resist the grid in its entirety; they don't need it to survive. They live mortgage-free, debt-free, without precarity and without the necessity of overperforming all the way to exhaustion. Constant's drawing of Amsterdam occupies a place of inexactitude, perhaps even failing on purpose, revealing how limited representational tools are when confronted with the political imagination of a world yet to come.

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