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Homo Ludens: Play, Subversion, and the Unfinished Work of Constant’s New Babylon

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Homo Ludens:

Play, Subversion, and the Unfinished Work of Constant’s New Babylon

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Art History
of Bard College

by
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**Introduction**

The postwar period was a time of new beginnings—of hope and uncertainty, turbulent shifts and radical optimism. Surrealist landscapes of flattened cities produced a blank slate for artists, architects, and revolutionaries alike, in their concerted effort to search for something different. This project explores Johan Huizinga’s theory of play with respect to art, space, and politics. The paradigm presented by *Homo Ludens* inherently rejects the sterile, utilitarian, and empirical urbanism that drove postwar reconstruction in Europe. Tracing the ways that this ludic theory played out within revolutionary avant-gardes of CoBrA and the Situationist International, as well as Constant’s project of *New Babylon*, this project investigates the subversive and reconstructive power of *Homo Ludens* as a counter-paradigm to the rationalist urbanism of postwar reconstruction. Following the life of Constant Nieuwenhuys, as *Homo Ludens* embodied, this project explores how he incorporates ludic theory into first an artistic process, then a revolutionary tactic, and finally into an architectural model for a utopian world. Mapping the ways in which *Homo Ludens* plays-out across the canvases of CoBrA, wanders and detourns the streets of Paris, and constructs the scaffolding of Constant’s *New Babylon*, it positions Huizinga’s ludic theory as a pivotal influence upon the cultural shift toward Postmodernism.

Ignored for so long by functionalist mentalities of the mid 20th century, and dismissed as unserious or unnecessary by postwar areas of thought, play and irrationality have been stifled and degraded to a status below that of efficiency and productivity.¹ Over the course of the 1920s, in the Bauhaus, on the pages of Le Corbusier’s modernist manifestos, or at the 1928 *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne*, modern architecture seems to have systematically

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discarded all that was unruly and expressive in favor of efficient and “rational” structures for a universal living. Concepts such as Johnson and Hitchcock’s International Style and Le Corbusier’s “Functional City” had the intention of mapping order onto the city from above with a pure and infallible logic. The same hard reasoning that had created the automobile and the atomic bomb extended to all areas of modern life, as functionalism and mass production fused with the values of capitalism and state communism.

Furthermore, the psychological trauma of World War II endured long after the war had ended. Mental health suffered among the desolate built environment and a greater amount of attention was directed toward psychological research. In the Netherlands, children in particular, became a category of collective concern and cultural interest, as the innocent victims of war. Out of a time when this functionalism was almost too rampant, and when the obsession with the machine and capital surpassed the value of human life, there came a desire for a return to the irrational. From an environment that was depressed economically, devastated physically, and traumatized psychologically sprung an intense need to focus on the value of human life and that which makes it more valuable than the machine.

Upon the end of the war, there formed a number of counter-cultural movements for whom radical experimentation and resistance became a common ground. By this time, Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga had already published his psychological and philosophical

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3 Sadler, The Situationist City, 6.
5 Stevens, “‘The Tumbling Child,” 376
exploration of play as a cultural phenomenon, *Homo Ludens* (1938). Arguing that “genuine, pure play is one of the fundamental bases of civilization,” he lays out an anti-rationalist model in which the “meta-logical” phenomenon of play is a primary and significant element of culture. Huizinga’s text pervaded Dutch society, as well as that of Paris, becoming highly influential to many avant garde and revolutionary groups experimenting with new paradigms to cope with the political and physical postwar atmosphere. *Homo Ludens* was appealing to these movements, in part, due to its argument that “all true civilizations emerged from play and not work.” Integral to the framework in which the CoBrA artists, the Situationists and Constant’s *New Babylon* were functioning, it enabled a way of thinking that did not ascribe to a Utilitarian value system, but focused on the process of play as a primary form of culture and an end in itself.

In creating an urban model based on free activity, rather than function, Constant utilized the non-productive process of play as a way to subvert the goals of material production. Difficult to grasp from a base of material relations, *New Babylon*’s structure floats in a realm of abstraction. Its reorientation of urban life toward constant mobility and the creative process of rebuilding one’s own environment corresponds with a restructuring of value systems, from that of late capitalism to one that values the process of human life as an end in itself. The numerous models, drawings, paintings, and collages that make up *New Babylon* are deeply engaged with the revolutionary discourses that surrounded it. It can be read both as a referent for a proposed

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social structure, as well as an active framework for a concrete revolution of space. In both cases, it is the element of play that leaves the question open and calls for reassessment.

Born in 1920, Constant grew up in Amsterdam and spent two years attending the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten (State Academy of Fine Arts) in 1939. This set him up to enter adult life just as World War II was reaching a peak, marking his early artistic career with the destruction and displacement of German Occupation.\textsuperscript{11} In order to avoid labor camps, he spent this time living and working in hiding, painting on house linens, which he would later boil and reuse.\textsuperscript{12}

Upon meeting the Danish painter, Asger Jorn, at a 1956 Miró exhibition in Paris, Constant was inspired to form the Nederlandse Experimentele Groep (Dutch Experimental Group) in 1946 and began to collaborate with the Danish Høst group and the Belgian ‘Groupe Surréaliste Révolutionaire’ to form CoBrA in 1948 - named as an acronym for the three cities.\textsuperscript{13} Central to these movements was the act of rebellious experimentation as a symbol of freedom, which for Constant, was most purely manifested in the ‘pure play’ of children.\textsuperscript{14} The movement was known for its direct and energetic painting style that would have been considered “degenerate” by German occupiers.\textsuperscript{15}

During the years that followed the break up of CoBrA in 1951, Constant’s shift toward architecture and desire to bring about a synthesis of the arts becomes clear. In a collaboration with sculptors Steven Gilbert and Nicholas Schöffer between 1953 and 1956, he created a series

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Wigley, \textit{Hyper-Architecture of Desire}, 14.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
of sculptural works, inspired by the Russian Constructivists, that incorporated increasingly urbanistic pretensions. By this time, Jorn had also introduced Constant to Aldo van Eyck, a prominent Dutch architect known for his minimalistic playgrounds in Amsterdam’s central city. Van Eyck was closely associated with CoBrA, sharing their belief that the play of children could serve as a creative cultural force. As Constant became interested in the potentials of working with the built environment, Van Eyck served as a friendly guide, lending him books and allowing him to tag along to regular meetings of De 8, the Amsterdam-based group serving as the Dutch branch of CIAM. At these meetings, Constant was able to absorb international discourse of some of the most influential figures of modern architecture and planning first hand. Still, he remained critical of the group’s functionalist orthodoxy and stopped attending when he began models for *New Babylon*. Van Eyck soon withdrew as well in order to join Team 10, a group of younger architects who formed in 1953 in resistance to the doctrine of CIAM.

When Constant first met filmmaker, writer, and Lettrist, Guy Debord in 1956, he was already working on seedling designs for *New Babylon*. Having just learned about unitary urbanism while participating in the *Primo congresso mondiale degli artisti liberi* (First World Congress of Free Artists) held by the Imaginist Bauhaus in Alba, Italy, he was inspired to incorporate the concept into his own work. It was just a few months later that he developed plans for a Gypsy encampment, whose lightweight and portable elements were meant to house a

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17 Harm Stevens, “‘The Tumbling Child,’” 376.
nomadic community that he encountered in Alba. These designs were the initial spark that would later evolve into *New Babylon*.

Furthermore, the urban landscape encountered by Constant and Debord during the early 1950s incubation period of *New Babylon* had been one shaped by the political realities of war. Amsterdam, along with most of Western Europe, was still recovering from occupation, deportation, and the Winter of Starvation (1946-7) which left behind decay and desolation of the built environment. During a short stay in Frankfurt, while working with the Zimmergalerie in the early 1950s, Constant recalls walking his son to school each morning across “an enormous bombsite,” between great heaps of rubble, where only fragments of the old city were recognizable. It was among this “surrealist landscape” of empty and desolate ruins that Constant’s interest in architecture began, as he wondered “whether life there will be just the same, or what will be different.” Out of those ashes rose an opportunity to replace that which had failed before. A revolution of space was in order. In the wake of total dissolution, architects in cities across Europe took hold of an opportunity to experiment with ways to begin the process of renewal. The slate had been cleared and the question remained: Where to begin?

On a broader scale, the early 1960s was a time in which architects across the globe began to conceive of utopian visions for the new modern city. The speed at which technology developed in the postwar decades and the degree to which it infiltrated human life lead to cyborg fantasies that paralleled Constants prediction of total automation. The urgency of European Reconstruction, recent explosion of technology, and increasing globalization led to a surge of

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22 Stevens, “‘The Tumbling Child,” 364.
24 Ibid.
manic excitement among architects and urban planners, forming an environment of radical self-confidence, in which proposals of impossible scale and complexity were deemed feasible. In Mechthild Schumpp’s *Stadtbau-Utopien und Gesellschaft* (‘town-planning Utopias and society’) of 1972, she identifies the three dominating characteristics of modern planning utopias. The first is the distinction between the permanent and the transient, the second is the notion of a “mobile leisure population,” and the third is the technological vision of the city. Emerging themes of techno-utopias, massive playgrounds and endless flexibility began to circle widely among radical thinkers, such as Yona Friedman, Cedric Price, The Metabolist Group, Team 10, and Archigram.

Yona Friedman’s *Spatial City* was one of the first utopian superstructures of this time. Finished in 1958, it consisted of a horizontal mesh of cables, providing a frame into which standardized modules could be easily inserted and relocated. Like *New Babylon*, which Constant began just a year before, the structure was to be raised up on pillars and allowed for maximum freedom and mobility of its inhabitants. The ludic flexibility of *New Babylon* was also present in contemporary projects emerging in Britain, where hopes had taken hold that automation would one day lead to a way of life in which leisure was the primary activity. In 1962, Cedric Price finished his *Fun palace*. Taking these themes to an even greater extreme than Constant, this “laboratory of fun,” was meant to be entirely transformable. A system of readily available cranes allowed individuals to rearrange prefabricated walls, floors, platforms and ceilings, as well as the massive steel frame, at will. The playful nature of this project, along with its ability to be

26 Reyner Banham, *Megastructure*, 70.
continuously revised by its visitors, shows that Constant’s ideas were part of a much larger movement of revolutionary space.

Chapter one of this project traces the ways in which notions of play re-entered the production of art in the aftermath of World War II through Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*. Pervading Dutch culture, and spreading later to France, *Homo Ludens* provided theoretical scaffolding for a number of postwar avant-gardes and revolutionary groups experimenting with new socio-political paradigms. The CoBrA movement, in particular, can be viewed as a primordial starting point for cultural renewal in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Focusing on the work of Constant during his CoBrA period, one can already see themes of play, nomadism, and desire that will follow him through his time in the Situationist International, and culminate in his utopian model of *New Babylon*. It is during these years that Constant’s rejection of rationalist thought emerged in his work, as he began to toy with notions of play and spontaneity. For Huizinga, pure play is the “primordial soil” from which all art and culture has developed. Through the lens of Huizinga, and the work of Constant yet to come, Constant’s work in CoBrA is positioned as the pure play from which the conception of *New Babylon* arose.

Chapter two traces the affinity between *Homo Ludens* and the work of the Situationist International movement in postwar Europe. Huizinga’s aesthetic exploration of play as a cultural phenomenon opens up an alternative paradigm that provides a semantic framework for the Situationists, that will eventually culminate in Constants project of *New Babylon*. Recently, a great deal of scholarship has assessed the intellectual legacy of the Situationist International. Given the solid foundation of historical work, this chapter proposes instead to extend its argument in the direction of ludic theory, attempting to map the ways in which *Homo Ludens*
plays out in the *dérives* and *détournements* of the Situationist International. In radicalizing Huizinga’s theory into a revolutionary ethics, Constant and the Situationists subvert and reformulate an urban environment that they found empirical and static.

Chapter three explores the ways in which Constant extends Huizinga’s theory of play to an urban design and course of revolutionary action. It is from Huizinga’s text that *New Babylon*’s notions of freedom, participation and desire, along with the rejection of functionalist architecture and utilitarian society, emerge. *New Babylon* serves as a vast playground for Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* - or ‘Man at Play.’ In this way, Constant expands Huizinga’s notion of play, which he asserts is always temporary - bounded in time and space - to encompass all aspects of life. *New Babylon*’s rejection of productive labor aligns with Huizinga’s characterization of play as separate from “ordinary” or “everyday” life, while its insistence on being continuously rebuilt according to the desires of its inhabitants ensures this play never ends. Taking a playful approach to the serious issues at hand, Constant insisted on a structure that should remain ephemeral and unfinished, resisting the goals of material production. In radicalizing Huizinga’s theory into revolutionary ethics, the Situationists activated modernist conceptions of urbanism through constant movement, disruption, and synthesis. This chapter shows the ways in which Constant applies these tactics to a material environment through an architecture that is ungraspable to late capitalist systems of control.
Chapter One

Pure Play: *Homo Ludens* Among Postwar Cultural Revival

The notion of play in the context of political and urban theory would seem almost contradictory. Serious endeavors such as postwar reconstruction and political revolution would presumably require a sequence of calculated steps - logical tactics to form a concrete and efficient plan for urban renewal. But what happens when play is taken seriously? This chapter explores the ways in which notions of play re-entered the production of art in the aftermath of World War II through Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*. Pervading Dutch culture, and spreading later to France, *Homo Ludens* provided theoretical scaffolding for a number of postwar avant-gardes and revolutionary groups experimenting with new socio-political paradigms. The CoBrA movement, in particular, can be viewed as a primordial starting point for cultural renewal in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Focusing on the work of Constant during his CoBrA period, one can already see themes of play, nomadism, and desire that will follow him through his time in the Situationist International, and culminate in his utopian model of *New Babylon*. It is during these years that Constant’s rejection of rationalist thought emerged in his work, as he began to toy with notions of play and spontaneity. For Huizinga, pure play is the “primordial soil” from which all art and culture has developed. Through the lens of Huizinga, and the work of Constant yet to come, Constant’s work in CoBrA is positioned as the pure play from which the conception of *New Babylon* arose.

While most widely known for his 1919 work, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga took an aesthetic approach to history, in which art and spectacle played
an important role. In congruence with the anti-rationalism of postwar Dutch counter-culture, Huizinga wrote a number of other works on the ways in which the spirit of technical and mechanical organization had replaced spontaneous and organic order in cultural and political life. This view is apparent in the forward of *Homo Ludens*, as he writes: “A happier age than ours once made bold to call our species by the name of *Homo Sapiens*. In the course of time we have come to realize that we are not so reasonable after all...” In other texts, he openly criticizes the rise of National Socialism, leading to his detainment by Nazi forces in 1942 and exile from Leiden until his death in 1945. Huizinga’s theory of play may, indeed, have been influenced by his political context, revealing a reflection of a Dutch society that was searching frantically for lightness and humanity as it prepared to be thrust into a second world war.

One of the key texts of postwar avant-gardists in Amsterdam, and devoured equally by their Parisian counter-parts, *Homo Ludens*, came to be known as the first comprehensive theory of ludics, presenting an incredibly broad exploration of play as a primary cultural phenomenon. First published in 1938, the philosophical and anthropological text was revived after the hiatus of war, appealing to the growing interest in alternative social paradigms that arose from a layering of the interests of pre-war avant-gardes with the postwar need for reconstruction. Proposing that “genuine, pure play is one of the fundamental bases of civilization,” Huizinga presented a

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31 Ibid.
cultural meta-theory that rivaled the sobriety of rationalism and provided a structural framework for counterpublics attempting to claim their newfound freedom.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Homo Ludens}

Tracing the ways in which “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play,” Huizinga lays out an anti-rationalist model in which the “meta-logical” phenomenon of play is a primary and significant element of culture.\textsuperscript{37} Coining \textit{Homo ludens}, “man the player,” - as opposed to \textit{Homo sapien} “man the knower” or \textit{Homo faber} “man the maker,” - Huizinga’s ambition for this text is create a space for play in an overly-rationalist modern society. Summarizing his argument in the second to the last chapter – “Western Civilization Sub Specie Ludi” – Huizinga writes:

\begin{quote}
It has not been difficult to show that a certain play-factor was extremely active all through the cultural process and that it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life. The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it. \textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

This passage elucidates Huizinga’s intention to not only study play or games but to inquire into their formal and creative qualities as they “play out” in culture.

Huizinga’s first definition of play, and the one most applicable to postwar avant-gardes, characterizes it as an expression of human freedom with regard to both

\textsuperscript{36} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, Forward.
\textsuperscript{38} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 173.
nature and morality.\textsuperscript{39} Like beauty and art, play is disinterested and distinct from the realm of “everyday life.” It does not satisfy external needs or desires, but “contains its own course and meaning,” acting as an “intermezzo” or interlude to the course of daily life.\textsuperscript{40} We see it as “non-serious” for its lack of concern with daily needs like food, shelter, money and other practical matters. But Huizinga does not disregard play as frivolous. On the contrary, he positions it as a “meta-logical” phenomenon that can “rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath.”\textsuperscript{41}

Alluding to the trance-like state that one adopts when fully immersed in play, Huizinga argues that, while there is always an underlying consciousness that play is “just pretend,” it often occurs as a fluctuation between seriousness and non-seriousness.\textsuperscript{42} As an activity that requires total devotion from the player, play is not only fun, but also earnest. It is not only intensely absorptive in the sense that the player is almost fully consumed by the act, but, according to Huizinga, the “play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow.”\textsuperscript{43}

To Huizinga, play is serious in the way that rituals and sacred rites are serious: “In all its higher forms the latter [human play] at any rate always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual – the sacred sphere.”\textsuperscript{44} Associating play with the sacred ritual, and all of the social and political orders it may inform, he argues that many of the great forces

\textsuperscript{39} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{40} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 9.
\textsuperscript{41} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 8.
\textsuperscript{42} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 10.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid}, 123.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid}, 9.
of civilization are “rooted in the primeval soil of play.”\(^{45}\) To play is to step out of a
common reality into a higher order, “making an image of something different, something
more beautiful, more sublime, or more dangerous” than what actually is.\(^{46}\)

Huizinga also characterizes play by its limitedness in time and space; the game,
performance, etc. must eventually come to an end. The players, then, inhabit a temporary,
alternative world, run by its own closed system of rules. The play-act is always an end in itself,
as it has no exterior function or purpose outside of its own process. Another observation point in
_Homo Ludens_ is the notion that once “pure” or improvisational play has occurred, it becomes
crystallized as a form that can be repeated. These calcified play structures take the form of
games, traditions, artforms, protocols, and rituals.

Huizinga notes that play is “indispensable for the well-being of the community,
fecund of cosmic insight and social development.”\(^{47}\) It is community building in that
groups form around play and feel connected in their collective difference from the real
world. There is also an element of secrecy, as when one puts on a mask or pretends to be
something they are not. This collective secrecy creates a social bond between people.\(^{48}\)
Finally, play “creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of
life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection.”\(^{49}\)

In this last quality, one can already see the ways in which play presents an ideal
framework for experimentation with utopian imaginaries. Presenting a closed system of
rules, the playworld can be posed as a paradigm for social and political revolution,

\(^{45}\) Ibid, 5.
\(^{46}\) Ibid, 14.
\(^{47}\) Ibid, 25.
\(^{48}\) Ibid, 11.
\(^{49}\) Ibid, 10.
allowing movements such as CoBrA and the Situationists to expand upon the destructive tactics of Dada and begin, constructing alternative paradigms for political and cultural systems. The semantic framework of Huizinga’s play-concept presented an opportunity for seeing a world that was not based on capitalist and utilitarian social structures. Positioning play at the base of human culture, instead of rationality or production, *Homo Ludens* places human life over that which it produces. Counter-cultural movements of postwar Europe adopted Huizinga’s theory, because notions of freedom, irrationality, anti-functionalism, and experimentation were applicable to rebellion against institutions that suppress human desires and create social stratification.

**CoBrA and the Rejection of Rationalism**

Within the immediate postwar period, Constant was already exploring themes that would persist into his plans for *New Babylon*. Play, desire, mobility, and freedom became integral to his work with CoBrA, in which childlike drawings, erotic gestures, wild expressionism, wheels and ladders are poised in a rebellion against the stifling and static conventions of Bourgeois society. The type of play that particularly concerned Constant in this phase was what Huizinga deemed “pure play,” a pre-cultural instinct characteristic of children, animals, and “primitive” cultures that is resistant to all logical interpretation. In a time that harbored such a need to express deep ridden trauma of war, Constant proposes the direct and passionate emotion of children and ‘primitives,’ writing:

> The child knows no other law than their spontaneous zest for life and has no other need than to express this. The same goes for primitive people. And it’s this quality that offers so much

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enchantment to modern man, living in a morbid atmosphere of inauthenticity, lies and barrenness.\textsuperscript{51}

He insisted that art was to be experimental, as the experience gained through absolute freedom would awaken society to their suppressed desires.\textsuperscript{52}

The postwar environment was especially bleak in the Netherlands. Nazi occupation was stifling to artistic production, as censorship limited the possibilities for artistic expression, making it difficult to acquire materials, let alone exhibit work.\textsuperscript{53} For almost ten years, the Netherlands was left in utter darkness, isolated from the rest of the world and held in a vacuum for artistic production.\textsuperscript{54} Released from its cultural snare, The Netherlands harbored a spreading resentment toward the cold reasoning of the rational sciences, and the society from which they were born. Radical underground movements, such as the Dutch Experimental Group, CoBrA, the Provos, and the Situationist International rebelled against the hegemonic rationalism of pre-war bourgeois society and proposed alternative modes for accessing meaning through experimentation and play.\textsuperscript{55}

The end of World War II brought on an explosion of violent emotion into the art world. The slate had been cleared and there was a brief moment of optimism in which anything seemed possible.

Calculated, distanced, and empirical rationalism, it seemed, had gone too far.


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

The raw nerves of a war torn industrial era exposed themselves in a wild cry of resistance, as the CoBrA movement formed in 1948. Resulting from a merging of the Dutch Nederlandse Experimentele Groep, the Danish Høst Group, and the Belgian ‘Groupe Surréaliste Révolutionnaire,’ the group derived its name from the acronyms of the three cities.\(^56\) In CoBrA’s 1948 publication, Reflex #1, Constant’s manifesto frames the postwar situation as a “total collapse” that might permit a “new freedom,” as long as artists “find their way back to the first point of origin of creative activity.”\(^57\) Disenchanted by the traumatic events of World War II, this text called for the total “dissolution of Western Classical culture.” Ready to abandon the principles of society that have been in place for thousands of years, they demanded a new “system whose laws are based on the immediate demands of human vitality.”\(^58\)

Known for a crude and direct style, combining figural elements with abstraction, CoBrA refused both social realism and abstraction, the “house” styles of the Cold War and rebelled against the regulation of politics and art.\(^59\) The group detested the gridded rationalism of painters like Mondrian and Le Corbusier, whose artistic styles seemed to work within the same semantic framework as the regulative practices of the state. In his 1948 manifesto, Constant likened this style to the “objective, abstracting spirit of the bourgeois world,” and five years later, Christian Dotremont compared it to “the order which rules warsaw.”\(^60\) Above all else, the group aimed for the expansion of individual freedom and creative potential.

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\(^58\) Constant, “Manifesto,” 167.
\(^59\) Sadler, The Situationist City, 5.
\(^60\) Sadler, The Situationist City, 8.
Refusing any form of specialization, their claim to creativity was linked more to experiment than art. In a fusion of art and life that anticipates the Situationist anti-art critique, Constant writes, “A painting is not a construction of colors and lines, but an animal, a night, a scream, a human being.” Here, Constant plays upon the famous modernist painting formula presented by Maurice Denis sixty years before (“Remember that a painting - before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote - is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order”), asserting that the process and the gestures themselves, violently apparent in CoBrA’s work, are what encapsulate their search for meaning.

Earlier in the 20th century, during and just after the First World War, it was the Dada movement that constituted the most radical and direct response to its disrupted surroundings. Born at the Cabaret Voltaire in Switzerland, and gaining participants from across Europe and North America, its main objective was to protest the bourgeois nationalist and colonialist interests, which many members believed were the root cause of the war, and against the cultural and ontological monotony - of art and more broadly in society - that corresponded to the war. Dadaist, Hans Richter, famously said that Dada is not art but “anti-art” and Hugo Ball expressed, “For us, art is not an end in itself… but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in.”

The counter-cultural movements of World War II Netherlands, at first glance, seem to serve the same purpose as Dada - a rejection of the rationalist, capitalist thinking that led to the war. In fact Dada did inform the CoBrA Group, as well as the Situationists, in their rebellion against the rational and empirical logic, to which they attributed the sterility of modern life.

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However, their similarities end here. In reality, Dada and CoBrA were almost opposite in their intentions. Dada’s response to rationalism was purely deconstructive - sarcastic, derisive, and cynical in its embrace of chaos and meaninglessness. CoBrA, on the other hand, had the aim of doing away with all that was hollow and superficial in the modern era, in hopes to find the deepest, most extreme significance of life and art. “Working for tomorrow’s world,” it hoped to integrate vitality back into a society whose desires had been suppressed and forgotten.

Playing upon the rubble of the postwar landscape, CoBrA found itself “confronted with a world of décors and hollow façades, with which all contact [had] been broken and in which all beliefs [had] disappeared.” Its paintings, sculptures, and publications were not just an attempt to deconstruct the hegemonic bureaucracy of its time. For CoBrA, the end of the war brought on a brief period of hope. “Stripped of all [its] certainties and left with nothing to believe in,” its entire oeuvre of work seems to represent a primordial starting point for Dutch cultural renewal.

Emerging during an naively optimistic period directly following World War II, - dissolving just three years later in 1951 - CoBrA’s undeveloped and childlike style was not unlike “primeval soil of play” in which Huizinga claims all forces of civilized life to be rooted.

The wild play of CoBrA is not just childlike, but also creaturely. It is this penchant for the animal, or hybrid creature, that truly distinguishes CoBrA from other avant-gardes.

Accessing meaning through the interstitial space between man and animal is characteristic of ludic theory. In his recent book, *What Animals Teach us about Politics*, Brian Massumi provides

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64 Ibid.
a deeper discussion of Huizinga’s play theory, arguing that play is where humans enter a “zone of indiscernibility” with the animal.\textsuperscript{68} In an exploration of the ludic gesture through animal play, he asserts that when one wolf cub engages in a play fight with another, it must always signal “this is not a bite” as it simultaneously references a bite. The difference in style and mannerism - a nip is not a bite - is integral to the ludic gesture. Rather than simply denoting another action, this act of pretending always “envelops a difference in the display of similarity.”\textsuperscript{69} In this way, play activates a paradox. The ludic gesture is a form of abstraction that always carries an elements of “meta-communication” - commenting on what it’s doing while its doing it.

Gregory Bateson, in his essay “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” infers that : “it would be bad natural history to expect the mental processes and communicative habits of mammals to conform to the logicians ideal.”\textsuperscript{70} Inducing a dual reality, in which two different logics are packed into a single situation. Bateson proposes that the type of abstraction inherent in play “does not respect the law of the excluded middle. Its logic is that of mutual inclusion.” \textsuperscript{71} Massumi extrapolates that “the difference between the human and the animal in this connection is perhaps that humans experience paradoxes of mutual inclusion as a breakdown of their capacity to think, and are agitated by it.”\textsuperscript{72} In its embrace of this interstitial space, in which man and creature overlap, CoBrA aimed to subvert the logic of hegemonic social structures on an semantic level.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Massumi, \textit{What Animals Teach us about Politics}, 7.
This theory of play as “lived abstraction” is inherent to CoBrA’s manifesto and work. Through its crude animal figures and childlike styles, the CoBrA movement positions play, not as a frivolous act, but as a meta-logical form of communication that does not conform to the mental processes of the “logician’s ideal.” The work of CoBrA speaks in a way that not only predates culture, but also complicates it past the point of being a simple code. The ludic styles, processes, and concepts that encompass the movement are the same processes of abstraction that elevate images to artworks, language to poetry, and movements to dance. In this way, the ludic gestures of CoBrA simultaneously subvert and transcend the logical. It recognizes that the reason of *Homo Sapiens* (“Man the Thinker”) is not as reasonable as it once believed, and calls for a return of mankind to its pre-cultural roots, in search of a higher form of vitality.

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Fig. 1. Constant, Homo Ludens, 1964, Linen, oil paint, 158.8cm x 183.9cm, Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, NL
Fig. 2. Constant, Children and Animals, 1949, board, gouache, 54.0cm x 45.5cm, Private collection, NY, USA
Fig. 3. Constant, Masked Disobedience, 1948, oil on canvas, 97.5cm x 70.0cm, Collection National Gallery Berlin
Fig. 4. Constant, The Ladder, 1949, 87.8cm x 75.3cm, linen, oil paint, Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, NL


Chapter Two

Ludic Subversion: Play tactics in the Situationist International

This chapter explores Johan Huizinga’s theory of play as a subversive paradigm to late capitalist structures of control. Specifically, it traces affinity between *Homo Ludens* and the work of the Situationist International movement in postwar Europe. Huizinga’s aesthetic exploration of play as a cultural phenomenon opens up an alternative paradigm that provides a semantic framework for the Situationists, as they dismantle hegemonic notions of art, space, and politics. Recently, a great deal of scholarship has assessed the intellectual legacy of the Situationist International. Given the solid foundation of historical work, this chapter proposes instead to extend its argument in the direction of ludic theory, attempting to map the ways in which *Homo Ludens* plays out in the *dérives* and *détournements* of the Situationist International. In radicalizing Huizinga’s theory into a revolutionary ethics, Constant and the Situationists subvert and reformulate an urban environment that they found empirical and static.

**Situating the Situationists**

The inauguration of the Situationist International in 1957 was somewhat unpromising. “In a state of semi-drunkenness,” eight delegates gathered at a bar in rural Italy to vote on the unification of the Lettrist International and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus.74 The former group, led by Guy Debord in Paris, was primarily a literary movement, whose assortment of writers, artists, revolutionaries and petty criminals formed the French counterpart to the American Beat Generation.75 It was the Lettrists’ blend of intellectualism,

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hedonism and protest that first coined the key Situationist tactics of *dérive* and *détournement.*

Contrasting with the Lettrists’ conceptual tendencies, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus was direct and expressionistic in its approach to art production. Reacting against the technical restructuring of the Bauhaus under Max Bill, former CoBrA painter Asger Jorn initiated this small avant-garde in Alba, Italy to revive the fantasy, symbols, and experimental expression characteristic of the earlier Bauhaus under Klee and Kandinsky. While these movements were quite different in approach, their common thread was a highly politicized desire for a social revolution during a time when the avant-garde had largely separated itself from the realm of politics. Thus, in a merging of politics and fantasy, the Situationist International was born, absorbing CoBrA’s Constant Nieuwenhuys as one of its founding members.

Playing out between 1957 and 1972, Situationism drew heavily upon Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* for its anti-functional and anti-productive systems of value. In the Lettrist publication, *Potlatch* 20, Debord expressed his position on *Homo Ludens* in relation to the movement, conceding that Huizinga’s “latent idealism and narrowly sociological understanding of the higher forms of play do not diminish his work’s basic worth.” In fact, he goes on, “it would be futile to want to find any other motive behind our theories of architecture and drifting than a passion for play,” adding to that, “what we must do now is change rules of the game from arbitrary conventions to ones with moral basis.”

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*Homo Ludens* was a guiding framework for the Situationists in their experiments with grassroots urbanism and critique of the empirical planning that fostered a banal and passive social life.

Amidst the ruins of World War II, the hegemonic tendency of in Europe was to re-establish the same bourgeois social structures that were dominant before the war. In response to this, there emerged a number of counter-movements involving intellectuals and artists who sought freedom from the socio-political conditions that lead up the war, as well as from the urban structures that contained them. Social life in Europe had also changed dramatically, altered by forces more insidious than just the two world wars. The basis of 20th century society had gradually shifted from one of production to one of consumption. Debord released a bitter commentary on the situation in 1967 with his *Society of the Spectacle*, in which he wrote,

> The image of the blissful unification of society through consumption suspends disbelief. (. . .) Each and every new product is supposed to offer a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption. . . . This continual process of replacement [of ever new products] means that fake gratification cannot help but be exposed as products change, and as changes occur in the general conditions of production . . . only the system endures.\(^80\)

In short, Debord asserts that the growth of capitalism is dependent on the manufacture, not of products, but of desire for more products. Consequently, he infers, the economic stability that presumably follows capitalist accumulation is not founded on innovation, but the ever growing need for consumption.

Furthermore, technological advancements had for the first time in history, begun to present the possibility of eradicating physical labor and shifting the basis of work largely toward

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intellectual and service skills.\textsuperscript{81} An excitement brewed over the prospect of a working class liberated from arduous labor and the consequent increase in time devoted to leisure. Naturally, these changes called for a new type of urbanism and social organization that responded more adequately to their needs. The Situationist International, in particular, proposed a complete abandonment of all previous notions of the city - from the level of the built environment to that of the individual psyche.\textsuperscript{82} The goal of this critique was to facilitate a new type of individual to produce and inhabit these new structures of social organization.

\textbf{Situationist Theory}

Influenced equally by Dada and Surrealism as it was by anti-authoritarian Marxism, the Situationism refused to distinguish art from politics.\textsuperscript{83} Unlike previous avant-gardes, for which art had a moralizing or elitist status, the Situationists hoped to eventually free art from its material form altogether. Instead of working with static objects separated by medium, they sought to combine art and life into a holistic urban \textit{process}, creating ‘situations,’ rather than ‘constructions.’\textsuperscript{84} Art would no longer be the domain of a few individuals of genius, who managed to break from the realm of convention. Rather than allowing hegemonic institutions to map order onto the city from above, each individual was to be self-producing and self-organizing. Instead of passively watching the ‘spectacle’ of entertainment media, which Debord attests only serves to perpetuate conspicuous consumption, misery and social estrangement, the new habitant would actively \textit{participate} in social production.\textsuperscript{85} The working

\textsuperscript{81} Reyner Banham, \textit{Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past}. (Thames and Hudson, 1976), 80.
\textsuperscript{85} Simon Sadler, \textit{The Situationist City}, 34.
method for the Situationists, ‘unitary urbanism,’ was defined by Constant as a dynamic, constantly fluctuating activity - fluctuating not because it was unstable, but so that it could adapt and respond to the needs of daily life. This was not an architecture or urban planning in the traditional sense of a technical occupation, but rather a continuous interface between the environment and inhabitants themselves.

The Homo Ludens of Paris

In a sense, the Situationists were the *Homo Ludens* of mid-century Paris. Or perhaps more patently, they were what Huizinga would call “spoil sports,” breaking with nearly all rules of social convention that maintained order in modern society. Among this nomadic crew of jobless artists, delinquants, and revolutionaries, were a surprising number of sharply cultivated individuals, choosing to rough it in a rejection of work, materialism, and the passive comforts of the ‘spectacle.’ As Debord lamented in 1988, “Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings still of some significance, but destined to continual reduction… there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern society.” Thus, the Situationists sought out the less-regulated spaces of the city, overlooked by rationalist reform, where images of play, eccentricity, and rebellion were not yet suppressed by modernist banality. The physical spaces of Situationism existed within the older, “unsanitized” sectors of Amsterdam, London, and Paris, while their cultural spaces existed,

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88 Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 44.
metaphorically, among a disarray of expressionist art, French Romanticism, drinking, Hegel and Marx.⁹⁰

Furthermore, the Situationists were infamous for their subversive tactics of dérive and détournement, meant to subvert and critique hegemonic political, cultural, and economic values through activity that is not dependent upon the forces of production and consumption. Playing out as an ‘urban drifting’ or aimless wandering through the city, the dérive attempted to undermine any empirically ordained structure within the city by locating ‘transient atmospheres’ outside the control of any centralized authority or hegemonic economic force.⁹¹ Their second tactic, détournement (French for “hijacking” or “re-routing”), can be defined as a creative pillaging of urban space and material culture, twisting existing elements (literary, artistic or cinematic) to have a new, possibly antagonistic meaning.⁹² These methodologies intended to provoke and dissolve empirical, banal, and static notions urbanism in postwar Reconstruction.

In an attempt to bring play into the streets, the Situationists posed their drunken meanderings as a form of anti-functional behavior, experimenting with ways of life beyond utilitarian, capitalist values. This collective roaming, which sometimes went on for months, defined a culture of Left Bank bohemianism in Paris, for which a mutual withdrawl from everyday convention cultivated the “feeling of being apart together” that Huizinga attributes to play-communities.⁹³⁹⁴ Ed Van der Elsken vividly captures this essence in his book of photographs, Love on the left Bank, where gritty snapshots of the Situationists stumbling through

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⁹⁰ Simon Sadler, The Situationist City, 44.
⁹² Ibid.
⁹⁴ Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 12.
Occupying urban space without a trajectory or purposive destination was, in itself, a disruption to the seamless efficiency of the “Functional City.” Plans such as Le Corbusier’s 1930 *Ville Radieuse* proposed ways to avoid this unruly “loitering” by replacing pedestrian neighborhoods with functionally zoned ranks of skyscrapers, connected by urban motorways to take inhabitants from point A to point B as quickly as possible. While these plans were still intriguing to postwar planners, they tormented the Situationists, who felt the social experience of the city was already being severely degraded by the increase of automobile traffic. In his “Theory of the *Dérive,*” Debord illustrates “the narrowness of the real Paris in which each individual lives,” referencing a study by urban sociologist Chombart de Lauwe, who finds that the trajectory of a Parisian student, over the course of a year, formed only a “small triangle” between her school, home, and piano lessons.

**Mapping a Poetics of Space**

For the Situationists, modernism’s idolization of objectivity caused it to lose entirely the dimension of knowing that becomes available only through presence and mind-bodily participation. Reacting against the distanced formulas of modern planners, who still thought within Le Corbusier’s four functions of the city, the Situationists sought to formulate a grassroots counter-method based on desires of the human inhabitant. Allowing participants to be drawn

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toward “hidden centers of attraction” and pulled by the city’s “force fields and flows of desire,”
the dérive became not only a rejection of work, but also a way to explore and harness the
psychological order of the urban environment, which lay hidden beneath its visible surface.\textsuperscript{98}

In an pseudoscientific attempt to record these dérives, Debord and Jorn created a series of
“psychogeographies,” many of which were compiled into a book called Mémoires in 1957.\textsuperscript{99} The
dominant technique for these “maps” involved a splattering of paint across each page, credited to
Jorn as structures portantes (“load-bearing structures”), over which Debord would scatter text
and images appropriated from stolen newspapers.\textsuperscript{100} These methods of production were evidently
meant to minimize the amount of labor and handicraft that went into the maps’ creation.
Maintaining their rejection of work, the improvisation of Jorn’s dripping and Debord’s text
mimic the surrender of the will that takes place in the passional drifts of the dérive. Mémoires, in
this way, constitutes a radically anti-functional work - an “anti-work” - whose digressive and
antiphonal structure reflects the dérive’s emphasis on collective play.\textsuperscript{101}

Furthermore, psychogeography sought to portray the ways in which “an urban
neighborhood is determined, not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the
image that its inhabitants and those of other neighborhoods have of it.”\textsuperscript{102} At times the paint
resembles routes of passage, structuring Debord’s text as if mapping out the sentiments they
relay. Other times the paint frames, interrupts or obscures the text, referencing supports and a

\begin{center}
\textsuperscript{98} Constant and Mark Wigley, \textit{Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire} (Rotterdam: Witte de
\textsuperscript{99} Hussey, “Mapping Utopia,” 41.
\textsuperscript{100} Ella Mudie, “An Atlas of Allusions: The Perverse Methods of Guy Debord’s Mémoires,” \textit{Criticism} 58, no. 4
(Fall 2016): 538. https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.58.4.0535.
\textsuperscript{101} Libero Andreotti, “Play-Tactics of the ‘Internationale Situationniste,’” 217.
\end{center}
hindrances in the built environment. Working within this notion of image-making, the playful call and response between Debord’s text and Jorn’s paint presents a poetic spatial narrative. Glimpses of imagery, relayed through partial phrases such as “Le soir, Barbara” (The night, Barbara) and “des lumières, des ombres, des figures” (lights, shadows, figures), construct an urban landscape through a scattering of incoherent memories and associations with place. Together with Jorn’s “architectural” gestures, these fragments evoke a psychological image of the city as it might be experienced by an individual. In an abstraction of traditional mapping, these narratives portray an emotional dynamic between the city and its inhabitants that is fallaciously overlooked by functionalist planners.

Furthermore, the synthesis of cognitive and spatial elements in psychogeography enact a personification of the traditional cartesian map - a play of myth-making that Huizinga discusses at length. According to Huizinga, play has a tendency to exaggerate and embellish actual experience and invest surroundings with personality. In the chapter of Homo Ludens concerning “Elements of Mythopoesis,” he emphasizes the relationship between between play, poetry, and primordial myth-making, writing: “As soon as the effect of a metaphor consists in describing things or events in terms of life and movement, we are on the road to personification. To represent the incorporeal and the inanimate as a person is the soul of all myth-making and nearly all poetry.”\(^{103}\) In this way, the spatial poetry of Mémoires can be seen a mythical account of urban space, personified through a lens of lived experience and spontaneous movement.

Furthermore, the storytelling at play in psychogeography has its roots in the Romantic, the baroque, and notions of the long voyage taken in the spirit of discovery and adventure. It

\(^{103}\) Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 136.
takes the form of an exploratory expedition, leading us through transient ambiances, inducing “flights of fancy,” and recording uncharted terrain. Here, the dérive encapsulates play in Huizinga’s sense of stepping into a higher order and “making an image of something different, something more beautiful, more sublime, or more dangerous” than what actually is. Intrigued by their ability to induce “awe and reverie,” the Situationists even published images of Romantic painting, architecture, and poetry in their publication, International Situationist, as sources of the Sublime. In part, the Romantic era was a response to the rationality of the Enlightenment and the transformation of everyday life brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Like the theorists of this period, the Situationists advocated imagery of the picturesque and the Sublime as a way to overpower the excessively ordered world of the Enlightenment’s descendent, modernism. In the spirit of the Romantic struggle between man and nature, psychogeographies sought to temporalize an environment they found static, banal, and unconducive to a truly human life. Unlike the images of humans at peace in nature characteristic of the enlightenment paintings, Romantic art portrays an emotional and turbulent environment, in which passion, reverie, and adventure activate a lively interplay between humans and their surroundings.

**The Détournement as a Ludic Gesture**

Thus, the activity of the Situationists hovered constantly between farce and seriousness. In fact, détournement, in its playing upon notions and elements of modern culture, functions identically to the “ludic gesture,” which must always have an real-word action to play upon. The practice of psychogeography itself represents a détournement of traditional map-making.

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105 Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 14.
106 Simon Sadler, The Situationist City, 76.
Debord’s poetic text and Jorn’s drip technique attempted to depict, not just the notion of architectural interface, but more importantly, the irrational *process* involved creating the map itself. The play gestures that took place during the creation of the psychogeographies caused them to envelop a difference from rational mapping through a display of similarity. This difference manifests in the manner in which it was created, which deforms and recontextualizes conventional notions of mapping. The cartesian map finds itself inhabited by a subversive irrationality that eradicates its original function and agitates the logic it is meant to purvey. Psychogeography references the concept mapping, while simultaneously putting its ordering and rationalizing functions in a playful suspense. While traditional maps provide a utility that allows for navigation, control, and commodification of space, the psychogeography has little use-value. Like Huizinga’s description of play itself, it transcends “ordinary” life and “interpolates itself as a temporary activity, satisfying itself and ending there.” At the end of one of Jorn’s drips are the words “*Ce geste même est inutile,*” (Even this gesture is useless).

In Huizinga’s almost spiritual interpretation, play is a sacred and primordial gesture, capable of transforming language into poetry and objects into art. Transcending the dichotomy of “serious” and “non-serious,” it is portrayed as a “meta-logical” phenomenon that can “rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath.” In his exploration of the role of play forms in the art, Huizinga emphasizes the importance of this aesthetic *activeness,* writing:

> In order to become aesthetically active the arts of the Muses, or the “music” arts, have to be performed. A work of art, though composed, practiced, or written down beforehand, only comes to life in the execution of it, that is, by its being represented or produced in the literal sense of the word - brought before the

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The case is quite different with the plastic arts. The very fact of their being bound to matter and to the limitations of form inherent in it, is enough to forbid them absolutely free play and deny them that flight into the ethereal spaces open to music and poetry.\textsuperscript{110}

Containing no external function or value outside of its own active process, play’s inherent transcendence of materiality and function render it difficult to exploit within late capitalist authoritarian structures. This aesthetic interpretation of play is helpful for understanding the Situationists’ rejection of form and materiality.

In Huizinga’s theory, works of art bound to materiality are only playful during their creation or their presentation to the public, but become calcified and dormant after this. Drawing from Huizinga, the Situationists assert that the process of play is where the value of art and life reside. In Debord’s, \textit{Society of the Spectacle}, he expresses his accord with this idea, writing, “When art becomes independent, and presents its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old.”\textsuperscript{111} The moment of its creation, in which the abstracting process of play takes place, cannot be rejuvenated by the simple viewing of the art object, but only evoked as a memory. “The point,” he says, “is to actually take part in the community of dialogue and the game with time that up until now have merely been represented by poetic and artistic works.”\textsuperscript{112} Treating urbanism as a game, the Situationists sought to maintain an active role in society, advocating for collective participation in social production. Huizinga, and subsequently the Situationists, value art, not for its material product, but for the ludic gestures that go into its creation, presentation, or it’s “playing-out.”

\textsuperscript{110} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 165-166.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}
Constant’s Break with the Situationists

Architectural and urban utopias were not, therefore, the domain of the Situationists. Guy Debord eventually proposed the eradication of all artistic production, including architecture, as an anti-art critique against consumer society - where art had been degraded to an object of capitalist consumption. Naturally, this proposition was too radical for many artists - including Constant - who did not wish to make themselves redundant. Constant broke with the Situationists in 1960 (even though he had authored many prominent early manifestos), due to his insistence on creating a material context for these new urban concepts.  

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113 Wigley, Constant’s New Babylon, 16.  
114 Ibid.
Chapter Two Images

Fig. 5. Ed Van der Elsken, pages from *Love on the Left Bank*, 1957.
Fig. 6. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, Page from Mémoires, 1957.
Fig. 7. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, Page from *Mémoires*, 1957.
Fig. 8. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, Page from *Mémoires*, 1957.
Fig. 9. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, Page from Mémoires, 1957.
Chapter Three

New Babylon: A Constant Becoming

This chapter explores the ways in which Constant extends Huizinga’s theory of play to an urban design and course of revolutionary action. It is from Huizinga’s text that New Babylon’s notions of freedom, participation and desire, along with the rejection of functionalist architecture and utilitarian society, emerge. New Babylon serves as a vast playground for Huizinga’s Homo Ludens - or ‘Man at Play.’ In this way, Constant expands Huizinga’s notion of play, which he asserts is always temporary - bounded in time and space - to encompass all aspects of life. New Babylon’s rejection of productive labor aligns with Huizinga’s characterization of play as separate from “ordinary” or “everyday” life, while its insistence on being continuously rebuilt according to the desires of its inhabitants ensures this play never ends. Taking a playful approach to the serious issues at hand, Constant insisted on a structure that should remain ephemeral and unfinished, resisting the goals of material production. In radicalizing Huizinga’s theory into revolutionary ethics, the Situationists activated modernist conceptions of urbanism through constant movement, disruption, and synthesis. This chapter shows the ways in which Constant applies these tactics to a material environment through an architecture that is ungraspable to late capitalist systems of control.

Unfixed

Constant was strongly committed not only to forming an ideological critique of the city’s social structure, but also to building an environmental structure that would accommodate a utopian community. In his lecture “Unitair Urbanisme,” given at the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam on 20 December 1960, he stated:
The modern city is a thinly disguised mechanism for extracting productivity out of its inhabitants, a huge machine that destroys the very life it is meant to foster. Such exploitative machinery will continue to grow until a single vast urban structure occupies the whole surface of the earth. Nature has already been replaced. Technology has long been the new nature that must now be creatively transformed to support a new culture. The increasingly traumatized inhabitants have to take over the shaping of their own spaces to recover the pleasure of living. . . . Everybody becomes an architect, practising a never-ending, all-embracing ‘unitary urbanism.’ Nothing will be fixed. The new urbanism exists in time; it is the activation of the temporary, the emergent and transitory, the changeable, the volatile, the variable, the immediately fulfilling and satisfying.115

While traditional modern planning suppressed and isolated the play of Homo Ludens, Constant provides a material framework that actually accommodates its activities. The Situationists expanded upon Huizinga’s theory of play, extending it from the separated realm of the chess board, court, or theatre to the public realm of the urban street. This had the effect of subverting functionalist social structures and activating a passive and static environment. In New Babylon, Constant attempts to take this even further, extending the world of play to eventually encompass the entire world in order to create an urbanism of continuous emergence.

In the wake of the second world war, the age of fixity and certitude had been demolished - physically, emotionally, politically - and from the dust emerged a hazy vision of what could be. The urban structure of New Babylon has no clear beginning or end. Its scaffolding leaves us with an unfinished suggestion - an open ended gesture toward a new beginning. Hovering above ground upon massive stilts or wheels, its tangled web of cables and concrete maintains an intangibility, insistent on a life of total freedom. It morphs in a constant state of flux, as inhabitants wander and reconstruct their surroundings according to changing needs and desires.

Expanding upon an early plan for a Gypsy community in Alba, Italy, its various sectors and complex network of pathways condition inhabitants for a life of nomadic wandering. All labor, once needed for material production, is relegated to a system of fully automated machines underground. Individuals are liberated to live a life of their own creation, in which freedom, experimentation and self-satisfaction are the primary goals.

More conceptual than pragmatic, New Babylon is admittedly “not so much a picture of the future as a leitmotif,” replayed in overlapping variations that never truly resolve. The ladders and wheels that pervade Constant’s numerous drawings, paintings, collages and models do not lead one to a static destination, but exist in themselves as metonymies for movement and progress. Constant was always careful to emphasize that these plans were merely suggested possibilities. “New Babylon,” he asserted, “is not an image of the future, but an image of what the future may require. Unlike a traditional plan, ‘every element is left undetermined… The project for New Babylon only intends to give the minimum conditions for behavior that must remain as free as possible.”

“Tomorrow Will Reside in Poetry”

Thus, the model of New Babylon not only proposes a new city structure, but serves as a metaphor for broader socio-political theory. In Homo Ludens, Huizinga illustrates the insoluble

bond between play and poetry, stating, “every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus, in giving expression to life, man creates a second poetic world alongside the world of nature.” The continuous re-creation of New Babylon’s structure is posed by Constant as a poetic form of play, using atmosphere instead of words as its medium. In this way, the playworld built for Homo Ludens also becomes a poetic world, literally and metaphorically hoisted up into a realm of abstraction.

“Tomorrow Life Will Reside in Poetry,” claims the title of Constant’s 1956 statement to the First World Congress. Praising recent shifts in the visual art toward abstraction for their “break with the limitation of form,” he predicts that a parallel shift will occur in urbanism. New materials like reinforced concrete and stainless steel would allow architecture to finally reach its full potential as “an art whose plastic expression will depend on the organization and assembly of elements, the same way as a painter organizes his brushstrokes.” Just as Debord cut up pieces of newspaper to rearrange into psychogeographies, the inhabitants of New Babylon would take apart old structures to constantly reformulate the city. For Constant and the Situationists, true liberation was to be attained by this dissolution of all calcified and inherited forms - breaking them down into mobile poetic fragments to be constantly reformulated.

The definition of utopia is u-topos, “without place.” Rather than imply that utopian ideologies cannot exist, this definition infers that their topo or ‘place,’ cannot be fixed or situated. Like the the word utopia itself, New Babylon relishes in its inconclusiveness,

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121 Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 4.
123 Ibid.
remaining elusive and out of reach. The structure of the city mutates in accord with changing needs. It cannot exist as a permanent entity or be determined in a generic way. The structure of *New Babylon* was to remain as flexible and fluid as possible, ready to address the rapid changes that will inevitably occur.

**Nomadic Influences**

Of course, such changes were occurring rapidly within postwar society. As borders were reopened in Europe, an emerging geography of interconnected human groups called for an infrastructure that allowed globalized citizens to live in a world composed of shifting notions of place, origin, and context. The future would require new reference points, which Constant situates in terms of free activity rather than function. Expressions of “gypsy” culture became a source of inspiration for Constant, as well as the Situationists, whose concept of the dérive promotes aimless wandering as a form of anti-functional play.125

Nascent drawings of *New Babylon*, such as *Ets met drie gaten* [Etching with three holes], illustrate this concept, as a complex fabric of lines and floating forms emulate routes blazed by individual itineraries. Lines that converge in various layers and patterns represent free nomadic interactions between participants in the community, constantly relocating their social interactions. A network is formed by ‘desire paths,’ allowing usage patterns to emerge and building structures where pathways are worn. In this way, inhabitants structure *New Babylon* in the same spontaneous way that they formed the medieval centers of Paris, London and Amsterdam - through a constant and spontaneous negotiation of space.

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The Structuralist movement used a similarly anthropological approach to architecture and urbanism. Visual similarities between the Peter and Alison Smithson’s cluster model and Constant’s plans for *New Babylon* are explicit, as both show an empathy toward the complex indigenous lifestyles of the city. Like Constant and the Situationists, the Smithsons emphasized small-scale associations as the driving force behind their designs, implying that traditional planning, which had grown up under a rationalist umbrella, reduced the intricacy of the city structuring to extremely simplistic levels.

However, Constant’s plan sought to further abstract that of the Smithsons. His drawing evokes a constant flow of movement, not present in the cluster model, that is brought on by the participatory action of *dérive* and *détournement*. While agreeing with the Structuralists’ increased attention to patterns of association, he might have argued that it was wrong to congeal those patterns into fixed entities. The search for universal patterns of association, and the archetypal solutions that they inspired in structuralist architecture conflicted with the Constant’s quest for spontaneity and participation. While Structuralists attempted to map theories of association onto static spaces, Constant and the Situationists continued to renounce the authority of the planner as much as possible. Thus, the structure of *New Babylon* was to be inseparable from the activity of its inhabitants, rejecting the rationalist assumption that a universal “type” can be achieved and mapped onto a city from above.

The Psychogeographic maps of the Situationists were, therefore, highly influential to the development of *New Babylon*, which can be seen as an attempt to work out the *dérive* and *détournement* into an architectural concept. As each section of the structure leaps across the

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127 Sadler, *Situationist City*, 32.
landscape, it operates like a zone of the traditional city, with a particular atmosphere. Lines of traffic circulation on the ground below take the place of psychogeographic arrows. In plan and section details of each sector, the dérive plays out on at smaller scale, as discrete spaces of ambiance are linked by flowing lines of movement. New Babylon’s relationship with psychogeography becomes clear in Constant’s Groep Sectoren (Group of Sectors) model and plans of 1959, in which plexiglass layers sprawl out across a flat plane, containing architectural details that allude to a large-scale pattern of the drift. The layers visually collapse onto one another, blurring the distinction between model and map.

**Dissolving Social Structure**

The constant rebuilding of New Babylon’s physical structure may be seen as a détournement tactic for dissolving present social structures, calcified in the urban environment itself. With themes of nomadism and flexibility that persist in New Babylon’s design, Constant uses the continual uprooting of its inhabitants as a destabilizing factor for social structure. This perpetual displacement maintains a social structure of constant flux, in which hierarchical structures of the past are unable to hold up and new ones do not have time to take form.

In fact, the playful reformulations of New Babylon’s structure mimic the ludic gestures of the détournement, subverting material elements and discourse alike. In his 1967 film, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord defines the détournement in a way that seems to sum up the aims of New Babylon itself:

Détournement is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It appears in a communication that knows it cannot claim to embody any definitive certainty. It is language that cannot and need not be affirmed by any previous or superficial reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into play.
Détournement has grounded its cause on nothing but its own truth as present critique. Like play, the détournement is a process with meaning inherent to itself. It does not seek an objective or empirical truth, in the way that rationalist social structures did. In fact, it ensures that these notions do not persist by constantly subverting them from within. In the middle of Debord’s film, Critique de la Separation from 1961, his voiceover reflects: “This is a film that interrupts itself and does not come to an end.”

Like the discourse of Situationism itself, New Babylon is cyclical. Like the dérive and détournement, it remains purposefully elusive, avoiding any static destination or conclusive result. The title of one of Debord’s latest films also attests to this. In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni - We Go Round and Round in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire - is a latin palindrome, reading the same forward as it does backward. Its syntax renders it incapable of coming to an end. Like the the concepts of the dérive and détournement, it opposes the static, one-way thinking of conventional modernism, in which rationalism and empirical logic was automatically equated to good design. Huizinga discusses the palindrome as an ancient play form that, like the riddle and the conundrum, “cuts clean across any possible distinction between play and seriousness.” Based on the concept of play rather than material production, the architecture of New Babylon holds the intrinsic value of life as process rather than a means to an end. It rejects the threats of rational social structures, and remains open ended, acknowledging the

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131 Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 110.
impossibility of a static state of perfection and calling instead for a process of constant critique, improvement and expansion.
Chapter Three Images

Fig. 10. Constant, Sketch for a Sector, 1966, color lithograph, 49.0cm x 68.0cm, Constant Foundation Collection
Fig. 11. Constant, Etching with Three Holes, ca. 1958, drypoint etching, private collection.
Fig. 12. Peter Smithson, Cluster City, 1952, reprinted in Uppercase 3 (1961)

Fig. 13. Constant, Landschap met sectoren: Vogelvlucht I (Landscape with sectors: Bird’s eye view I), 1964, ink, paper, 39.6cm x 53.3cm, Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, NL
Fig. 14. Guy Debord, "Psychogeographic guide of Paris: Discourse on the passions of love: psychogeographic descents of drifting and localisation of ambient unities," 1955
Fig. 15. Constant, Groep Sectoren, 1961/ink, metal, oil paint, plexiglass, wood/Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, NL

Fig. 16. Constant, Groep sectoren, 1959. 56.9cm x 66.5cm. ink, paper. Collection Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, NL
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