Free play and the foreclosure of New Babylon

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Received 11 July 2010; in revised form 14 June 2011

Abstract. Automation may be able to completely eliminate the need for labour. But how should we use the freed-up time? In his proposal for a future urbanism, New Babylon, Constant Nieuwenhuys thought people would engage in nonstop free play, remaking surroundings. I argue that at the core of New Babylon is an intuition about a satisfying life, that of *Homo ludens*. This intuition had a broad appeal in the 1960s. New Babylon is an intuition pump, not a utopia, and Constant wants *Homo ludens* to be possible and desirable. Possibility can today be most urgently equated with sustainability. I will argue that New Babylon is not sustainable. I will also argue *Homo ludens* is not desirable, and 1960s intuitions about the good life have dated. Constant forecloses on creative activity such as we might find in improving science and technology.

Keywords: New Babylon, Constant Nieuwenhuys, Surrealism, Situationist International, urbanism, environmentalism

Escape from utopia

What would happen if everyone could just do what they wanted?

Dutch artist Constant thought his New Babylon project (1957–74) answered this question using text dioramas, drawing, and painting.\(^{(1)}\) New Babylon has been described as a city where “houses evaporate” (dust jacket of Wigley, 1998). If the radicalism of the 1960s ever gave us an alternative to hearth, home, and routine it was New Babylon. Constant’s intuition is that people with control of the time and industrial means would automate production. They would then whimsically explore their individual and collective psyche, continually remarking their surrounds, while enjoying feasts, sexual and other pleasures.

New Babylon is premised on a complete freedom and unrestricted access to social goods. All power relations are abolished. So, therefore, are ‘alienation’, power relations understood as preventing the people from determining the results of production, and hence how they consume these products. New Babylon involves mazes of usually shifting ambiences designed to stimulate and disturb. These are mounted on stilts. Due to their playfulness, the inhabitants of New Babylon are dubbed *Homo ludens*.

Before getting better acquainted with them, it is important to understand why New Babylon is still relevant. It is true that since the 1980s a conservative mood ensured New Babylon was rarely seen, even in art galleries. Gone were the days when Constant promoted New Babylon with popular multimedia tours and a Belgian youth subculture, a proto-punk movement, called the *provos*, used street actions to vigorously demand New Babylon. It is natural enough to think New Babylon might retain relevance as a utopia: it critiques contemporary cities by presenting us with a better, playful, city.

Constant did not think along these lines. He characterised utopias by reference to the Greek roots of the word. New Babylon is too tight an extrapolation on social relations and technology already existing in the 1960s to be “no placia” (Pinder, 2001, page 16). However, Constant’s is not a good way to understand utopian discourse.

\(^{(1)}\) Just prior to his death Constant distanced certain works completed after 1968 from the New Babylon project (Boersma, 2005, page 52). This will not cause trouble for my criticisms of New Babylon.
For on it classic utopias also come out not utopian. Paradigmatic examples revolve around law and order (Pinder, 2005, chapter 3). These extrapolate upon already existing moralistic social relations and methods of surveillance to propose a brighter future.

Constant could have found an easier way out of utopia, and a clearer expression of why his project is important. Unlike previous utopias, New Babylon provides no blueprint. Homo ludens make it up as they go. Constant’s audience is given clues only as to what this entails: labyrinths and stilts. They fill out the details themselves (Sadler, 1998, page 125). So there is an important difference between the New Babylon and earlier proposals. Classic utopias describe where Constant provides almost no determinate description. This appeals in the aftermath of popular utopias-turned-dystopias (*Brave New World*, 1984, *THX1138*, etc). Science fiction writer Greg Egan (1998) imagines a mutating vegetable refuge impervious to corporate influence. It also relies for appeal on not having a blueprint (page 4). Agnes Heller forecasts multiple simultaneous blueprints (Gardiner, 2000, pages 153 – 154), as did the *Latent Utopias* exhibition (2003).

Constant is even less committal. David Pinder (2005, page 21) insists that, by providing traces of an imaginary more desirable city, New Babylon remains utopian. The problem is that the traces are mere prompts. New Babylon is a baroque intuition pump, an elaborated thought experiment. In thought experiments we imagine social, physical, metaphysical, or epistemological scenarios and take our intuitive reactions to these to give us an understanding of reality. For instance, fanciful thought experiments involving trolley switches and victims tied to railway tracks have often been used to provoke intuitions to (supposedly) help us understand ethics. Constant imagines the development of automation and the abolition of alienation. His intuitive reaction to the thought of people in this situation, Homo ludens, is elaborated into art. While Pinder himself recognises New Babylon as a thought experiment (2001, page 18), by concentrating on the prompts he misses the relevance of Homo ludens. To gauge Constant’s intuitions, I will pay some attention to features he did describe, but these remain dispensable. As in da Vinci’s famous drawings, at the centre of the New Babylonian grid is a human figure with freedom of movement.

Homo ludens embodies a certain intuition, popular in the 1960s, about a kind of free play that human beings find fulfilling. Gestalt therapies, LSD, meditation, certain Eastern religious beliefs, and group and gay sex will remind us of the stimulations Homo ludens engineers. Bob Dylan’s or Jack Kerouac’s admiration for homeless wandering will remind us of Homo ludens’ innate nomadism. Since the 1980s the New Right have scorned these and other manifestations of 1960s rebellion. Conversely, later counterculture has been influenced by the 1960s zeitgeist and Constant himself affirmed 1960s subcultures were a forerunner of his new person (Pinder, 2005, page 210). It is this 1960s legacy that leaves us with an important reason to reappraise New Babylon today: to reappraise intuitions about ourselves.

Where for some New Babylon would be too much like the old, Biblical version, for others it is just impossible. There are several senses of ‘impossibility’ available. The most urgent is an ecological sense and is considered immediately after we examine New Babylon in greater detail. Hilde Heynen (1996) less convincingly takes ‘impossibility’ to mean Constant’s intuition is not worth pumping or reappraising. For Heynen to imagine a society without power relations ignores the fine-grained interplay of micro-power dynamics required for actual social interaction. So Heynen thinks Constant unwittingly represented bleak disconnectedness (pages 37 – 38). One way to understand this objection is that, without the contractual mechanisms of the market, micro-power dynamics could not be regulated satisfactorily, and we would certainly not have a society that produced megastructures [Vidler (2001, page 88) reads Heynen along these lines].
Heynen forgets arguments that a festive abolition of power and the market can be achieved [briskly passed over by her on page 36, but in the Situationist context see, for example, Debord et al (2006 [1962]), Gardiner (2000, pages 118f), and Sadler (1998)]. There have been human societies not based around the market in the past, why not the future? If Heynen objected that New Babylon does not allow for competition as an indispensable motivator in social life, it could be recalled competition not for goods, including wrestling and martial arts, suits Homo ludens (Wigley, 1998, page 69). Heynen begs the question of power against Constant rather than giving us a reason to dismiss his presentation of an influential intuition about what people want. Here, before concluding, I will examine this intuition in depth. On the other hand, we are not committed to building New Babylon simply because we do agree to pump Constant’s intuition. Thought experiments often discount a thought, and what follows argues we neither can nor should be Homo ludens.

Possibility and desirability, then, are central here and are discussed in that order. This reflects Constant’s own aspirations for New Babylon. He and anarchist Marxist group the Situationist International (hereafter SI), with which he was associated in the first years of the project, required New Babylon to perform an agitational role. Marxists have been criticised for being Promethian (Castree, 2002, page 123). That is, for having unrealistic expectations that technology will solve all problems and bestow stupendous capacity. Constant wanted to avoid the kind of cynicism about revolution Promethianism might attract. This goal sets rough limits to the speculative aspect of his project. As briefly with the Belgian proto-punks interested in Constant’s work, New Babylon is supposed to encourage activism by plausibly and graphically suggesting an attainable, and more desirable, urbanism.

Nevertheless, since New Babylon is not to be found by crossing the road, we might ask where we should search for it. The answer is ‘after the revolution’. When as a senior artist Constant affirmed he was still a Marxist committed to revolution, an interviewer replied: “It’s hard to pronounce that word [‘revolution’]” (Buchloh, 2001, page 25). Even if so, if we wish to drift into New Babylon we must first negotiate the terrain of radical social change.

Welcome to New Babylon

“Poetry”, Constant declared, “will be the house of life”. The slogan was informed by the SI’s dérives. These involved a “move through the city without purpose, thus provoking unexpected occurrences” (Heynen, 1996, page 26). Today factories, offices, and roads are designed to ensure that people do not control their productive capacities. Likewise shopping centres, stadiums, and the other infrastructure of passive consumption; the ruling class engineer consumption to impose profitable, not enjoyable, forms of living. This is ‘alienation’ in action. One result is urban boredom: leisure consumed in determined ways after hours. A nightclub enforces roles based on work and family requirements. People prepare for work, later watching repetitive sport on TV. A dérive or ‘drift’ is a response, seeking the poetic nonworkaday in the city.

The SI believed that as cities became more commercialised there was less such poetry. In drifting they also keenly felt the need for self-upkeep; the resources to be able to maintain themselves: showers, food, etc. This latter problem will soon prove important since it must be solved for New Babylon to resurrect poetry by custom remaking urban experience. New Babylon instantiates a permanent drift. Marshall Berman (1991) documents how contemporary streets from New York to St Petersburg are already characterised by shifting relations and populations. New Babylon extrapolates from the trend as experienced on dérives:
“New Babylon dispenses with notions of nostalgia ... Relations between people and built form were never fixed ... The focus of New Babylonian life was the enjoyment of living, and playing out one’s desires. The mundane preoccupations of a typical day, such as work, were replaced with exciting prospects of leisure, creativity, and traversal” (Nicols, 2004, page 30).

Homo ludens engage in untrammeled festive activity, remaking the (noninfrastructural) architecture they inhabit (Sadler, 2001, page 90). This, Constant’s idea of ‘free play’, carries with it an implication of self-discovery and other-discovery (Constant, 1959a; 2001). It is vision of communism that is ‘disinterested’ in not only profit (as we would expect), but also in production.(2)

The theoretical language that surrounds discussion of the SI often supposes every gesture is constructed (Plant, 1992). One way to read Constant’s New Babylon is as proposing that in addition every gesture can construct. The advanced technology of the New Babylon can magnify gestures and whims into environments housed on stilts and designed to invoke moods and interactions. This is a version of what the SI eponymously termed ‘constructed situations’ or otherwise ‘ambiences’. The purpose is an exploration of group psychology meant to enhance the taste of life. An emphasis on change reflects both the absence of authority and the freedom of imagination.

To understand how Constant wants his audience to fill in the details, free association is important (McDonough, 1994; Moffat, 2006, page 273). I used automatic writing to create my own sector of New Babylon. Castles of sponge where once there was a hanger covered in chintz, baroque ice palaces becoming puddles at a controlled rate, a minaret made of slime in which I often sleep, etc. As what André Breton called an “eternal Surrealism”, automatic activity complements and can draw on Constant’s historical influences (documented by Sadler, 1998). Figure 1, Group Sector (1962), shows the sense of excitement Constant intends.

Figure 1. Group Sector Constant (1962) phototype and ink on paper, 48 cm x 69 cm. License obtained to use work entitled “Group Sector, 1962”, from Viscopy. Invoice No.:11899.

(2) Anthony Hayes pointed out to me that this is a fruitful way to understand free play.
Since most of New Babylon undergoes continual change, nothing is thought to be perfect. Family values would be considered passé, but there is no authority to permit, deny, or even recommend anything. From this perspective the problem with the polyamory of a *Brave New World* is that it is enforced. There is no one way of living in New Babylon, no compulsion to monogamy any more than any enforced polyamory. If architecture is solid music, as Goethe believed, the city melts into a fluid composition, and New Babylon is more like the frenzied saxophony of Charlie “Bird” Parker than any monumental symphonic composition. Offices, family homes, churches, and brothels are obliterated. Futuresque dystopian institutions never have a chance to take root.

We have found Heynen tries to explain unintended bleakness in Constant’s work. Constant was also sometimes intentionally bleak. A central influence (Buchloh, 2001, page 24; Pinder, 2005, pages 127ff), Gilles Ivain proposed a city designed to provoke different moods including a haunted quarter and other places of disquiet. You do not create freely any ambience by forbidding some (Wigley, 1998, pages 68–69). Further, Constant’s thought experiment is supposed to provide a contrast with a better, and attainable, future world. His expressionist *The Mai Lai Massacre* (1972) sets an infamous incident from Vietnam in front of New Babylon. This provides a point of favourable comparison with what people had around them.

So we return to Constant’s Marxist politics. The possibility and desirability of his Homo ludens intuition was supposed to intensify 1960s activism and overturn capitalist society as incompatible with New Babylon. In the meantime, the revolution as envisaged by the SI was defeated. Uprisings of the later 1960s/early 1970s that often shared their ideas did not succeed in overthrowing capitalism, and nor did Constant. New Babylon’s relegation to galleries makes it is natural to ask whether Homo ludens really is possible or desirable qua appealing.

**Is New Babylon possible?**

In the context of an urban proposal, ‘possible’ should be interpreted as ‘ongoing’, and this requires sustainability. Today New Babylon would never serve the politically motivating function Constant requires if the fun proposed adds to the existing devastation of the nature. How, having inherited the ravages of capitalism, could Homo ludens be fed, let alone frolic? New Babylon would be a preeminent example of why Marxism has been criticised as being ‘cornocopian’. According to the criticism, nature is falsely thought of as a resource to be exploited endlessly in the cause of a ‘liberated’ lifestyle. Michael Gardiner similarly writes “a nonmarket society does not only have to be fun; it has to achieve a harmonious balance with the natural world” (2000, page 126).

The difficulty with dismissing New Babylon on environmental grounds is that Gardiner’s proposition does not obviously preclude the fun achieving the balance. And we find Constant’s infrastructure is, given the emphasis is supposed to be on play, almost strangely sustainable. Structures on stilts would be advantageous when it comes to capturing solar or wind energy, rising above mists and tapping higher airflows. Further, Constant shared Situationist Pinot-Gallizio’s passion for colloidal substances (Pinot-Gallizio, 1959). New substances were to come into general use as research and development resources were channelled away from militarism, salable pseudo-innovations etc. These were to be produced and used up less destructively. *(3)*

Constant also mentions “screens of radiance” alongside other virtual components (McDonough, 2001, page 98; Wigley, 1998, pages 63–65). Constant’s circuit-board-like cityscapes reinforce this impression (Constant, 1959b). If in diluted form, the Internet

*(3)* Pinot-Gallizio (1959) accompanies a text on the subject with a depiction of the pollution he hopes to end (documented in Keehan, 2003).
sometimes offers us a continuation of the New Babylon project. Surfing more ludic, less commercial, sites can in some ways approximate outcomes Constant envisioned. Artists P.i.x.l.F.u.x.a and fellow Dutchman Oosterhuis have here found the Internet conducive for the graphic representation of urban features reminiscent of Constant’s work. Especially granted renewable energy, this virtual-friendly aspect of New Babylon presents us with less wasteful play instead of another throw-away society.

But is this just convenient, a case where Constant’s self-confessed whimsy can, by coincidence, be interpreted ecologically? If so, it would suggest that as we pump the Homo ludens intuition we will find much that is not sustainable. Consider another example of bleakness Heynen finds in Constant’s work, particularly *A Tribute to Odeon* (1969, figure 2):

> “these drawings also betray a feeling of unease through the indifference with which the earth’s surface has been stripped, through the colossal scale of the structures that support the sectors, and through the endlessness of the interior spaces” (1996, pages 34 – 35).

If New Babylon is indeed everywhere and is a gigantic cityscape, we are confronted with the frightening prospect of it never ending (Wigley, 2001b; de Zegher, 2001, page 10; see also Heynen, 1996, page 28). The nightmarish feel of such a prospect is starkly expressed in J G Ballard’s (1985) *Concentration City*.

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**Figure 2.** [In colour online] *A Tribute to Odeon* Constant (1969) oil and aluminium paint on canvas, 190 cm × 200 cm. License obtained to use work entitled “*A Tribute to Odeon, 1969*”, from Viscopy including colour for Internet reproduction. Invoice No.:11899.
Again though, the infrastructure does exist in some kind of harmony with the larger world, and in this case explicitly by design:

“An increase in population is leading to the almost complete urbanisation of the landscape, destroying what was originally common land ... related to this, is the growing importance of mechanical traffic ... we cannot allow traffic to destroy the social space of cities, as it is doing now, and we cannot let population growth be responsible forchanging all landscape into one uninterrupted townscape” (Constant, 2001, page 14).

Constant envisages extensive wilderness as part of New Babylon [see, for example, Sectors Around a Forest (1966 – 1967), figure 3], but not usually intruded upon by Homo ludens. He has automated factories underground (Constant, 1998a, page 134).

Figure 3. [In colour online] Sectors Around a Forest Constant (1966 – 1967) watercolour on collage, 99 cm × 80 cm. License obtained to use work entitled “Sectors Around a Forest, 1966 – 1967”, from Viscopy including colour for Internet reproduction. Invoice No.:11899.
Tall stilts do not intrude so much on the Earth's surface. Queenslander houses, though on shorter stilts than those proposed by Constant, show how this might work. These wooden dwellings free up a surprising amount of ground space. Equally, concern with ground space is a reason Constant suggests stilts. We need not suspect lucky coincidence with environmental imperatives nor strain our interpretation on this score. So it is that New Babylon begins over already-devastated city sites, which Constant considers a write off, and then develops upward.\(^{(4)}\)

Yet a certain incongruity remains. As Heynen observes, Constant thought it was artificial environments, consisting entirely of materials socially reworked, that were the most satisfying.\(^{(5)}\) So why bother with (relatively) unworked wilderness? To answer this question, consider Constant's most speculative ecological initiative. Constant proposed a rapidly changing urban space that provided the experience of travel without Homo ludens moving in any spatial dimension. As an alternative to the individual flexibility promised by the motor car, energy is saved on mass transit (Constant, 1998b, page 226). Here we find Constant recognising that, to be possible, New Babylon has to find the energy to run automation, and as well, relating back to wilderness areas, provide the fresh air and water human beings need to metabolise their food. Due to pollution and other environmental concerns, Constant here seems to assume that reaching for the energy bonanza promised by fossil fuels is no solution.

In Constant's texts it is clear that he, like the SI, has a Marxist understanding of social metabolic process. While today there are a large number of of ecologically inclined Marxists (see Castree, 2000; 2002, pages 111ff), Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster's reading deals most directly with this issue. Their basic idea is that capitalism exists as a competitive race to exploit the worker so as to be able to exploit the land and vice versa (Burkett and Bellamy Foster, 2008). For them, Marx thinks

"the capitalist economy is an open system reliant on environmental inputs of labor power and non-human matter-energy. Marx emphasizes capitalism's tendency to deplete and despoil the land, while exploiting the worker. Stated differently, Marx argues that the metabolic systems that reproduce the productive powers of labor and the land are susceptible to adverse shocks from the system of industrial capital"

(Burkett and Bellamy Foster, 2006, page 140).

Marx proposes an alternative system in which people manage directly the metabolic systems that reproduce themselves and the land (Burkett, 2005, Burkett and Bellamy Foster, 2008). Given examples like the industrial devastation of the Ural Lakes and treatment of workers affected by such catastrophe, Constant would not want the Soviet Union to be a model of this in action. He and the SI considered the closed society found in Eastern Europe to be a form of capitalism hiding behind Marx's ideas (Plant, 1990; 1992). This leaves open the question of what future metabolic management might be like.

A number of thinkers have found any Marxist approach to the ecological issues unsatisfactory [see the brief overview by Castree (2002) pages 112 – 115; with regard to metabolic concerns see lists and discussion in Burkett (2005) and Burkett and Bellamy Foster (2006)]. Here ecological critic Val Plumwood (1981) is most relevant as she targets the energy use required for postcapitalist automation:

\(^{(4)}\) Constant made a series of maps showing New Babylon rising out of historical European cities. Some can be found in Wigley (1998, pages 150 – 155). Presumably skyscrapers which are too tall to be built over would just be demolished, as would any existing developments which got in the way of the new infrastructure. See also McDonough (2001).

\(^{(5)}\) Heynen finds this idea implausible, though she is reticent to enter New Babylon. In any case, given wilderness areas, a simple door or window could solve the problem. Note as well that, perhaps unwittingly, the New Babylon thought experiment brackets the relationship between cities and nature, complicated by the fact that the former cannot be considered separate to the latter complication (discussed in Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006).
“The automated paradise we are offered as the final freeing of man ... must be highly energy intensive and thus given any foreseeable, realistic energy scenario, environmentally damaging” (page 242). (6)

Automation could pose more of an ecological problem than Constant’s gestures at environmentally friendly infrastructure could solve, and renewable energy sources would remain peripheral to energy production. Fossil fuels would present as the easiest option, and New Babylon would evince the same domineering attitude to nature as we find today [see Green (2008) and Hyde (2009) for Plumwood’s ideas about why this is default].

There is reason to think Plumwood is right. Homo ludens is a limiting case of the people-managed approach to social metabolism discussed by Burkett and Foster. Postrevolutionary people opt for zero labour, 24/7 free play. Interestingly, Marx himself did not think this limiting case was realistic. Marx and Engels (1845—1846), page 22) had proposed that variation in tasks not restricted by monetary concerns could lessen the evils of necessary, unavoidable, labour. One reason is the amount of invisible labour already required for current social reproduction suggests we will always need human input.

A worker turns up for ready to work. A young person enters the job market, ready to earn a wage. Behind the scenes, without pay, or on lower pay, it is usually women who put energy in the right sockets to create and maintain such a worker—feeding, cleaning, etc. Equally women’s work is never done in New Babylon; Constant never mentions it (Pinder, 2005, page 205). In this way Constant never really solved the problem of upkeep found in dérives. Feminist performance artist Mierle Ukeles (1969) similarly thought that the sourball of every revolution is that someone has to clean up the mess on Monday morning.

At least some of these tasks could be performed automatically, as washing machines do today. To get closer to Homo ludens we would need something like the cleaning robots Marge Piercy (1991) imagines in her utopian vision. The problem would be, though, that Peter is robbed to pay Pauline. Increasing automation requires further energy to produce, run, and maintain. Apparently, Constant assumed we could always rely on what Berman describes as the “inexhaustible energy and inexorable momentum” ostentatiously on display in the heyday of modernity (page 331), even if he also had his suspicions about fossil fuels. Berman notes this problematic assumption was commonplace prior to the early 1970s oil/energy crisis.

In 1972 Constant forsook New Babylon, and the timing could be revealing. Plumwood had argued that a hierarchical and domineering approach to women is required for the dominating attitude to nature. (7) Conversely, she thinks the domination of nature is required for the oppression of women. Hierarchical thought in one instance is required for that in the other. This certainly fits with Burkett and Foster’s idea that exploitation of the land is needed to exploit people and vice versa. Women, already prone by family life to exploitation as invisible domestic labourers, would be a prominent and special case of this mutual exploitation (see also Caffentzis, 1992). Once energy is problematised, Constant is confronted with a Hobson’s choice along the same lines: either the ecological consequences arising from intensifying the use of robotics, or women subjugated as they are today.

(6) Permission to access Plumwood’s archives was denied to me by her literary executors, so I was unable to find any evidence she knew specifically of New Babylon. Her approach to Marx is at odds with mine in that I hold Marx believed some labour was necessary under communism (see below). Plumwood does, however, acknowledge interpretations of Marx outside the Marxism she criticises (1981, page 244).

(7) Prominent in Plumwood (1981), with brief summaries of this idea in her other work also found in Green (2008) and Hyde (2009).
If women are subjugated, then on Constant's own preferred social theory, we get power relations incompatible with Homo ludens. The first slave, Marx and Engels acknowledged, is woman. Or, Homo ludens is saved only by an unsustainable energy outlook that implies ecological devastation. Plumwood has a solution—metabolic input from necessary labour (1981, page 242). This too is incompatible with Homo ludens. Nor should we get the wrong idea about Piercy’s cleaning bots. In her utopias, necessary labour remains. In Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) people work in the field. In Body of Glass (1991) the presence of cleaning robots is not intended to suggest that her anticorporate town can simply take thoughtlessly from already damaged surrounds. What Piercy actually suggests is that in any lightening of necessary labour we must accept that women have performed it unacknowledged.

Constant might point out that cooking and (especially) childrearing could be free play. But what about clearing up plates after a huge banquet or changing many dirty nappies at a communal care facility? The brute necessity of these tasks suggests that even setting aside the ongoing impact on the environment, there could be no Homo ludens. Entering into the spirit of Constant's thought experiment, and at the risk of being Promethean, we could imagine such tasks automated. But the more we import sophisticated robotics, the more we add to New Babylon's domestic energy debt. Constant might reach for further speculative ideas to tip the metabolic balance back. One idea from the 1960s has orbiting solar panels, highly efficient without atmospheric interference, beaming vast amounts of power back to Earth. But Plumwood's criticism concerns a 'foreseeable' energy scenario, and for New Babylon to serve his agitational purpose, Constant is similarly confined. New Babylon is not possible.

Creative and expressive production and the desirability of New Babylon

I turn now to the question of whether or not New Babylon is desirable. It might be thought that since New Babylon is not possible this question needs not be answered. But it remains important to reappraise the intuition that human beings would want nonstop free play if such was attainable. The hunch that they would want nonstop play heavily informs the legacy of the 1960s (eg, the hippy and other play-only lifestyles of activists since the 1990s, or as they are sometimes termed, 'slacktivists'). Constant could retain his intuition about this, even if he also had to bite the bullet and admit he is Promethean about the possibility of New Babylon itself. He could hope that whatever agitational appeal New Babylon thereby loses is counterbalanced when the sheer desirability of his proposed urbanism makes itself felt. In this section we will find that limited to the preconscious, Consant is, undesirably, unable to provide Homo ludens with purpose. This can also be linked to the contemporary suspicions about science and technology encountered in some contemporary oppositional quarters.

I mentioned that Heynen misses the intention behind some of the darker moments in New Babylon, but she does not do Constant quite the same disservice to detect aimlessness in his work. She finds it in his Terrain Vague (1973). The title references Constant's very different belief, inherited from the dérive and otherwise manifest in New Babylonian labyrinths, that getting lost produces excitement rather than aimlessness. But here a detail of Constant's intuition of a life without work is at odds with experience. Today traffic damage to street signs, malls that channel customers past businesses, or street directories containing ghostly streets to prevent breaches of copyright, all lead to frustration. Constant could respond that this is an experience of the rat race, not New Babylon. Getting lost would be more fun if it was collectively planned in freed-up time rather than being another uncontrolled side effect of an unplanned market society.
A deeper problem with the intuition Constant pumps is nevertheless revealed. To begin, let us consider Constant’s own background so we can get a better idea of what he does—and does not—mean by free play. Dérites experimented with pulp: mysterious meetings, unlikely romances, and daring escapades. Yet genres like thrillers and spy stories are premised on the society the SI sought to escape. Plots include crime, prostitutes, police, competing nations, mainly male heroes, etc. Constant used free association to make up the difference when genre fiction informs us only loosely informs us about a postrevolutionary society. The starting point here is the Surrealist idea that the liberation of the id would lead to political and creative emancipation. In his younger days Constant was involved with ‘CoBrA’ (Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam)—an affiliation of European artists rethinking Surrealism. The group differed from the Surrealists in rejecting even the term ‘id’ as too theory laden. To underwrite free association, Constant instead invoked children’s pretheoretical unself-consciousness (Wigley, 2001a, pages 34–36).

The SI, by contrast, headed in the opposite direction. Pinder finds masculinist assumptions (about upkeep for drifting male heroes?) implicit in the dérive. He also thinks the drifts were a learning process by which such assumptions were replaced by better ideas (2005, pages 158–159). This stream of the avant-garde was interested in Hegel (Wollen, 1989). Hegel argued that mistakes are part of an increasingly conscious use of reason, so we would expect a move towards explicit, and more formal, argument. This is indeed what we find. Moffat (2006, page 274) has the SI initially follow a Surrealist and 1960s tendency to abandon rigorous argument to conservatives influenced by Popper and Hayek. Soon enough though, things changed. For McDonough (2001, page 93), Debord had begun by making epigrams and finished with proper arguments. Indeed, Debord eventually argued that activists should study formal logic to be convincing (Debord, 1990, chapter X). The SI moved away from the same preconsciousness Constant endorsed.

Critical of Surrealist overtheorisation of the id, Constant was able to side with the SI against Surrealism while remaining informed by a childlike sensibility. The deeper underlying difference was disguised when Constant could agree with the SI that power and alienation should be abolished. But he was forced to resign when the SI rejected art in favour of theory in 1962. Constant never properly argued for his exclusive emphasis on the preconscious when he left the SI, instead relying on art to represent it. Constant’s continuing emphasis on free association explains a lingering surreality in New Babylon (Romito, 2001) and similarities with Aragon’s 1994 [1926] iconic Surrealist novel, The Paris Peasant.


This tells us that the aimlessness Heynen finds in New Babylon is not confined to the unfortunately titled Terrain Vague, or remedied simply because it is Homo ludens.
roaming the labyrinths. The derives were premised on the idea that (Surrealist) country walks were aimless. The SI thought that such excursions did not allow significant reimagination of surrounds, unlike city drifts. But it is not obvious that imaginative appreciation of urban surrounds, or even imaginative interaction with the cityscape, restores aim. The SI acknowledged this (The Situationist International, 1958). One can dissolve in the city, without the means to formulate coherent goals beyond the fulfillment of immediate needs. This helps explain the destructive effects of homelessness. Involvement in production could provide purpose as it engaged different, including analytical, abilities over a period of time. Only such fuller engagement of the person in the longer term, I suggest, combats aimlessness. Interactive enjoyment of urban surrounds seems more promising as a backdrop for such purpose.

Returning briefly to Plumwood’s criticism of automated utopias, we can move onto a better idea of what purpose could involve. Plumwood thinks that a horror of drudgery explains the Marxist drive to unsustainable automated utopia (1981, page 242). Plumwood also believes in “creative and expressive production”. In creative and expressive production, the imagination would be combined with an instrumental approach to reconfigure a productive process. Production is ‘creative’ in that new ideas would accompany rigorous thinking about a difficulty, and ‘expressive’ in expressing a desire to have satisfying lives with others, better use one’s tools and to be a harmonious part of a larger environment. There is no doubt Constant has the imagination to admit such production would be free of drudgery. Constant’s problem is rather that because they

Figure 4. [In colour online] Labyratorium Constant (1962–1963) ink on paper, 48 cm × 69 cm. License obtained to use work entitled “Labyratorium, 1962–1963”, from Viscopy including colour for Internet reproduction. Invoice No.:11899.
are exclusively interested in preconscious exploration, and disinterested in production, Homo ludens would, a fortiori, also be disinterested in creative expressive production.

Science and technology, problematic in New Babylon, could otherwise provide examples of such production. For instance, Plumwood observes that, rejecting the idea of creative expressive production, Marxists are unable to table concrete suggestions regarding alternatives to planned obsolescence (1981, page 243). Such obsolescence, wasteful at all stages of the production process, is apparently unavoidable given market competition. A redress is not only important from an environmental perspective, for Plumwood it could provide stimulating insight into new ways of living. With science and technology problematised by Constant, it is unsurprising that Plumwood’s observation is borne out by New Babylon. Instead of ideas about greater noncommercially viable durability (for example, universally interchangeable kinetic modules), Constant tends to paint devices, large and small, out of his city.

It is easy enough to generalise from a failure to engage with planned obsolescence to the foreclosure of New Babylon on a range of potentially satisfying pursuits. If there were free movement between Agnes Heller’s multiple utopias, there would be similarities with Homo ludens. Heller also shares Constant’s assumption that science and technology neglect important parts of the personality. Heller is explicit though; the stultifying effect is due to commercial pressures (Gardiner, 2000, page 148). These pressures do not exist in New Babylon. It is only in a place like New Babylon that we could have creative expressive production involving, for instance, science and technology. Yet, for Constant, this form of production is absent.

So we can move on to other examples. The biomorphic shape in Labyratorium can only ironically recall Pinot-Gallizio’s contention that imagining new substances outside commercial/military constraints could encourage social dissatisfaction. Situationist Asger Jorn had postrevolutionary society embarking upon spacecraft construction, part of a nonexploitative cosmic journey enable by more extensive cooperation (Bernstein, 1960). No matter how exciting this project might be. New Babylonians would not be interested. In Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) Piercy has one character passionate about treatments for a highly specific ailment. With additional resources for research medicine is more personalised, and supercedes institutionalised specialisations. This plausibly creative endeavour also gives us postrevolutionary health care, a detail necessarily neglected by Constant. In Piercy’s anticorporate town of Body of Glass (1991) android design is relished. This is a more plausible idea of labour-saving postrevolutionary robotics than Constant could ever provide.

These examples reraise the question of aimlessness. Scientific instrumental rationality is only one area for creative and expressive production involving analytical capacities. Organic permaculture may be another, less technological example. The point is Constant’s assumptions about preconsciousness foreclose on abilities and activities that provide purpose. These warrant further consideration in a New Babylonian context, even if the exercise of these aspects can be problematic today. The foreclosure is the trouble, not that ambiences, group sex, or movable feasts might not be rewarding. Without social power, these cognitive functions are not foreclosed upon by force. The foreclosure is due to the intuition of Homo ludens, and it must be accordingly assessed.

Labyrinths can be a sources of fun. Usually, though, this is a diversion in the context of a purposeful life. When purpose itself is frustrated, enjoyment vanishes. While free play can be goal directed (eg, sex, food), solving problems that engage with a fuller range of analytical capacities is needed for purpose. New Babylon—prizing a preconsciousness modelled on child’s play, and rejecting a creative expressive participation in production—offers no prospects for this. Nor does it offer any substitute purpose. New Babylon is permeated with aimlessness. It is not desirable.
Conclusion

New Babylon is supposed to be about the future, but in many ways it is an artifact of the past. It is a monument to attitudes that we rightly associate with the 1960s; a prizing of preconscious investigation that people of the time undertook through drugs or by appropriating Indian or other religious ideas. Even if we recognise the need to move beyond these attitudes in thinking about the form of a new society, this does not mean New Babylon is not relevant. Rather, it is relevant in two ways. Firstly, understanding it can help us understand how the zeitgeist has changed, how we might feel different about ourselves than people did in Constant’s not-too-distant past. Secondly, understanding the failures of New Babylon can give us a more viable vision of the future.

Because the importance of Constant’s work has been forgotten, it has become a little too fashionable to lay siege to New Babylon. In the second decade of the 21st century the militarisation of society and the destruction of nature make it likely that we will soon experience significant social change. Often this is taken to mean intensifying conflicts and devastating hardships. But if humanity could decisively tackle global problems, the change could be for the better. In that case it would be helpful to know what we should be trying to achieve. New Babylon presents a view of the future that warrants serious consideration and can still help us rethink what people of Constant’s time found attractive. This fits Constant’s own ideas about why New Babylon is important. New Babylon is a thought experiment intended to make us think Homo ludens is possible and desirable. Thus it rises or falls. It does indeed fall, and we should understand why.

In terms of possibility New Babylon was live before the 1970s energy crisis hit the West. For the first time the crisis made many aware fossil fuel was not a limitless resource simply to be exploited. Like other activists of the 1960s, Constant was ahead of most people by to some extent recognising metabolic irresponsibility. But the aspects of the New Babylon that do gesture beyond fossil fuels are insufficient to keep it running. Traditionally women have undertaken the upkeep required for the continuance of society, and power relations kept them performing their tasks unacknowledged. They are unacknowledged in New Babylon too. If Constant could automate domestic work, as his thought experiment dictates, then New Babylon would be energy thirsty. Given foreseeable technology it would revert to unsustainable practices.

Having thus concluded New Babylon is impossible, to understand 1960s ideas properly from a contemporary vantage I still had to settle accounts with the desirability. There does seem to be aimlessness in New Babylon. Constant would doubtless claim that it appears from only the perspective of today’s society. Against this I have argued purpose is needed. I argue Constant focuses exclusively on preconscious exploration with his idea of free play, and this explains the problematic status of science and technology in New Babylon. Purpose requires engagement of more analytical capacities over a longer term. Without alienation, Constant should be able to exercise these abilities though creative and expressive production and provide purpose. But as he came to occupy his own corner of the European avant garde, his idea of free play, which involved preconsciousness only, reminds me of subcultures like the hippies. Constant cannot use science and technology to imagine such production, or allow it at all. New Babylonians are aimless and New Babylon is not desirable.

So we leave New Babylon, older but wiser. As concerns directions for future agitational research, the conclusions suggest more mindfulness. As Hegel might have said, we need to think more analytically about fulfillment in order to recognise the fulfillment in analytical thinking. This is alongside any ideas of fun inherited from Constant’s time. So 1960s intuitions about a good time need to be reassessed: not as
morally bankrupt pipe dreams, but as insufficient alone. Pinot-Gallizio, Jorn, and Piercy all offer us promising and more inclusive ideas of how people might spend time if alienation was abolished. The do-it-yourself component of the New Babylon could also be developed. Even crude imaginings around the fuller range of human capacity could be stimulating. The virtual-friendly aspect of New Babylon could complement this direction. Instead of verbalising or depicting the alienated consumption that (often cynically) today passes for a good time, websites could portray and discuss ideas for desirable future lives.

Acknowledgements. In later 2003 two Canberra discussion/publishing groups combined an interest in DIY expression with, among other things, an examination of Constant. These were *The City Project* and *Aberrant Genotype Press*. Thanks to both for prompting this paper. In particular, Anthony Hayes helped me mount a limited defence of New Babylon when those involved in *Aberrant Genotype Press* criticised *Homo ludens* for lacking family values and a work ethic. Anthony also allowed me access to his library of avant-garde material. I am indebted to Dominic Hyde for reading an earlier draft of this paper and assisting me with the work of Val Plumwood. Rose Cook helped me gain access to hard copy resources concerning the New Babylon not available in Australia.

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Constant, 1962 – 1963 *Labyratorium* ink on paper, 48 cm × 69 cm
Constant, 1966-1967 *Sectors around a Forest* watercolour on collage, 99 cm × 80 cm
Constant, 1969 *A Tribute to Odeon* oil and aluminium paint on canvas, 190 cm × 200 cm
Constant, 1972 *The Mai Lai Massacre* oil on canvas, 120 cm × 130 cm
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