

Cobra: The Written Image

Opening speech by Kim van der Horst, 25-09-2026 Steendruk Museum, Valkenswaard

It was inevitable that CoBrA fell apart after three years. The end of CoBrA [Dying in Beauty] was inherent in the character of the group.

It is 1948. The population in Europe is traumatized, European cities lie in ruins, reconstruction has begun, Marshall Aid is being rolled out, the Nuremberg trials are in full swing, international law is being written.

On a terrace in Paris sits a group of artists. They have survived. The scarcity of the hunger winter, the isolation of hiding, the raids of the Arbeitseinsatz, the censorship of the Kultuurkamer. They are not planning to submit themselves once again to a dogmatic theory. Experiment will be leading. And we will know it.

A clearer embodiment of life energy, desire for freedom, protest, collaboration, and creation than CoBrA is hard to imagine. But an explosion cannot be institutionalized. And that is precisely where the tension lies.

For this group, printmaking, lithography, is the medium of choice. For individual prints, group works, artists' editions, and for the magazines *Reflex* and *CoBrA*. Not only to distribute their work and ideas in large print runs, but also to break the rich bourgeoisie's exclusive right to own art. Nothing is more democratic than an affordable art print on the kitchen wall. With the first commercially sold works, the CoBrA group became part of the very system they opposed. It is like a Banksy in a museum.

Where the CoBrA artists used lithography to spread their work and ideas, in a world of influencers and viral messages a run of 100 is limited, almost unique. And the materiality and craftsmanship of a print feel authentic precisely because of that.

In a world where everything takes place in a digital, parallel universe, in which algorithms constantly flood you with controversy tailored exactly to your triggers, the radical act is to cut the connection. Back to nature, to silence, to a place where you can hear yourself think. It is the task of the artist today to resist distraction and devote themselves radically to their own obsession. To ignore the compulsion of the algorithm and create without chasing effect. Is that still possible?

In 1949 the group held its first exhibition at the Stedelijk: “Exposition Internationale d’Art Expérimental.” It led to a physical uproar and devastating headlines. Unlike today, that kept visitor numbers limited.

If today, as an artist, you manage to choose from the overwhelming flood of possibilities something to resist, something to rail against, then every controversy is immediately turned into viral success by the algorithm. Where the CoBrA artists had to wait years for their art of resistance to be noticed, the timeline of viral success is a news cycle at most.

On my phone I read the headlines of our globally connected world in the palm of my hand. “Tech Utopians want to build a city for a post A.I. world”.

I think about how Constant resisted the word utopia. A utopia, according to him, was an idealized expression of existing bourgeois notions. It was a place that could exist nowhere. When I think of all contemporary utopias, most of them are examples of world build on the ruins that emerged after an event of destruction.

But according to Constant, *New Babylon* was a concrete, theoretical proposal, based on actual social changes he observed: far-reaching automation and robotization.

Labor becomes unnecessary.

Leisure abundant.

The playful, creative human flourishes.

A nomadic lifestyle is the result.

He was not wrong in observing these developments.

What he did not foresee was that technology itself would become the opium of the people. We live in a world in which technology is in the hands of a handful of tech billionaires. The means of production and the technology in New Babylon are in the hands of the community and are used to provide everyone with a dignified existence.

Constant too becomes disillusioned. And that is due to the Vietnam War. The first war to be mass broadcasted on television into every living room. On 30 April 1970 he makes the collage *Mekong River* with newspaper clippings from *Het Parool*. It marks a turning point in his belief that *New Babylon* is a viable alternative in the short term. Four years later he ends his New Babylon project definitively.

In 1948 Constant writes in his manifesto, which none of the other artists sign, that “modern art stands isolated and powerless in a society that seems to concentrate all its forces on its own destruction.

Turned into an instrument for glorifying bourgeois ideals.”

He continues.

“In this period of upheaval, the creative artist can play no other role than that of the revolutionary and is obliged to destroy the last remnants of an empty and obstructive aestheticism to awaken the creative instincts that still slumber unconsciously in human beings.

The masses do not yet know their own creative possibilities.

These are stimulated by an art that does not specify but suggests, that through arousing associations and speculating on them will bring about a new fantastic way of seeing. From now on, the viewer is themselves involved in the creative process.

Seen in this light, the act of production is of far greater significance than the product, while the latter will gain in meaning the more traces it bears of the labor that brought it into being. Gone is the illusion that the artwork as such represents a fixed value: that value depends on the creative capacity of the viewer, which in turn is stimulated by the suggestions evoked by the artwork.”

In 1993 Constant says this: “The history of art is also the history of attacks on art: destruction, vandalism, iconoclasm, and persecution. Especially in this age, with treacherous means. ... But in exile or clandestinely, art always finds an audience somewhere, a few supporters or admirers. To destroy art completely, these therefore must be eliminated. More effective than imprisoning the artist is manipulating his audience until it disappears altogether. This latest method, without visible violence, is economic in nature and relies on a powerful propaganda apparatus [with a network of countless museums across the world]. Thus, anti-art has come to be established as the official art of our time, with the inevitable consequence: the demoralization of artists.”

In a world where the means are more powerful and more invisible, the *expérience*, the experience, the exchange between the artwork and the observer, is once again a radical act.

Sources:

Constant Nieuwenhuys - Manifest, 1948

Constant Nieuwenhuys - Lecture at Cercle d'Art Paris, 1993