A Portrait of Guy Debord by Constant Nieuwenhuys

By Alistair Hemmens on Marblepunk.com, July 12, 2012

This is a portrait of Guy Debord painted by Constant Nieuwenhuys in 1989. Constant had originally begun his career as a painter but soon gave it up for architecture. As a member of the SI in the late 1950s he invented the idea for a town called *Dériville* that was meant to embody Situationist theory and practice. It was Debord who suggested that Constant rename his concept *New Babylon*. [Although no one to my knowledge has mentioned this before, I am pretty sure that Debord had in mind the film of the same title about the Paris Commune of 1871 of which I have spoken in an earlier post.

In the 'official' history of the SI, the Debord-Constant split is usually presented as a clear-cut rupture. However, the actual break was far more messy and complicated. Debord refused to accept the resignation letter of Constant for weeks before making it available to the wider SI (trying to convince his friend to change his mind in the meantime). The argument began largely over the utterly absurd publication of designs for a church (!) by members of the briefly active Dutch section of the SI.

n the SI review Constant was critiqued for having a technocrat idea of how Situationist ideas could be realised in practice (a critique that Vaneigem has reiterated in a recent interview). Despite the resignation of Constant, Debord was by no means as hostile towards him as other ex-members and there was the possibility that it could have become a clandestine relationship as with Asger Jorn after his resignation. However, Constant and Debord never picked up where they had left off later on.

This painting was created by Constant in his later life when he took up painting again. It is a strange and wonderful image. There is something of the Picture of Dorian Gray here - the dandy after a lifetime of indulgence - and also of that famous détourné papal portrait by Françis Bacon. But it is hard to pin down. The deep orange setting, the soft wash of colours and the playful lines around the head and face, these are warm and friendly. There is an element of détournement in this image, not only in its ludic qualities, but perhaps because it is inspired by photographs and not a sitting portrait. Indeed, this is by far one of the most interesting images of Debord out there.

[This is a poor quality version of the image. The original is more sharp and vibrant.]

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