

Where is 'utopia' now: an exploration of contemporary Dutch utopian thought and art

Runette Kruger

Lecturer in Art Theory at the Tshwane University of Technology.

krugerr@tut.ac.za

The term 'utopia' originated in 1516, when Thomas More christened his imaginary perfect society 'Utopia'. The name combines the Greek terms *eutopia* ('good place') and *outopia* ('perfect place' or 'no place'). In this article, this binary aspect of utopian thought (of transcendent utopias versus utopias achievable here and now) is utilised in an analysis of three waves of utopian thought and art, focusing on the most recent. These waves correspond to the post-World War I and post-World War II eras respectively, and to current (early twenty-first century) thought. The term 'utopia', as used here, refers to an attempt to create an alternative social system in order to abrogate social tension. Current pre-occupations with 'utopia' can be interpreted as a focus on inclusivity, diversity and multiculturalism in an attempt to counter parochialism and othering. In this paper it is argued that the ideal of 'unity-in-diversity' re-occurs in Dutch utopian art from the early as well as mid-twentieth century and again at present. Furthermore, the discourse of contemporary art movements is contextualised in terms of current utopian thought, in order to answer the question: Where is utopia now?

Key words: Constant, Cybertopia, Mondrian, Multiculturalism, Utopia.

Waar is 'utopia' nou: 'n ondersoek na kontemporêre Nederlandse utopiese denke en kuns

Die term 'utopia' het sy ontstaan in 1516, met die benaming van Thomas More se denkbeeldige, perfekte samelewing. Die naam kombineer die Griekse terme *eutopia* ('goeie plek'), en *outopia* ('perfekte plek' of 'geen plek'). Hierdie tweeledige aspek van utopiese denke (van 'n bo-aardse utopie teenoor 'n utopie haalbaar in die hede) word hier aangewend in die ontleding van drie golwe van utopiese denke en kuns, met die fokus op die mees onlangse golf. Hierdie golwe stem ooreen met die tydperke na die Eerste- en Tweede Wêreld oorloë, en met hedendaagse (vroeg een-en-twintigste-eeuse) denke. Die term 'utopia', soos hier aangewend, verwys na 'n poging om 'n alternatiewe sosiale sisteem te skep met die doel om sosiale spanning te bowe te kom. Hedendaagse utopiese denke kan geïnterpreteer word in terme van 'n fokus op insluiting, diversiteit en multikulturalisme, met die doel om uit te styg bo nougesette denke en 'anders-makery'. Met hierdie ondersoek word daar gepoog om aan te toon hoe die ideaal 'eenheid-in-veelheid' herverskyn in Nederlandse utopiese kuns in die vroeë-en middel twintigste eeu, en weer tans. Verder word die diskoers van kontemporêre kunsbewegings kontekstualiseer in terme van huidige utopiese denke, om sodoende die vraag te beantwoord: Waar is utopia nou?

Stelwoorde: Constant, Kubertopia, Mondrian, Multikulturalisme, Utopia.

There are a number of binaries by means of which, according to utopian theorist Frank Manuel, the plethora of extant utopian constructs can be categorised. Manuel (1966: vii) lists utopias which can be described as 'hard' or 'soft', 'sensate' or 'spiritual', 'escapist' or 'realisational', 'collectivist' or 'individualist'. The term 'utopia' originated in 1516 when Thomas More christened his imaginary perfect society 'Utopia'. The name combines the Greek terms *eutopia* ('good place') and *outopia* ('perfect place' or 'no place'), (Mumford 1966: 8). In this analysis of twenty-first century Dutch utopian art and discourse, the binary aspect of temporal versus transcendent utopias is employed. This framework will be utilised in order to 'situate' utopia, (in other words to determine 'where' such a utopia might 'be'), and to gain clarity around the perceived nature and social context of such a utopia. The term utopia, as used here, is defined as *an alternative social system* created in order to come to grips with social tension. From this point of view, Frank Manuel (1966: xii) observes, utopia "can be read as expressive of specific social conflicts which it presumes to resolve". In his *Le mythe de la cité idéale* (1961), Roger Mucchielli (in Manuel 1966: xi) defines utopia as "the myth, awakened by personal revolt against the human condition ... which meets the obstacle of impotence and evokes in the imagination an *other* or a nowhere, where all obstacles are removed". Ernst Bloch (in Marques 2007: 139) describes this kind of utopian thought as "dreaming forward".

A secondary framework useful in the interrogation of the locus of utopia as reflected in current Dutch artistic practice, is the arguable re-occurrence of such thought (and art) in eras of heightened social crisis and instability. Saskia Poldervaart (online 2003), in her essay

Utopianism and sexual politics in Dutch social movements: 1830-2003, identifies the “last three utopian periods” in the Netherlands as occurring from 1825 to 1850, from 1890 to 1920 and in the nineteen-sixties. A fourth period, which is, as argued here, currently taking shape, might be added to these, whereas nineteenth century utopian thought is ignored for the purposes of the present discussion. Thus the focus here falls on the following eras: the post First and Second World War periods respectively,¹ and the present era, afflicted by pervasive suspicion toward social ideology, the foreboding sense of the ‘end of history’,² and, more acutely, the global religious conflict and paradigmatic clashes as highlighted by the events of 9/11. It is possible to argue that the ideal of ‘*eenheid-in-veelheid*’ (unity-in-diversity), originally formulated by early twentieth century Dutch architect Petrus Berlage, *re-occurs* in Dutch utopian thought and art in these three eras. For instance it occurs after World War I, (when Mondrian adopted it as a model of social harmony in Neoplastic theory), after World War II (in the utopian architectural models for New Babylon, collectivist city of the future, created by Dutch artist Constant A. Nieuwenhuys) and in early twenty-first century movements such as Toyism and the Association of Autonomous Astronauts (AAA), and in collaborative, technological art events such as the Second Life Walkie Talkie Walks, discussed below.

Thus, this paper seeks to explore the locus of current Dutch concepts of utopia – where these utopias might be considered to *be* – against a binary framework consisting of an ethereal version of utopia versus a conceivably physical manifestation of utopia, and against the framework of its reoccurrence as the ideology ‘*eenheid-in-veelheid*’ after periods of social turmoil in the twentieth century and presently.

The Platonic utopia of the ‘eternal now’

The differing twentieth century versions of what an ideal society might entail delineate the changes in social, artistic and philosophical discourse from the early to the mid-twentieth century. The nature of the utopian theories from these respective periods differs intrinsically. The first era, spanning the late nineteenth century and the decades just after the First World War, saw a spate of quasi mystical visions of a spiritualised society beyond a positivist, materialist view of the world and beyond the brutalities of war. The writings and abstract art of early twentieth century Dutch painter Piet Mondrian fall within this category, and his rigorous Neoplastic theory, published in the *De Stijl* journal, evince a sustained attempt to resolve feelings of acute alienation from society and from the material world at large.³

Mondrian’s generation witnessed the formation of various esoteric schools of thought and the rejection of materialism and positivism (Holtzman & James 1986: 11). The turn of the twentieth century saw the spread of nihilist dread, uncertainty and angst, and these tensions came to a climax after the War. In the aftermath, theorists and artists embraced various combinations of anarchy, internationalism (as opposed to nationalism), mysticism and arcane utopian theories (Long 1986: 206). Mondrian believed that his art would stimulate awareness of the possibility of perfect social harmony (defined by Mondrian as the balancing of all possible opposites), which would in turn engender the transformation in consciousness necessary for the establishment of such an ideal society. In this way Mondrian draws heavily on Hegel’s notion on the role of art, which coincides, for Hegel, with that of philosophy and religion. Art, for Mondrian as for Hegel, “is the means through which we can know the universal and contemplate it” (Mondrian 1970: 63). Thus, Mondrian contended that his art could, and would, lead to an earthly utopia, envisaged as the result of a spiritual, mystical evolution of society (Kruger 2006: 130).

Mondrian’s formulation of the principles of an abstract art not for its own sake but for the sake of ushering in an era of societal perfection, can be seen to coincide with his rejection

of materialism. Explaining his goal in art, Mondrian (in Holtzman & James 1986: 14, 17) declares that art can “provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm [art] is ... the path of ascension: away from the material ... Art must transcend [physical] reality ... Otherwise it would be of no value to man”. Whilst Mondrian lauded the technological achievements of his time, technology was valuable to Mondrian not for its potential to improve material life, but for its ability to point the way toward new, non-material consciousness. About the transformative powers of technology Mondrian (1986a: 251, 262) states:

[P]rogress in science and technology ... appears to obstruct moral evolution [yet] ... achieve[s] a new, free form of life that is precisely capable of ... transforming man’s vague intuition into consciousness ... The machine above all is a necessary means for human progress.

Thus, technology’s virtue lay for Mondrian in its potential to act as moral and spiritual catalyst.

This stance is in keeping with Mondrian’s subscription to the Hegelian notion of mankind’s evolution, through the unfolding of history, away from the material toward the spiritual, and of the dialectic synthesis of every phenomena into an Absolute, all-encompassing Whole (Kruger 2006: 138, 78). It can furthermore be contextualised against the Platonic tendencies in Mondrian’s thought (Kruger 2006: 183). These tendencies include the rejection of the validity of sense perception and the notion of the ‘abstract-real’ artwork as the worldly conciliation of Form and form, *noumena* and phenomena,⁴ the ideal and the corporeal. For Mondrian his abstract compositions were the most abstract, non-material representations of a Platonic, harmonious continuum possible in a material world. These artworks were, as such, ‘concrete-universals’, conceived of as harbingers of spiritual (i.e. non-material) existence.

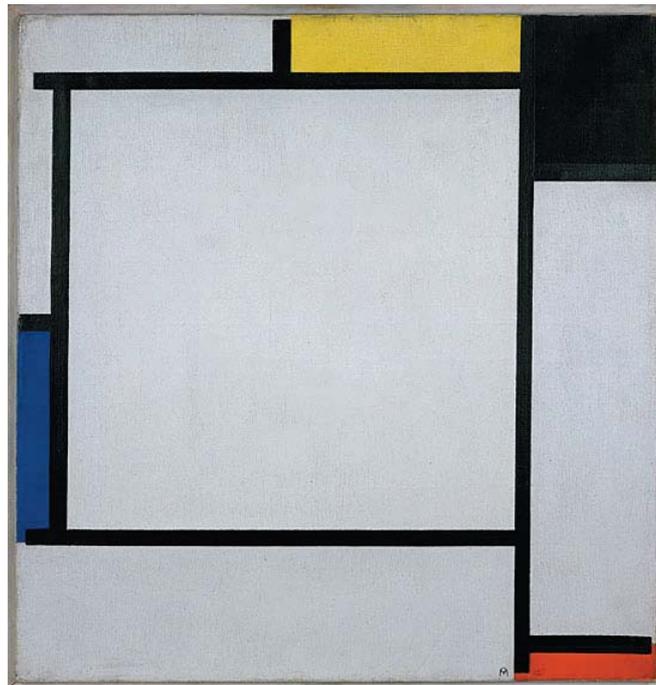


Figure 1

Piet Mondrian, *Tableau II with yellow, black, blue, red, and grey*, 1922, oil on canvas, 21 7/8 x 21 1/8 inches, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_112_4.html).

Hilton Kramer (online 1995) describes how Mondrian laboured to avoid reference to concrete materialism in his art, and aspired instead to create art as an “instrument of pure spirit”. In short, Mondrian’s utopia (and, it can be argued, Plato’s utopia), is a place freed from the exigencies and brutalities of material existence.

Key to Mondrian's model of utopia as universal harmony is the relationship between the individual and society, a relationship defined by contemporary Dutch architect Petrus Berlage' as *eenheid-in-veelheid*, or unity in diversity. As an idealistic notion, it was adopted by Mondrian in his conception of a harmonious society where neither excessive individuality nor blind collectivism takes precedence.

The *location* of Mondrian's utopian society, divorced from all taint of the material, can be contextualised against the background of De Stijl inquiry into the existence of a spatial fourth dimension. At the start of the twentieth century, speculation around the nature of the fourth dimension was common, in scientific as well as artistic and philosophical circles. Physicist Albert Einstein, who formulated his Special Theory on Relativity in 1905, conceived the fourth dimension as a space-time continuum. Yet other early twentieth century theorists saw in the fourth dimension possibilities of transcending the material and side-stepping positivism. One such theorist, whose work circulated among the artistic avant-garde of Russia as well as Europe, was mystic Russian philosopher Peter Demianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947). In her thesis on the relationship between early Modernist art and mystic and scientific notions of the fourth dimension (*The fourth dimension and non-Euclidean geometry in Modern art*, 1983) Linda Dalrymple Henderson describes Ouspensky's inquiry into the nature of the fourth dimension as 'hyperspace philosophy'. Henderson uses the term to differentiate mystical and metaphysical inquiry into the fourth dimension from, for instance, Einstein's scientific approach to the topic (Henderson 1983: 25). From a mystical point of view, the inscrutable fourth dimension seems a viable locus for such ideal entities as Plato's Forms and the Kantian *noumena* or 'things-in-themselves', both described as the respective sources of what there is in the material world and what we are able to fathom and experience. Henderson describes how the Cambridge Platonists, active in the seventeenth century, were indeed the first to find a home for Plato's Forms in the fourth dimension.

Ouspensky (in his work *Tertium Organum*, 1911), goes to great lengths to infer by means of analogy the existence and nature of the spatial fourth dimension from observable conditions in the three dimensions with which we are familiar. Ouspensky argues that if a one dimensional line is the trace of the movement of a non-dimensional point, and a two dimensional plane is the trace of the movement of a line, and if a three dimensional cube is the trace of the movement of a plane, by analogy, a four dimensional solid is the trace of the movement of a three dimensional solid/form (Ouspensky 1981: 22). In a further attempt to clarify what remains a fairly abstruse concept, Ouspensky urges us to see the fourth dimension not as time but as a very real (if ethereal) place, a *spatial* realm, conceived of as a plane. With the correct mentality (identical to a state of Enlightenment in oriental philosophy), we would be able to 'rise' above our general perception of time as a never-ending line, and to see events and forms as they exist in perpetuity – not coming into or fading out of existence, but abiding serenely on the plane of the fourth dimension. From this vantage point we would be able to see that it is we who move 'through' phenomena, which we imagine to start and end owing to our limited and conditioned perception. From this vantage point, furthermore, time, which we commonly experience as the succession of fleeting moments, opens up into the Eternal Now of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy (Ouspensky 1981: 95).

Thus in hyperspace philosophy mystical precepts (such as the theory of time as a spatial Eternal Now) converge with Western idealist philosophy and provide a locus for Mondrian's utopia. Such a utopia, formulated (as has been argued), in an attempt to come to grips with the maladies of post-War Europe in metaphysical, idealist (and even religious) terms, might be described as Platonic or transcendental. In contrast to this, mid-twentieth century utopian constructs are predominantly based on skepticism towards ideology and a belief that positive

change can only be conceived of in *concrete* terms. The work of Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, known simply as Constant, belongs to this category.

The existentialist utopia of being-in-the-world

Believing that a technological, mechanised transformation of the urban landscape was imminent, Constant renounced painting and dedicated himself to the building of models of New Babylon, a utopian city which would, the artist believed, eventually become a sprawling labyrinth of global proportions. In the period from 1956 to 1969 Constant worked on models, sketches and collages of New Babylon, and wrote prolifically on its nature, scope and desirability.

Constant's early expressive paintings were made in reaction to the disruption and trauma of the Second World War. Historian Cor Blok (1994: 108) remarks how Constant's paintings reflect the painful reality of cities in ruin.² Constant's early paintings as well as his subsequent foray into the built environment evince an effort to regain a sense of stability and the need to rebuild. Constant (online in Boersma 2005) relates how the bombed remains of Frankfurt inspired his interest in architecture: "Frankfurt was indescribable ... every morning I took my son to school ... across an enormous bombsite... It was a surreal landscape, and it inspired me enormously. If you walk through a town that lies in ruins, then the first thing you naturally think of is building".

The first drawings and models of New Babylon appear in 1956, originally conceived as an encampment for Gypsies in Italy. Describing the sorry site of the 'miserable terrain' that had been allotted the Gypsies (who annually passed through the Italian town of Alba), so as to keep them out of the city proper, Constant (online 1974) recalls:

That was the day I conceived the scheme for a permanent encampment for the Gypsies of Alba and that project is the origin of a series of maquettes of New Babylon ... where, under one roof, with the aid of movable elements, a shared residence is built; a ... constantly remodeled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale.

Yet, Constant's response to the plight of the Gypsies might also be explained in terms of what the Gypsies embodied in post-War Europe: a non-nationalist, 'free' people, who traversed the borders of Europe seemingly by choice and with no pretenses to world domination – the antithesis, hence, of bourgeois complacency and territorialism.³

Constant is at pains to emphasise, on the one hand, the importance of freedom of choice as manifested in the playful creativity of Homo Ludens (a notion borrowed from Dutch theorist Johann Huizinga). On the other hand, what Constant regards as central to his work around New Babylon, is the notion of space not as a blank tabula rasa to be filled in by the genius architect, but rather as a communal social construct. Constant describes social space as the space of fortuitous meetings, the aggregate of social relations, and argues (online 1974): "Spatiality is social".

In Constant's utopian New Babylon technology frees Homo Ludens ('playful man') from work, from utilitarianism, from any need to produce. Man is instead free to spend his energy on the creative modeling and regulating of his built environment and its ambience. New Babylon, visualised as a sprawling, communally constructed and ever changing labyrinth, becomes the ultimate existential construct, where (in line with the view of Sartre), one is free to choose, though not free not to choose (Solomon & Higgins 1996: 278). Constant's Marxist leanings are also embedded in his conception of a global utopian city. Constant (online 1974) elaborates:

[L]et us suppose that all ... work can be completely automated; that productivity increases until the world no longer knows scarcity, that the land and the means of production are socialized ... that, as a consequence of this, the minority ceases to exercise its power over the majority; let us suppose, in other words, that the Marxist

kingdom of freedom is realizable ... [as] a social model in which the idea of freedom ... [is] not the choice between many alternatives but the optimum development of the creative faculties of every human being.



Figure 2

Constant. *View of New Babylon*, 1971, watercolour, pencil, collage, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag (<http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/documents/upload/constantkrant.pdf>).



Figure 3

Constant. *New Babylon / Antwerpen*, 1963, ink on map, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag (<http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/documents/upload/constantkrant.pdf>).

In this dynamic framework the New Babylonian is, “at any given moment in his creative activity [in] direct contact with his peers. Each one of his acts is public ... and [in turn] elicits spontaneous reactions” (Constant online 1974). In this non-ceasing communal creation of space, the notion of privacy and retreat into personal space diminishes. Time keeping, the constraints of having to keep to a routine dictated by diurnal and nocturnal cycles, the notion of a fixed abode, of the family unit, and of every conceivable constraint on the freedom of human movement, choice and creativity, vanish, in the mind of the artist, like mist owing to the benefits of mechanisation. The ‘perfect openness’ with which social relations are endowed also reminds of the extreme receptivity experienced in the so-called state of *Dasein* (‘being-there’) lauded by mid-century existential hermeneut Martin Heidegger.⁴ Existentialist theories, whilst broad their spectrum of approaches, are linked by the notion that the philosophical problem of being takes precedence over that of ‘knowing’. Belief in the usefulness of abstract ‘knowledge’ is rejected in favour of awareness of one’s concrete existence in time and space, and the responsibilities that

such existence entails. For the existentialist “existence is basic. It is the fact of the individual’s presence and participation in a changing ... world” (Flew 1984: 115).



Figure 4

Constant. *Mobile ladder-labyrinth*, 1967, ink on plexiglass, oil paint on wood, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag (<http://www.gemeentemuseum.nl/documents/upload/constantkrant.pdf>).

Much of Constant’s theory relates strongly to the writings of French social critic Guy Debord, chief theorist of the movement Situationist International, to which Constant belonged and contributed during the formation of his ideas on New Babylon. It is from this participatory, pre-emptive notion of existentialism that the Situationists take their name, as Situationism is defined above all else as the “*creation of situations*” (emphasis added) as opposed to the apathetic tourism of the passive culture of the spectacle. The Situationists further reject functionalism and rationalism and subscribe to the theory of architecture as socially created space (Blok 1994: 121). The notion of freedom and play is also mirrored in the Situationist *dérive*, or drift. These drifts would comprise groups of Situationists wandering willy-nilly through cityscapes, sometimes for days on end. The drifters would roam seemingly without purpose, yet there was an important aim. The purpose was to map out the so-called ‘psychogeography’ of a site, which relates to how a terrain is experienced and not to arbitrary city plans, imposed urban boundaries and forced use of space. These ‘psychogeographical maps’ were created in an attempt to humanise and de-territorialise urban space.

Constant built his model of New Babylon as an antidote to pre-War idealism – as the forerunner of a physical utopia, made possible by technology. Constant sometimes contradicts himself when addressing the utopian status of New Babylon. In an interview with Dutch theorist Linda Boersma (online 2005), Constant describes New Babylon as “a social utopia ... An artistic vision ... A cultural revolution”. Yet so strong is Constant’s belief in its immanent actualisation that, in some cases, he denies the utopian aspects inherent in New Babylon.⁵ It is, in the mind of the artist, a social inevitability. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this discussion, where utopianism is defined as a formulated antithesis to societal ills, New Babylon is seen to fall within the framework of mid-twentieth century utopian discourse.

Thus, in relating the constitution and locus of the two kinds of utopia seen to occur in the Netherlands in the twentieth century to the binary immanent/transcendent framework used in this discussion, Constant’s utopia is the haptic, real-time experience and co-creation of temporal and concrete social space. One might state that Constant’s utopian vision, formulated against a broadly existentialist framework, reflects a Sartrian “renewed confidence in the significance of being human” (Solomon in Mautner 2000: 188). Constant furthermore insists on the validity of materialism⁶, and on the subsequent realisability of his vision. The theoretical framework of

Constant's conception of utopia relates to Marxism and aspects of the post-War existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger. Mondrian's utopia, on the other hand, constitutes immersion in the universal otherworldly absolute of a 'spatial' yet transcendent fourth dimension. Mondrian's theoretical and philosophical framework can be traced to Hegel, Plato and mystic philosophy sympathetic to Oriental constructs.

Whilst the loci of Mondrian's and Constant's utopias differ (one being transcendent, the other perceived in material terms), both artists emphasise collectivity. In his post-War manifesto, Constant (online 1948) states: "Art ... is the property of all ... 'genius' will become public property ... the genius of the people ... replaces the individual performance". For Constant New Babylon would be the living manifestation of ceaseless, social co-creation, the result of innumerable, fortuitous encounters between peers.

A summarising comparison between the two utopias show that whilst both Mondrian and Constant subscribe to the notion of a better future, to the beneficial role of technology in the establishment of such a future, to the notion of unity in diversity and the rejection of divisive social constructs in favour of internationalism, the locus and ambience of the utopias differ radically, informed by opposing ideologies and schools of thought. Mondrian's utopia is one of universalist, mystical stasis; Constant's one of immanent, dynamic flux. Theorist Viriato Soromenho Marques describes the 'two utopias of modernity' in terms of precisely this dichotomy, namely an ethereal/material binary. The first kind of utopia (where otherworldliness is embraced) is often regarded by its detractors as an "idle escape from reality, an inability to face the harshness of life's dictates" (Marques 2007: 135-136). Such utopias, which regard drastic change in social thought and behaviour as requisite, are rejected on the grounds that they fail to take human nature into account. They are seen to be based on "anthropological misconception ... [on] ontological alteration that only a miracle would allow – or the disavowal of reason" (Marques 2007: 136). Such too is the criticism leveled by mid-century utopianists themselves, such as for instance Constant.

The notion of utopian thought as a reaction to social calamity is borne out by the similarity of statements made by Mondrian and Constant. Mondrian (1986b: 360-378), agitating for change even as a new era of war is dawning, notes: "If we are living at present [in] perhaps the most terrible time we can image [sic], we must see this as the destroying of oppressive forms and false mutual relations in the world, and as a struggle to construct a better life". In Constant's Situationist International manifesto, published in 1948, he declares (online 1948):

The cultural vacuum has never been so strong or so widespread as after the last war, when the continuity of centuries of cultural evolution was broken by a single jerk of the string ... painters after World War II see themselves confronted by a world ... in which all lines of communication have been cut and all hope has vanished ... Their only salvation is to turn their backs on the entire culture.

In similar terms, and relating the three eras addressed in this discussion to each other, Duncan Forrester (2005: 22, 24, 49) states:

[After] the First World War ... it was hard for the optimistic nineteenth-century belief that everything was getting better to survive ... the Second World War was waged with unprecedented ferocity...[and] in an hour the event of 9/11 ... shook to their foundations all ... assumptions about politics, culture and religion.

Significantly, interest in New Babylon has been revived in the last decade. In her interview with Constant, Linda Boersma (online 2005) remarks on the 1998 exhibition of his work at Rotterdam's Witte de With (normally concerned exclusively with contemporary art), on the 1999 New York exhibition *New Babylon: city for another life*, and, lastly, on inclusion of models of New Babylon in the 2002 *Documenta*, Kassel, Germany. Utilising the binary

construct noticeable in the utopias discussed above, it might be possible to explore the locus of current Dutch utopian constructs.

Where is utopia now?

Contemporary art movements which address issues of multiculturalism, globalisation, and utopian thought (in and outside the Netherlands) include Multiculturalism, Stuckism, Funism, Thinkism, Toyism, AAA and the collaborative events organised by Dutch artist Sander Veenhof. The theories addressed by the movements and artists suggest a preoccupation with contemporary social catastrophe (Thinkism was founded the day after 9/11), combined with an attempt to establish an alternative to postmodernist ennui and post-apocalyptic pessimism. The Stuckists (also called Remodernists, or the practitioners of Anti-anti-art), argue for the revival of modernism's "genuine belief in the new", and assert: "Remodernism recognises that development ... is a legitimate task for us now" (Thomson online 2004). The movement proposes to re-engage with the tasks set out for society in early Modernism, and hopes to avoid the pitfalls which led to the derailing and sinister appropriation of these tasks. Dutch artist ArthurX is a member of Stuckism.

Toyism, founded in the Netherlands in 1990, has adapted to the millennium concept of diversity. Its members, like Mondrian and Constant, disavow what they regard as the excesses of individualism. A reformulation of the Toyist manifesto, called *Moeder* (or 'Mother') reads: "In Oktober 2002, 'Mother' underwent a facelift ... now her children have gained an international character ... through this, 'Mother' is affording her children a glimpse of their own world" (author's translation) (Manifesto Moeder online 2004). Emphasising the international yet anonymous⁷ nature of Toyism, its website features work by artists under assumed names, and, moreover, in a presentation which asserts the playful character of the movement.



Figure 5
Ifio, *Dream picture - once upon a time*, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
(<http://www.toyisten.nl/index.php?page=showgallery&id=237>).

All works by the members have a similar appearance, and the artists are urged to address weighty social issues in a seemingly naive way. *Dream Picture, once upon a time* (2006) depicts, in contrast to its cloying appearance, marital infidelity. *The potato eaters* (2007)

critiques inequality and exclusion – here some are eating, and some are not. Toyism, in other words, can be interpreted as a bid to negate the nihilist, jaded irony of postmodern discourse, and furthermore as an attempt to address the notion of multiculturalism in a reaction to extreme clashes in cultural paradigms.



Figure 6
Jaf'r, *The Potato Eaters*, 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 45 cm
 (<http://www.toyisten.nl/index.php?page=showgallery&id=253>).

The utterances of the members of AAA (the Association of Autonomous Astronauts), situated in the Netherlands, are based on political and social commentary. AAA, whilst not directly engendering art, can be seen to contribute to early twenty first century utopian discourse. Issues such as the de-militarisation of space and civic participation in space travel are meant to challenge political hegemony. AAA writer John Eden (online S.a.) insists that “the ‘militant’ posturing so adored by so many puritanical political activists is of no use to AAA”. In line with a utopian desire to either change society or leave it behind, the blurb for the so-called AAA Intergalactic Conference (Intergalactic Conference online 1998) reads: “The days of this society are numbered. Its reasons and merits have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; its inhabitants are divided into two parties, one of which wants to build their own spaceships and leave this society behind”. Linking the AAA utopianist vision to an emphasis on diversity, an anonymous statement under the heading ‘Every Man and Every Woman is an Astronaut’ [Online S.a.] reads:

It intrigues us that various reactionary groups use runic symbols as part of their imagery. We wonder how well their nationalism will stand up when community-based space exploration becomes reality. There are no countries in outer space.... Forward to a multiverse without borders!

Lastly, the current *dérives* (or ‘drifts’) organised by Conflux, described as “the annual ... New York festival for contemporary psychogeography” (SL Walkie Talkie online 2007) are related to the mid-twentieth century practice of Situationist International, with the difference that these latter day *dérives* incorporate the alternative universe (or ‘metaverse’) of cyber space through its use of Second Life avatar technology. Second Life is an internet based virtual world (launched in 2003), created in order to enable its users, or ‘residents’, to interact with each other by means of animated personifications known as ‘avatars’⁸ (Wikipedia/Second Life online 2008). In the Conflux drifts, one chooses from a menu of possible avatars with whom one then proceeds to ‘drift’ through the streets of New York. Event information for the 2007 drift includes

a request to avatars, and people, not to fly but to keep to a New York pace, to “notify each other of peculiarities encountered on the way. Keep in touch. Be curious!” (Conflux Festival online 2007).

The virtual world of Second Life (one of several on the internet), was inspired by the notion of the ‘metaverse’ of Neal Stephenson’s cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (1992). One might relate it to the alternative, disembodied reality of the *Matrix*, (made famous in the trilogy of motion-pictures by that name). Sander Veenhof, a Dutch artist involved in the organisation of the 2007 Conflux drift, makes use of the Second Life ‘metaverse’ for other projects as well. The project description for the event *OPEN SOURCE PERSONALITY - A virtual world mass psychology experiment* (April 2008) describes how an avatar, equipped with artificial intelligence, will be invested, through prompts by online users, with a communally created ‘open source personality’. Furthermore, the avatar’s whereabouts is continuously tracked on the project-website, “so the open source personality can be visited ‘for real’” (emphasis added) (Veenhof online 2008).



Figure 7
Poster for the Second Life Walkie Talkie Walk held in Brooklyn, New York, 2007 (<http://www.slwalkietalkie.com/>).



Figure 8
A simultaneous Second Life/Real Life walk in progress in Brooklyn New York, 2007 (<http://www.slwalkietalkie.com/>).

Concluding remarks

Relating these events to utopian thought, it is possible to posit the theory of an emerging 'cybertopia', or 'intentional community' made possible by means of online interaction. Whilst the drifts mentioned above enhance awareness of the possibilities of urban planning beyond the given, a broader cybertopian context relates to the need in early twentieth century interaction to escape the stultifying effect of increasing reactionism and fundamentalism. In this vein, Dr. Kurt Hochenauer⁹ (online 2007), in his paper *Open Source, Open Mind: Expanding Diverse Voices in Hostile Environments* (delivered at the 7th Annual Conference on Diversity held in Amsterdam in July 2007), declares:

The United States' current neoconservative political predicament has left millions of marginalized Americans without cultural voices, but open source Internet applications, which are inexpensive and easy to learn, are increasingly restoring the country's democratic structures ... The larger question is this: How can we get new open source technologies to all marginalized people, and how can we protect these people, on technological and political levels, when they challenge authority? This question transcends issues of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and even political thought ... How can we challenge the status quo and use open source to create a new philosophical, psychological, and political reality that embraces plurality and diversity?

The new philosophical, psychological and political reality in question could be referred to here as 'cybertopia'. The locus of this particular utopia, or 'forward dreamt' alternative to current social malady: the intangible matrix of the metaverse.

In conclusion, how should one locate current strands of utopian thought? Where do there utopias reside and how do they relate to the ethereal/tangible dichotomy of the utopias discussed above (those of Mondrian and Constant)? It would seem that the utopias mentioned, whilst engaging with multiculturalism and diversity, (as had Mondrian and Constant in the parlance of their respective eras, typified as the notion of '*eenheid-in-veelheid*'), focus on global flow, hybrids, interstices and processes. These phenomena create an alternative/utopia/other that is neither concrete nor abstract, but falls somewhere between the two. This is illustrated by the marriage of abstract constructs (such as communality), to the ideal of multiculturalism, and the implementation thereof in current political discourse (as seen in the publications of AAA and in the politicised role of open source computer technology). Lastly, it is possible to assert that current utopian thought and art in the Netherlands relates to a need to actively engage with the social and political tension that has preceded the turn of the century, and climaxed in the west with the bombings of 9/11. The wave of 'post-apocalyptic' utopian discourse identified here is contextualised in terms relating to globalisation 'from the bottom up', or, a multiculturalist heterotopia, which is neither here nor there, but 'everywhere'.

Notes

1. The body of twentieth century utopian literature reveals two eras of heightened significance, namely the decades following the First and Second World Wars, respectively. Utopian publications and conferences proliferated during these eras. Examples of seminal published works from the post-World War I era include Ernst Bloch's *Geist der utopie* (1918) and Lewis Mumford's *The story of utopias* (1922). Post-World War II utopian publications (and commentaries on utopian thought) include R. Ruyer, *L'Utopie et les utopies* (1950); G. Negley & J.M. Patrick, *The quest for utopia – an anthology of imaginary societies* (1952); Frederik L. Polak, *De toekomst is verleden tijd: cultur-futuristische verkenningen* (1955); N. Cohn, *The pursuit of the millennium* (1957), Ernst Bloch, *The principle of hope* (1959), and, lastly, F. Choay, *L'urbanisme, utopies et réalité* (1965). Mid-century utopian conferences include *Un vaggio alle 'isole utopia'* (Ivrea, Italy, 1958), *Quel avenir attend l'homme?* (Paris, 1961), *Les utopies à la Renaissance* (Brussels, 1961), and *Vom sinn der utopie* (Zurich, 1963).
2. The notion of the 'end of history' derives from political theorist Francis Fukayama's essay *The end of history?* (1989) in which he argues that, if

history is the narrative of competing ideologies, the ‘victory’ – for better or worse – of Western political and economic liberalism, denotes the end of this narrative, and, consequently, the end of history (Stankiewicz 1993: 328).

3. Mondrian’s extensive article *The new plastic in painting* was written between 1915 and 1917 and published in the *De Stijl* journal from October 1917 to October 1918. It formed the basis of his agitation for a purely abstract art and throughout his career Mondrian scarcely deviated from this early formulation of Neoplastic theory.
4. The *noumena* refer to German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s conception of ‘untouchable noetic ‘things-in-themselves’, the existence of which mankind can only infer through experience with worldly phenomena. The *noumena*, though themselves unfathomable, are the source of that which we experience as phenomena (Flew 1984: 251).
5. Berlage was led by his ‘moderate socialist’ belief that collective values should be emphasised whilst retaining the elements of plurality and tolerance which, for him, characterised Dutch society (Overy 1991: 24).
6. Blok’s (1994: 100) words are plaintive as he describes the aftermath: “Nothing here is what it used to be, and, a few gruesome details aside, nothing is recognisable”.
7. A 1963 quote by the then president of the World Community of Gypsies, Vaida Voivod III, captures the imagination. Voivod (online in Constant 1974) declares: “We are the living symbols of a world without frontiers, a world of freedom, without weapons, where each may travel without let or hindrance from the steppes of central Asia to the Atlantic Coast, from the high plateau of South Africa to the forests of Finland”.
8. Solomon and Higgins (1996: 270) state: Heidegger tries to show us the way to a genuinely presuppositionless ... philosophy ... [which] will involve a new openness, a new receptivity, a oneness with the world ... in line with the program of many radical or ‘deep’ ecologists and, as Heidegger himself discovered, with several non-Western cultures, which had never been distracted by the dualisms and humanistic arrogance of his own philosophical tradition.
9. Constant argues that the longing for an ‘earthly paradise’ is as old as the world itself, but that *his* vision for a planetary city is technologically realisable. In an interview of 1966 Constant (in Janssen *et al* 2005: 19-21) repeatedly emphasises this conviction: “For the first time in history the notion of an earthly paradise has a concrete basis – it can now *be* ... I do believe in a higher existence for mankind, but *here*, on earth ... New Babylon is no myth, but a bona fide plan ... New Babylon is no utopia” (author’s translation).
10. Constant (online 1948) asserts that “only matter stimulates creative activity ... we will strive for the greatest possible materialistic effect”.
11. One Toyist member, known as Mwano, is a Capetonian, but further information on her is unavailable, owing to the movement’s insistence on the maintenance of the artists’ anonymity.
12. An avatar is described as a computer user’s two or three dimensional, animated representation of him or herself, or “a text construct representing the embodiment of the user” (Wikipedia/Avatar online 2008). It is the personified user in the universe of cyberspace.
13. Hochenauer, an Oklahoma based journalist and writer on Henry James, John Steinbeck, and Jack Kerouac, hosts the blog *Okie Funk: Notes From the Outback*. The blog embodies Hochenauer’s use of cyberspace to encourage political dissidence. Quotes such as “Democracy is best taught by example, not war”, and “All you fascists are bound to lose”, lyrics by ‘Oklahoma native Woody Guthrie’, exemplify his sentiments (Hochenauer online 2008).

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Runette Kruger is a fulltime lecturer in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the Tshwane University of Technology. She currently teaches Ceramic Design II-IV and Art Theory I-IV and supervises M-Tech and B-tech candidates. She publishes and delivers papers at conferences, and also writes artists' catalogues and newspaper reviews. She has recently been appointed committee member and selector by the South African chapter of Afrovibes, which promotes South African art and theatre in the Netherlands. As a researcher her interests lie in the philosophical contextualisation and analysis of art practice and visual culture. In 2007 she embarked on research around the notion of post-apocalyptic utopian thought in contemporary Dutch art.