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## ReForm

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# Chapter I: ReForm SUBCONSCIOUS (Muddled Thinking)

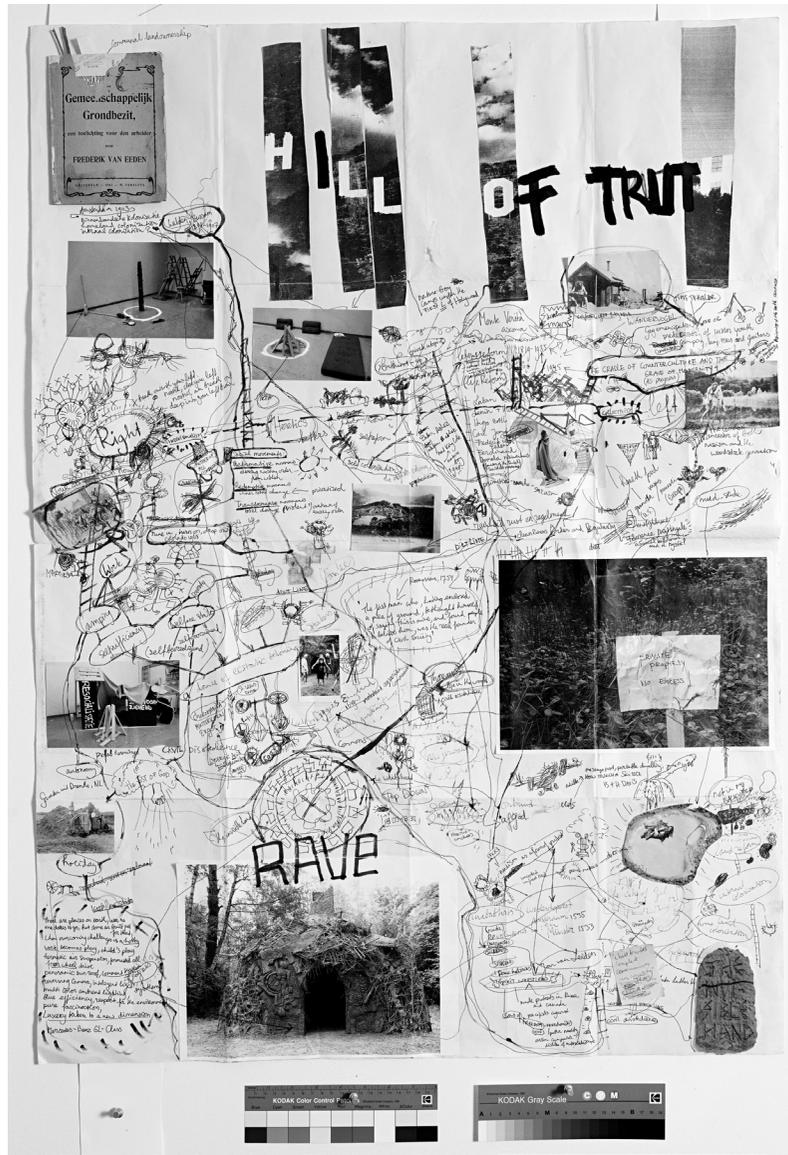


Fig. 1.0. *Hill of Truth*, collage, Ruchama Noorda, 2013. Photo: Johannes Schwarz.

## Chapter I: *ReForm SUBCONSCIOUS* (*Muddled Thinking*)

In this chapter I use Frederik van Eeden's Walden experiment as a case study to examine the role of the subconscious, of regression and dreams in the articulation and testing of Lebensreform ideas and ideals. The spread of utopian artist colonies, rooted in a 'back to the land' ethos across both northern Europe and the USA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is typically seen as a reaction on the part of intellectuals and artists to the onward march of industrialization, urbanization and colonialism. In this process of resistance to emergent capitalist values, the soil itself figures for Lebensreformers as both fruitful resource and raw material: the ground upon which the garden we need to get back to is grown. In my own work, mud figures in a similar way as the primary material with which, and on which I work. At the same time it functions as a symbol of everything progressive modernism struggles to distinguish itself from and to master.

### Internal Colonization

Sometime during my early high school years I heard about the Dutch 'Walden', a colony set up in 1898 by psychiatrist, writer and life reformer Frederik van Eeden. Van Eeden's novels were included in the curriculum because of their importance to Dutch literature, and it was in this context of literature and compulsory reading that I first learned about the utopian colony in Bussum about 25 km south-east of Amsterdam. The colony had been named after Henry David Thoreau's famous account in *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854) of his own experiment in 'back-to-nature' living in what were then the wilds of America's New England. At my high school the topic of the Dutch Walden colony was taught in a purely literary context and this may account for the tone of mild contempt with which the ideas of Walden's alternative social arrangements were presented. Walden appeared in the curriculum first and foremost as an example of failed dreamy idealism and I sometimes thought the

way it was introduced in the wake of the anarchic 1960's was designed to discourage future attempts at repeating the experiment.

Nowadays, Bussum is one of the most expensive living areas in northern Holland, in 'Het Gooi', and is sometimes even referred to as a 'reservation for the wealthy'. At the time of van Eeden this situation was quite different: when his group arrived to found their socialistic gardening colony, they were building on what was then barren land. The plot of land that van Eeden bought was part of a private estate of one of his former patients (van Eeden, 1980), but the thin, sandy soil proved infertile and unsuitable for farming. Van Eeden's idea to enlist artists, dreamers and psychiatric patients to establish a self-sustaining colony turned out to be a recipe for disaster and bankruptcy: seven years later he was left with a gigantic debt. Much later I learned that, although it eventually failed, van Eeden's colony can be regarded as a pioneering experiment in co-operative living, based on the ideas of communal land ownership. These ideas grew out of the broader Land Reform movement of that time, for which van Eeden was a spokesman and an energetic advocate.<sup>1</sup> The colony initially consisted mainly of artists and well-off young people who wanted to escape the city, together with a number of van Eeden's psychiatric patients for whom manual labour in the colony's fields and workshops was supposed to be therapeutic. In the wake of the 1903 railway strike, a group of fired railway workers joined the colony. This was the first of a flow of working class recruits with multiple practical skills. They were drawn by van Eeden's writings on the principles of 'homeland colonization'<sup>2</sup> and communal land ownership, whereby self-sustaining communes were to function as a social-economic tool, gradually reforming society from within. The Reform movement presented a gradualist 'organic' alternative to violent revolution in radical

1 The Organisation of Communal Landownership was called: Vereniging Gemeenschappelijk Grond Bezit (GGB). It existed between 1901–1958.

2 van Eeden, F. *Binnenlandse Kolonisatie*, Vereniging Gemeenschappelijk Grondbezit, Amsterdam, W. Versluys, 1901

circles in the late 19th and early 20th century. Society would be altered not by the seizure of power by a revolutionary caucus, but by a process of 'osmosis'. Smaller cells organized along communitarian lines, would gradually transform society as a whole from the bottom up. Van Eeden's Reform agenda appears tied to his experience as a psychiatrist. I think that it is clear that van Eeden set out to transpose his ideas concerning the therapeutic treatment of the individual mind (his patients) to the larger social organism that he regarded as sick and equally in need of a radical 'cure'.

'...already for a long time I have considered my house too large and my life too wasteful. I metabolize more than 6000 guilders per year and I have no idea on what. This consuming of what others bring forth strenuously is causing me grief. Now I'm planning to buy a small piece of land to place a small house on. I will cut into my household costs and will try to live on what the land at my disposal makes possible through hard work and planning. Then I will save money and I want to share this with others who want to live the same kind of life with me but are not able to do this by themselves because they don't have the means to buy themselves out of this society.'<sup>3</sup>

It seems clear from even a casual reading of the history of modernism that van Eeden's experiment was just one in a long line of attempts on the part of radical counter-culturalists to dismantle the principle and practice of private property. One of the most iconic examples of opposition to the institution of private property occurred in 17th century England, around the time of the English Civil War (1642–1651). The Diggers, a group of protestant agrarian egalitarians led by Gerrard Winstanley resisted the enclosure of common land by planting vegetables at St. George's Hill, near Cobham in Surrey, and settled in the vicinity, thereby forming the first Agrarian Socialist commune. More than a

3 Fragment of a letter by Frederik van Eeden to Henri Borel, Bussum, dated 28 February 1898 (van Eeden 1933, 96).

century later, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his famous denunciation of private property as a destructive and egotistical institution, equated private land ownership with the origins of social injustice: ‘The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society’ (Rousseau 1754). Rousseau’s critique of property as theft helped clear the ground for the French Revolution. It seems incontestable that in northern Europe and North America, the state historically has tended to obstruct and to oppose any concerted attempts on the part of ordinary citizens to abolish private property and share goods in common. Early examples of levelling attempts to overthrow existing property law include the Anabaptist rebellion in Münster of 1534, and the lesser known abortive attempt at an Anabaptist revolution in Amsterdam a year later, which grew out of the German Peasant’s War (1524–1525). In the first case, the Münster Anabaptists seized the city and installed a religious egalitarian commune under the leadership of the Dutch prophet, Jan van Leiden. Van Leiden held the city for a year until it was recaptured by troops led by the Bishop of Münster and the Count of Essen, and all the surviving insurrectionaries were either killed or tortured. These predecessors of the 20th century Lebensreform spirit figure in this dissertation and in my work as Reformation archetypes. I am convinced that their actions and their fates—the faith of Reformation martyrs—continues to haunt the dissident imagination up to this day. They are the restless, unavenged ghosts of an alternative history of the world that remains thwarted and unfinished, and which finds an outlet in our dreams.



Fig. 1.1. *Asocialen - Private Prophecy - Detox*, Ruchama Noorda, installation performance, Diepenheim, 2012. Photo: RN.

## Unrealistic Dreamer

It is worth noting that from the start, van Eeden’s Walden experiment in Bussum was treated with contempt and scorn by the press and leading intelligentsia in Holland. In 1907, not long after Walden’s downfall, van Eeden set out to defend the colony in (social) scientific terms in his article entitled ‘My Experiences in the Field of Sociology’, published in *De Gids* literary magazine:

‘And one has to admit that especially when it comes to social economic issues, the testing of one’s own theories by experiment is not a common practice, but is no less valid for that. My education in the natural sciences during my medical training taught me the importance of practical experimental research in all studies’ (van Eeden 1907, 102–122).

As a scientist committed to the experimental method, van Eeden could regard the question of the colony’s success or

failure as irrelevant. However, in van Eeden's case the conventional idea of scientific detachment hardly applies, since observer and observed cannot in any way be separated from one another. Theory and practice were one and the same in this instance, and van Eeden could not approach the 'body of society' as pure other, as his own body, mind and socio-economic circumstances, in other words his privileged position, were all implicated in the research and formed part of the 'object of study'. The spirit of ridicule, which greeted van Eeden's Walden, can be seen in the work of another well-known contemporary writer, Nescio—the Latin pseudonym of Jan Hendrik Frederik Grönloh, meaning 'I do not know':

'...one day when we walked there on a Sunday, about a four hour walk, we came across a hatless gentleman in a farmer's costume wearing very expensive yellow shoes, eating candies out of a paper bag, in intense communion with nature, as they described it that time and a beard full of crumbs. We didn't dare to go further and just walked back to Amsterdam.'<sup>4</sup>

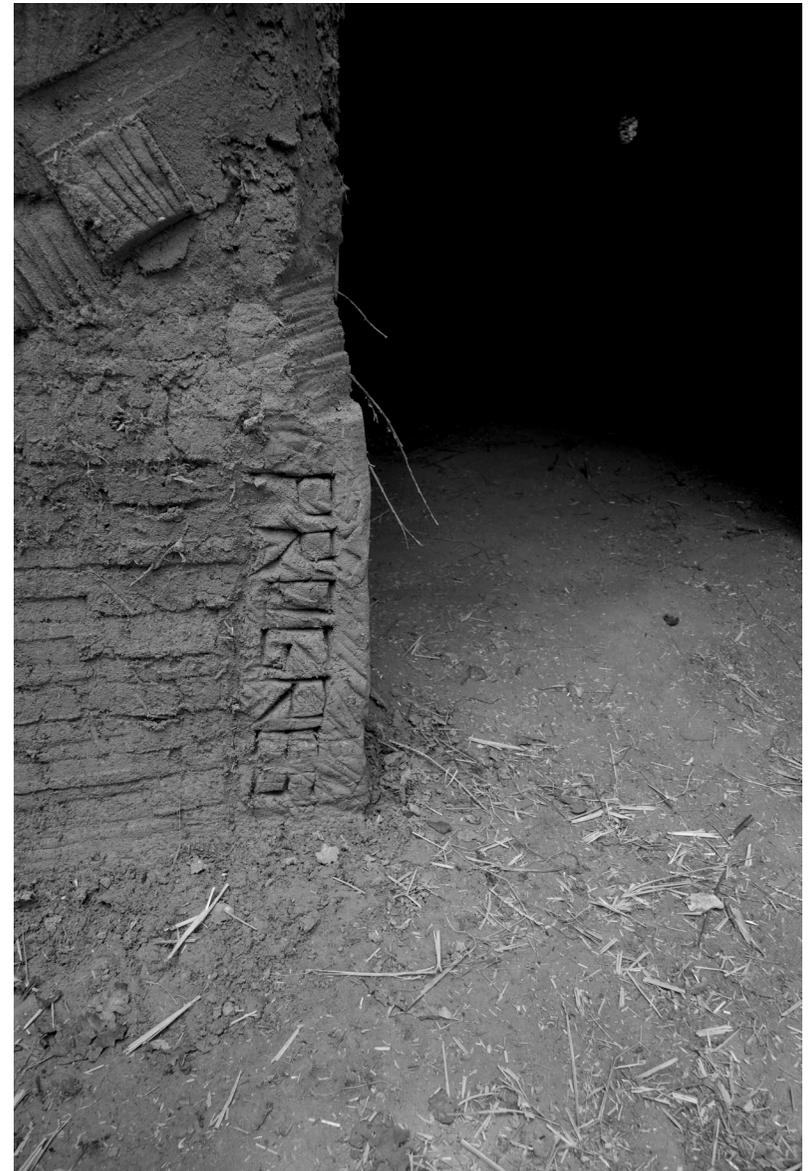


Fig. 1.2. *Asocialen-Private Prophesy-Detox*, Ruchama Noorda, Diepenheim, 2012. Photo: RN

4 Nescio (*De Uitvreter*, 1911) on van Eeden's Walden.

By the 1960's, Nescio (1882–1961) was regarded as one of the most important writers in the canon of modern Dutch literature. All of Nescio's work bears witness to the conflict between his own career and his ideals, against the backdrop of a flourishing pan-European utopian socialist movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Nescio's thinly veiled reference to van Eeden as 'the Sponger' in his novel of the same name (*De Uitvreter*—The Sponger, 1911) is characteristic of the contempt in which Agrarian Socialism was then held, even in Bohemian circles: 'Except the man that thinks the Sarphatistraat is the most beautiful place in Europe, I have never known a more unusual guy as the Sponger.' (Nescio 1911, 45)

Although van Eeden appears here in Nescio's fiction, most notably at the beginning of Nescio's novel, *De Uitvreter*, the character seems to be a mix between van Eeden and other clichés surrounding the bohemian lifestyle. Nescio, a one-time salesman from 1901–1903, set up 'Tames', his own short lived attempt at a self-sustaining commune near Huizen. Some of the resentment Grönloh seems to have felt towards the older man may have stemmed from the fact that Nescio in 1900 had tried unsuccessfully to join the Bussum community in 1900. He was rejected presumably because he was an 'artistic type' (Heijder 1995, 103–107). Van Eeden by this time was seeking to attract members of the labouring classes with proven manual skills. During the Bussum years, van Eeden tended to be portrayed in the press as a charlatan and unrealistic dreamer. In one newspaper cartoon (Fig. 1.3), van Eeden appears beneath the caption 'Royal Simplicity', dressed as a farmer standing on a pile of hay carrying a pitchfork. His own books are skewered on the tines. He is surrounded by a crowd of his followers who are hailing him as the 'King of Walden'. This satirical portrait of van Eeden as a vain demagogue leading gullible followers astray, or as a dreamer wearing foot-reform sandals, remained largely unchallenged and the image became fixed in the historical record. The caricature of a 'Geitenwollensokken Idealist' (an idealist in goat woollen socks) in the Netherlands persists to this day. In the 1970's

with the rise of the hippy movement, socks-and-sandals became once again a conventional emblem of unworldly non-conformism.



Fig. 1.3.

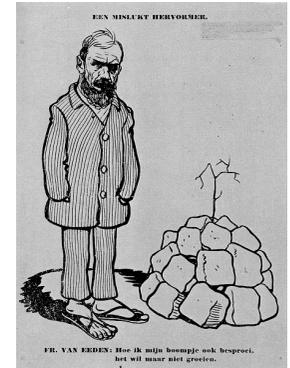


Fig. 1.4.

Left a caricature of van Eeden in Magazine *Vooruitgang* 1903 nr. 39 and right a drawing by Albert Hahn in *Het Volk*; Amsterdam, 1906. Images Courtesy of DBNL 5

In the second caricature (see fig. 1.4 above) van Eeden is called 'a failed reformer'. He is standing beside a dried out plant growing on ruins. The depiction of Walden's founder as an 'unrealistic dreamer' seems to be strangely fitting to his research into dreams. As a psychiatrist in the circles around Freud, van Eeden did actually coin the term 'lucid dreaming' (Mavrematis 1987, 96) in his 1913 article, 'A study of Dreams' printed in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (van Eeden, 1913).

Lucid dreaming is a state in which one 'wakes up' in a dream and is thus able to consciously operate inside it. By doing so the conscious dreamer becomes actively engaged in the

work of creating reality by envisioning or imagining it. The following dream from van Eeden's dream diary of 3 February 1903 mentions the half-conscious dream states he describes in the article:

'I had a dream influenced by a hostile review in the newspaper in which I was again portrayed as an imposter. I woke up in a room and Hans was entering the door. Then I thought how much this being awake resembles dreaming and still I'm awake. And I felt sad because life is a dream-like illusion. Then more or less lurid stuff, my father, a skeleton, Hans with dirty hair, etc. Then I suddenly really woke up and it took a while for me to realize that I'd been misled again.' (van Eeden 1979, 149)<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1.5. Ruins of Thoreau's hut, Lake Walden, Concord, Mass. Postcard from Ebay.<sup>7</sup>

## American Walden

With its roots firmly planted in the Romantic movement, the idea of forming a self-sustaining brotherhood based on principles of equality and justice, on a small scale through communion with nature, held a strong practical and political

as well as a spiritual appeal for many Western intellectuals, who were concerned about the alienating effects of urbanization and industrialism. In the 19th and early 20th centuries one of the most celebrated and influential experiments of this kind was famously documented in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). The book is the author's literary account of two years he spent living by himself in a house he built with his own hands in the woods of Massachusetts. Thoreau's goal was to gain a better understanding of both society and himself through seclusion and personal introspection. During his solitary sojourn in the forest on the edge of Walden Pond in Concord, Thoreau attempted to live a self-sufficient life, cutting his own timber, growing his own vegetables and going on long walks into the surrounding countryside. Not only did Thoreau's book (and title) serve as the inspiration for van Eeden's own efforts in alternative living, but Thoreau's aspiration to 'live deliberately', that is consciously, might be said to correspond at some level to van Eeden's idea of lucid dreaming as a tool in the development of the self. I think that in both cases the individual is approached holistically as an integrated organism that both shapes and mirrors the larger world in which s/he operates.

'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.' (Thoreau 1854, 90)

<sup>6</sup> van Eeden, *Dromenboek* (Dream Book), 8 January 1898.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ebay.com/sch/sis.html?\\_nkw=Thoreaus%20Cairn%20Concord%20Massachusetts%20Linen%201948%20Postcard&\\_iteml=390827176615](http://www.ebay.com/sch/sis.html?_nkw=Thoreaus%20Cairn%20Concord%20Massachusetts%20Linen%201948%20Postcard&_iteml=390827176615) <13 May 2015>

A mentee and close colleague of the American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau was part of the American Transcendentalist movement. This movement had its roots in German Romanticism and the then recently translated texts of eastern Vedic Philosophy. Although some Transcendentalists were interested in radical social change, at least on a theoretical level, others in this group (including Emerson himself) considered it an exclusively individualist project. He makes this clear, for instance, in his essay 'On Self-Reliance' in 1841. For Emerson, individual development and self-reliance were the leading virtues. I would argue that Thoreau, by way of contrast, in putting the principle of self-reliance into practice at Walden Pond, projected introspection outwards, thereby developing a thorough critique of the new American democracy and of the capitalist economic and social relations that emerged with it.

Van Eeden's experimental colony functioned from 1898 to 1907 and can be seen as an extension of Thoreau's experiment: a collective European answer to the American Transcendentalists' more individualistic approach. The experimental character of the Dutch Walden colony is evident. It constituted what was in effect a multi-year process of cumulative, collaborative research (van Eeden's Walden experiment lasted from 1860–1932). The exclusive but collective

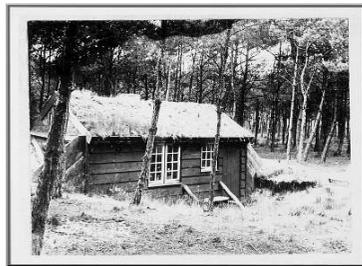


Fig. 1.6. The cabin of Carry van Hoogstraten, a colonist at Walden circa 1903 and van Eeden's cabin at Walden, circa 1905. Image Courtesy of DBNL<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/eede003wald01\\_01/eede-003wald01\\_01\\_0209.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/eede003wald01_01/eede-003wald01_01_0209.php)<13 May 2015>

garden cultivated at Bussum and neighbouring villages surrounded by primitive cabins reminded me of similar reclusive institutions—such as a monastery or a mental hospital or a sanatorium—because the experiment was taking place in the equivalent of an enclosed garden. But for Bussum to succeed as a reform project with large-scale effects on society, it would have to be expanded and replicated elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> This might have happened, despite the negative attention during that time. Even today, in some corners or niches of society, the experiment survives as an idea and a model.

### (Sub-)Consciousness

As a psychiatrist, van Eeden used hypnosis in an effort to help his patients retain consciousness at some level while crossing the border between dreaming and waking. In his writings and speeches he was open about how hypnosis works in and through suggestion. In his 1913 article, 'A Study of Dreams' he rejected the idea of the productivity of the unconscious as something without a willed intention:

<sup>8</sup> The eventual failure of the Walden colony led van Eeden to believe in the principle of good management as a necessary precondition for a successful commune system. Van Eeden visited the United States frequently and gave lectures, promoting his Organisation of Communal Landownership. These lesser known activities that sprang out of van Eeden's Walden homeland colonization experiments in the Netherlands are described in the comprehensive study on the American dream of van Eeden by M. Mooijweer, *De Amerikaanse Droom van Fredrik van Eeden*. In this book, the author describes the founding of a new van Eeden colony sponsored by a local landowner and businessman, Mac Rae in North Carolina in 1911, which attracted mainly poor Dutch farmers who were largely recruited on the strength of van Eeden's articles and advertisements in left wing magazines in the Netherlands. The settlers were in part unsatisfied with the construction 'and also from the Netherlands came the critique that van Eeden had taken in a pact with a capitalist.' 'Several left wing newspapers such as 'Het Volk' published articles and letters of ex colonists who accused Mac Ray and indirectly van Eeden of speculative land development and swindle' (Mooijweer 1996, 95).

'I, for one, do not believe in "unconsciousness" any more than in Santa Claus.' For van Eeden, dreams are not the result of a passive process, like taking dictation, but are rather forms of experience, internal dialogue and expression in which one can actively and consciously engage. These are two of his dreams from his dream diary that I think illustrate this point:

'In May 1903 I dreamt that I was in a little provincial Dutch town and met my brother-in-law, who had died some time before. I was absolutely sure that it was he, and at the same time I knew that he was dead. He told me that he had communicated at length with my "controller", as he put it—my guiding spirit. I felt glad, and our conversation was very cordial and more intimate than it had ever been when he'd been alive. He told me that I was facing impending financial disaster. Somebody was going to rob me of a sum of 10,000 guilders. I said I understood, though later when I woke up I found myself utterly puzzled and unable to make sense of what he'd said. My brother-in-law had informed me it was my guiding spirit that had warned him about my financial situation. I'd gone on to tell the story to somebody else in my dream. Then I'd asked my brother-in-law to tell me more about the after-life, and just as he was about to reply I woke up—as if somebody had cut off the communication. I was not at that time as accustomed to prolonging my dreams as I am now.' (...)

'Lately I have had some more clear dreams sometimes with doubling?? some days ago, for instance, I dreamt I was floating above a city and its hinterland, I saw everything very clearly. I saw wild animals, cattle and other beasts running towards me, but I was floating above them and was pressing them down with some kind of fork. Though the animals wore frightening facial expressions, I wasn't scared of them. I understood that while under normal circumstances I would be afraid I merely felt annoyed and a little sad. Because the animals had to my mind very low and

despicable expressions of uncontrolled aggression, I clearly remember a grey cow's head with cruel, dumb wild eyes, that I skewered (with my fork) out of disgust. And I thought everything was uniformly low and ignoble. The animals made unusual jumps, flipping back upon themselves. And I thought that these repetitive movements were probably the dream shape of something I had seen the night before. And I tried to think of what I had seen that could have caused this dream. This was a double judgement during my sleep, made as I stood above the dream. This fact made me happy the next day and it still does. It is what Thoreau called "The sense of Dawn in soundest sleep". I want to raise my judgement above sleep and dream' (van Eeden 1979, 75).

### Enclosed Garden

From the end of the 19th century until the 1930's, the area of 'Het Gooi', where van Eeden's colony was situated, was known for the so called 'hutten kolonies' (cabin colonies). These colonies were popular among artists and writers who wanted to get back to a simple way of living. Plein air painters, like Jozef Israëls of the Larense School, had felt drawn to the authentic Netherlands landscape as early as 1870 when depicting the simple life of farmers. A year after van Eeden founded his workers' cooperative in Bussum, in a nearby village, Blaricum, the Amsterdam professor Jacob van Rees set up the *Tolstoy Colony* in the name of 'The international Brotherhood of Christian Anarchists'. The colony functioned from 1899 to 1911. Both colonies can be seen as a response to the growth of industrial capitalism and to the forms of alienated labour, exploitation and class struggle associated with it. After the decline of these collectivist experiments, individual artists and freethinkers began to move into the area and to rehabilitate the abandoned cabins. Piet Mondriaan for instance made some of his early abstract works between 1914 and 1917 in one of these cabins (Heyting, 2009). The desire to live simply in an unmediated relationship to nature stands in sharp

contrast to the contemporary paradise of suburban villas for which the area is now known. The protection of the fenced-in *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) has nowadays been outsourced to private security companies and elaborate hightech alarm systems.



Fig. 1.7. The former colony of Walden, Bussum.  
Walden, digital photograph, Ruchama Noorda, 2014.

### ***Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox***

*Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox* was a sculpture and happening I presented in 2012 as part of the *Now I lay Me Down To Eat* project. From 26 – 28 May, ten artists camped out with members of the public for three days in an abandoned camp site in Diepenheim, in the east of the Netherlands, with the aim of forming a temporary autonomous artist community. On a clearing surrounded by tall trees we built a house out of loam, osier and straw mounted on a frame of repurposed material such as discarded bicycle frames and shopping carts (Fig.1.8). This pieced together framework remained visible through the skin of loam, which covered it and protected the interior to some degree from the elements. The hut became a place of shelter and retreat—a muddled version

of ‘social housing in the wild’. Behind the ‘house’ in the backyard, we dug a kidney shaped pool that was designed to function as a curative mud spa, a social hub and detox centre: a place to relax with friends and family while purging the skin of impurities. The frieze above and beside the entrance of the hut was inspired by decorative architectural ornaments, found on the facades of early 20th century Dutch social housing. Like the original Amsterdam School’s friezes, it referenced socialistic ideals of welfare, labour and progress. The temporary construction out of loam created a provisional monument to a set of historical ideals now increasingly consigned to the ‘dunghill of history’. The structure will gradually disintegrate, washed away in Holland’s watery climate by exposure to the elements.

As fundamental elements in every sense, mud and loam are literally and metaphorically close to faecal matter. These substances figure in the modernist imagination as the dirt that modernity tried to escape from when the last sod houses were torn down by the Dutch state. With a view to clearing the way for a cleaner, more enlightened and progressive future for all, the 1901 Housing Act (*De Woningwet*) outlawed sod housing (though people continued to live in sod structures in Holland until the mid-1960’s), as poor families were relocated from their ‘primitive’ habitats into the newly built ‘sanitary’ housing blocks. The slogan used to promote this process of social transformation was ‘Reinheid, Regelmaat en Rust’ (Cleanliness, Order and Quiet). This motto functioned throughout the early 20th century as the Dutch translation of the international hygiene movement that fought for social and physical hygiene. They also were inspired by the ideas on health and hygiene promoted by British nurse and social reformer, Florence Nightingale. The slogan was in effect stamped on the foundation stones of the Dutch welfare state.

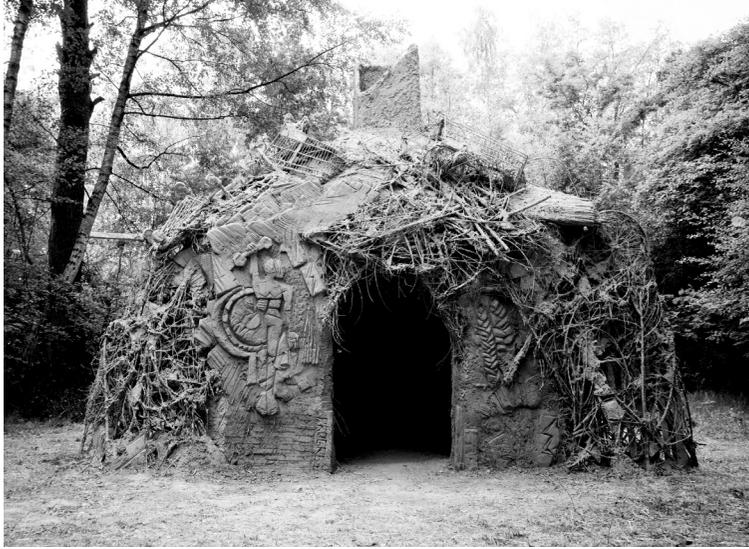


Fig. 1.8. *Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox*, performance and installation, Ruchama Noorda, Diepenheim, 2012. Photo: RN.

I think that together with the medieval overcrowded living situations in historic cities, the dilapidated shacks and improvised housing that seemed almost to have grown out of the damp Netherlands soil, were held responsible by modern urban planners for epidemics of tuberculosis and other diseases, and were linked in the minds of the administrators and progressive modernists in Holland and elsewhere to bad nutrition and 'backward' or 'primitive' living conditions. The people living in these kinds of structures were often called 'a-socials' because they lived beyond the reach of the emerging bureaucracies outside governmental control. State intervention via housing reform was also an attempt on the part of the reforming elites to regulate as well as improve the living conditions of the 'underclass'. However, not all the relocated people volunteered happily to give up the hard won autonomous habitat they had built for themselves, and there was an element of coercion that was resented and in some cases resisted.



Fig. 1.9. An example of the Dutch 'plaggenhut' (sod housing) at the beginning of the 20th century. Photo: National Archive Spaarnestad Photo.

Nowadays these sod houses are familiar to us only via written descriptions and photographs commissioned by governmental organisations to expose the problems surrounding 'free range' housing. No doubt as in other instances where photography was used to further social reform (e.g. the Farm Security Administration photographs taken in the USA under the Roosevelt regime during the Great Depression [Curtis, 1989]), the worst examples of slum housing were chosen to help publicize the cause of Reform. The photographs that have survived often show extremely large families living in collapsing structures made of soil and mud.



Fig. 1.10. *Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox*, performance and installation, Ruchama Noorda, Diepenheim, 2012. Photos: Paulien Oltheten.

On the wall of our mud house in Diepenheim, next to the interior campfire, a neon light box containing ergot (spoiled rye) was installed, radiating blue light that was visible at night through the open door (Fig. 1.11.). Ergot is a parasitic fungus which appears in wheat. It was a widespread contaminant of the cereal grains that were central to the diet of the peasantry throughout medieval Europe. The Ergot parasite caused periodic waves of gangrene and 'choromania' (excessive unstoppable dancing, sometimes called 'St. Vitus Dance' throughout the Middle Ages). The potent hallucinogen Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) which served as a catalyst for the counterculture of the 1960's was first synthesized from ergot alkaloids in 1943 by Dr. Albert Hoffman at the Sandoz laboratories in Switzerland (Hoffmann 1980, 37).



Fig. 1.11. *Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox*, performance and installation, Ruchama Noorda, Diepenheim, 2012. Photo: RN.

On a wooden billboard set in front of the hut in Diepenheim, a sign was erected advertising a '30 Minute Rave' scheduled for 27 May 2012. Local people and friends gathered on the site at the appointed time. The rave was an orchestrated dance ritual designed to induce an altered state of consciousness, not through drugs but by means of controlled breathing and repetitive movements known as trance dance (Fig. 1.10.). A dance of ecstatic belonging or just a repetitive simple movement that, if repeated, makes the dancer disengage from normal patterns of thinking. In opposition to its reputation as a dirty and unhealthy pollutant, mud has also functioned for millennia in various cultures as a curative and healing substance. During the 1969 Woodstock Festival, a spontaneous mass mud slide was set up in the torrential rain to cleanse festival goers of the contaminating influence of a dominant militarized-industrialized culture, at a time of war and national crisis, in a down and dirty back to nature move reminiscent of the cleansing rituals of the masses of Hindu or Christian devotees, who douse themselves in the smelly Ganges, or get baptised in the polluted Jordan river.

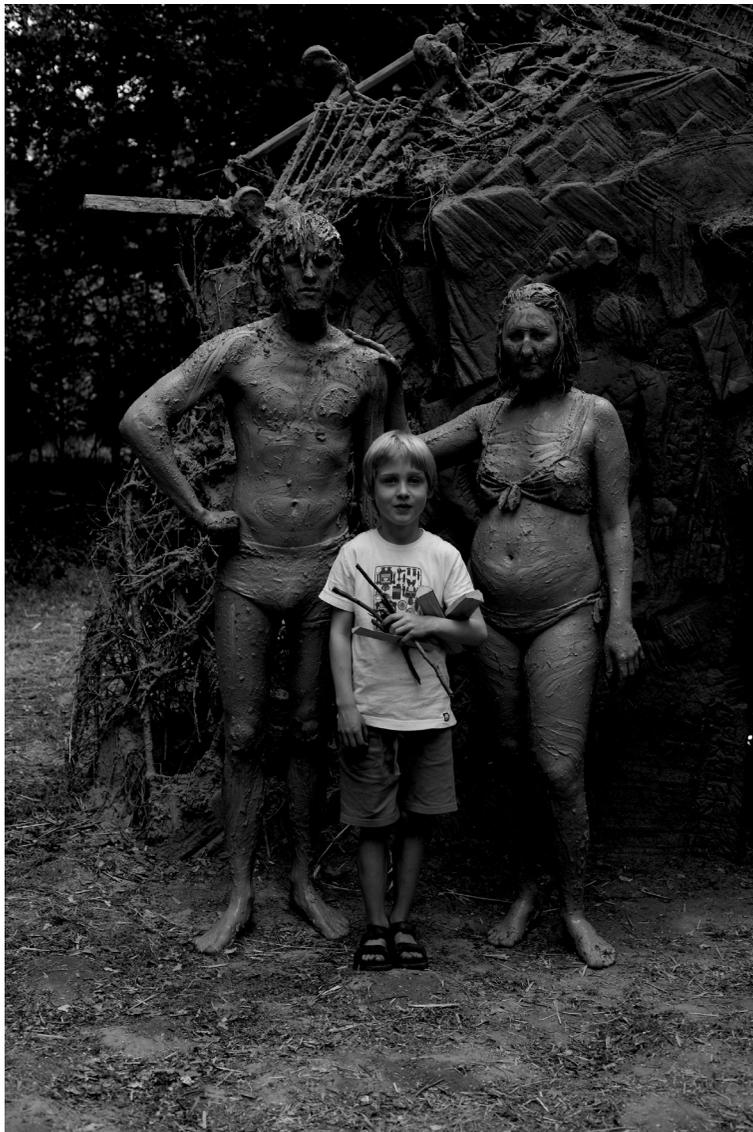


Fig. 1.12. *Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox*, performance and installation, Ruchama Noorda, Diepenheim, 2012. Photo: Paulien Oltheten.

## Dirt

Both mud (dirt) and ergot (fungus) are polluting and purifying agents at the same time. Functioning potentially as either contaminant or cure (or both at once), mud and ergot in my view are reminiscent of Plato's *pharmakon*—a word that incorporates the diametrically opposed meanings of 'poison' and 'remedy'. In *Asocialen*, the installation-performance I made in Diepenheim in 2012, I worked with ideas that spoke through rudimentary and elemental materials. The concept of 'social housing in the wild' sprung forth out of ideas surrounding camping and outdoor activities that have been of great importance to the Lebensreform movement together with general yearnings to go back-to-nature. Anthropologist Mary Douglas states:

'If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a breaking of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. If there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering of matter, that means ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements' (Douglas 1966, 35).



Fig. I.13. *Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox*, performance and installation, detail: ergot fungi, Ruchama Noorda, Diepenheim, 2012. Photo: RN.

Within my *Lebensreform* research project, this binary urge connects to the symptoms of alienation and lifestyle-generated ailments. It was the desire to go ‘primitive’ that started me on this path—a longing to go back to the basics and a fascination with the paradoxical idea of

progress-through-regression. Whereas psychologists tend to classify regression negatively as a defence mechanism, i.e. the organism’s reversion when under pressure to an earlier stage of development, regression, according to me, could also be considered a creative act involving play that is potentially triggering adaptive behaviour. The mud bath functioned both as a form of relaxation therapy and as a baptismal ritual, providing access to the work. The mud pool was the first threshold to be crossed in the dissolution of the boundaries between body and dirt. Although the installation appeared natural, the material out of which the hut and bath were constructed was actually pre-packaged ‘instant mud’ (‘just add water’) purchased in bulk from an organic building supply store 250km south of the installation site. Participants thus found themselves immersed in an experience that was simultaneously both ‘natural’ and ‘inauthentic’ (here the dirt was literally as well as figuratively ‘matter out of place’). The breathing exercises during the ritual rave were designed to invoke a sense of grounding and exaggerated gravity, which helped to shape the embodied experience and to merge the participants with the landscape.<sup>9</sup>

By mounting the performative and ritual work, *Asocialen-Private Prophecy-Detox* in a plain air natural setting, I was aware of the connection to the type of immersive ritual performances choreographed at Monte Verità by Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman. Such performances were examples of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and improvisational *Ausdruckstanz*<sup>10</sup> (expressionist dance) in a natural setting (Brandstetter 1998, 453). Consciously or otherwise I was setting out in Diepenheim to restage or recapitulate elements of the Monte Verità experiment.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty described the embodied experience prior to mental representation as: ‘my body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my “symbolic” or “objectifying function”’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 140–141).

<sup>10</sup> *Ausdruckstanz* was developed out of *Ausdruckspsychologie*, which was established by the German psychologist Karl Jaspers at the beginning of the 20th century.