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Chapter 3:

ReForm

COLLECTIVE:

Countering

(Individual) Culture



Fig. 3.0. *Redemption Value*, Oude Kerk: Amsterdam, 2014.
Photo: Nachito Pike.

Chapter 3. ReForm COLLECTIVE: Countering (Individual) Culture

'I become lost in my own thoughts again: I believe one should... follow one's nose: ...the intuitive method. But the beautiful way in which Christ does this is of special value. I would like to imitate Christ-an inner disquiet seizes me-what is supposed to happen? I hear an odd whirring noise-and suddenly a roaring as if a flock of enormous birds is in the room... a frenzied flapping of wings—Many shadowy human forms rush past and I'm surrounded by a babble of voices and from out of the babble I hear the following summons:

'Let us pray in the temple!'

'I call out "Where are you hurrying to?" A bearded man with tousled hair and dark shining eyes stops and turns toward me: "We are off to Jerusalem to pray at the most holy sepulcher.'

'Take me with you.'

'You cannot join us, you have a body. But we are dead.'

'Who are you?'

'I am Ezekiel, and I am an Anabaptist.'

'Who are those with you?'

'These are my fellow believers.'

'Why are you in such great haste?'

'We cannot stop...We must make a pilgrimage to all the holy places.'

'What drives you to this?'

'It seems that we have no peace, although we died in true belief.'

'Why do you have no peace if you died in true belief?'

'It seems we did not come to a proper end.'

'How so?'

'It seems to me that we forgot to do something important that should have done when we were alive.'

'And what was that?'

At this he reaches out greedily... toward me, his eyes shining as

if burning with an inner, fire spits out: 'Let go, Daemon, you did not live your animal.'¹

(Jung 2009, 293)

The idea of the collective haunts the 20th century. Whether envisioned as a small autonomous group opposed to mainstream cultural values or as the 'masses' brought together by the state through industrialization and urbanization, the collective was commonly figured throughout the 20th century as the potential source of social, cultural, economic and (sometimes) spiritual transformation. In this chapter, I focus exclusively on the small-scale version of the collective—the commune—and on the unstable dynamics that threaten the internal cohesion of any group that seeks to change the social order and/or the course of history. Reform communities tend to fracture and fall apart often in relatively short periods of time. Experiments in communal living built around a rejection of individualism and private property, and based on principles running directly counter to the laws and norms of capitalist societies, are characteristically unstable and vulnerable to entropy. Examples of such short-lived experiments in alternative living undertaken in the 20th century considered elsewhere in this dissertation include the Llano del Rio commune and Frederik van Eeden's Walden. The central contradiction dealt with in this chapter is between the aspiration on the part of committed individuals to the promotion of a collaborative or cooperative ethos within a circumscribed space and the principles of competitive individualism and private property on which the larger societies in which these experiments take place are founded.

¹ This quote comes from *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, Carl Jung's personal account of what a sympathetic commentator, Sonu Shamdasani, described as a series of 'fantasies deliberately evoked..(by Jung)... while in a waking state... (between 1913 and 1917), which he entered into 'as into a drama' ('Introduction' to *Liber Novus*, 200). For Jung, this process involved 'not only communication between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personal psyche but also between the personal and 'collective' unconscious' (Jung 1996, 49)

In what follows I weave back and forth between, on the one hand, a meditation on historical attempts at realizing social utopias from the past, and on the other, descriptions of projects undertaken by Civic Virtue, the four-person artist's collective which I helped to found in 2009. I also reflect on some of my own recent solo work. The Civic Virtue group consisted of Icelandic artist Geirthrudur Finnbogadottir Hjorvar, Dutch writer and performance artist Gijsbert Wouter Wahl, Canadian new media artist Brian McKenna and myself—all friends in their early thirties. We were brought together by a shared interest in the history of radical experimental communes, from the late medieval/early modern period to the present day. Specifically we were interested in studying the value systems, organizational structures and documented histories of heretical and counter-cultural sects from the pre-Reformation Anabaptists in northern Europe and the radical anti-clericalism of the French Revolution to (in my case) the revolutionary 'lifestyle' experiments of the latter-day hippies on the west coast of the USA. The installations, performances and publications produced by Civic Virtue were not conceived as re-enactments of earlier social/art experiments, but were designed instead to provide us with opportunities to see what might be possible in terms of collaborative art making in a contemporary context. We were curious to see what kinds of ideas and artworks would emerge from a shared archive of historically informed references and commitments. I was also strongly drawn to Jung's ideas of the collective unconscious and lucid dreaming. I was ready, like him, to follow Ezekiel's command voiced in the extract from *The Red Book* which opens this chapter: to let go of my Daemon and live my animal.

Like so many collaborative experiments before it, the Civic Virtue collective had a finite life-span: personal differences and professional conflicts eventually led us to go our separate ways in 2014. Nonetheless, far from considering the experiment a failure, I view the time we spent working together as valuable, productive and transformative. Civic Virtue served for each of us as a vehicle for collectively thinking through and executing projects we otherwise would not

have been able to undertake. It enabled us to evolve and test collaborative tactics and strategies. It served as an arena in which four strong-willed individuals learned not just how to argue for, with and against strongly held viewpoints and positions, but also in the end, in certain cases, how to let go and concede the ground if the ideas of other members proved more viable or interesting than our own. In the process, the sharp lines of each individual artist's distinctive personal style were liable to get smudged or blurred, and while this could at times be frustrating and anxiety-provoking, it was also clear that something strong and new—something like a collective ethos and aesthetic—was emerging in the collective work that was different from and in certain instances, greater than the sum of the individual parts. As such, Civic Virtue's output could be said to rub against the grain of the institutionalized art world which, while generally tolerant of 'trends' and 'movements', remains committed—outside the 'alternative' sphere—to the promotion of individual names and resists the idea of collective production.

Since we dissolved the group, I have found that many of the themes I had developed with my peers in Civic Virtue keep cropping up in my solo work, for instance in *Redemption Value* (2014) which is described towards the end of this chapter.

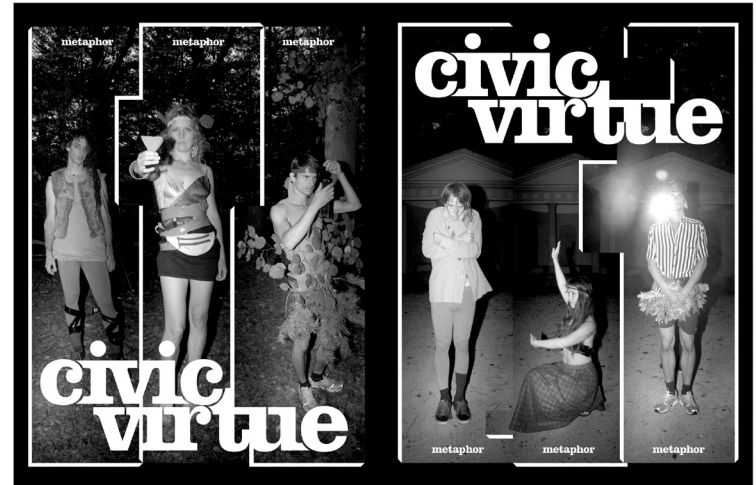


Fig 3.1. *Civic Virtue*, magazine by Künstlerhaus Villa Concordia. 2011. Design by Jeff and Andrew Goldstein.

Despite a continuing reluctance on the part of museums and commercial galleries to fully endorse the idea of collaborative or collectively authored works, 'social practice' is becoming once again in the 21st century a crucial orientation among a growing number of younger artists. It therefore seems appropriate to consider how the contemporary art world is responding to the revival of the collective as an idea(l) and a mode of production that challenges the fundamental grounds of an 'art star'/art market system, rooted in the mystique and selling power of the individual 'creator'. The idea of the collaboratively authored work is no less suspect and subversive within the academic world, where the basic unit of value for progression and recognition remains the monograph or singly authored text. Predictably the idea of the 'creative commons', around which advocates of open source models of knowledge development and distribution have organized themselves in recent years, are exiled and frequently prosecuted and penalized (as, for instance, 'hackers'). At the same time, new communication and social networking technologies are so tightly bound up with the

economic system in which they have been developed that it becomes harder and harder to think (or act) outside them. The Internet, globally wired connectivity and the ‘free market’ model are now so meshed together that neoliberalism is on the verge of being universalized as humanity’s ‘second nature’. In his recent book, *Art Power*, the Russian critic, Boris Groys (Groys 2008, 165) explores the impact of the spread of neoliberal economic norms on art both as a commodity and a tool for political propaganda. He argues that the idea of ‘natural law’ as explained by ‘classical’ economists like Adam Smith was turned upside down under communist rule so that in socialist societies ‘only someone who no longer has property is free and available for every social experiment.’ Thus, he goes on to argue: ‘(T)he abolition of private property... represented the transition from the realm of necessity to the realm of (political and artistic) freedom, from the traditional state to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*’.

Groys points out that with the collapse of that system at the end of the Cold War ‘[e]normous territories became abandoned wildernesses as far as rights were concerned—as in the Wild West era of the United States—and had to be restructured, that is to say they had to be parcelled, distributed and opened up to privatization’ (Groys 2008, 165). This abrupt transition happened, he claims, in such a way that the neoliberal makeover felt anything but natural. Adam Smith’s idea of the ‘invisible hand’ was exposed as no less manipulative and incomplete in its operation, so that, rather than the free market representing ‘a state of nature’, what stood revealed instead was ‘the highly artificial character of the market itself’. Although Groys’s argument is made in the context of the impact of the sudden transition from communism to capitalism, the denaturing of the idea of the ‘free market’ has been widespread in recent years, following the financial meltdown and the credit and derivatives crisis of 2008. In the wake of that systemic failure in the global finance system, alternative models of social, cultural and economic value and investment have begun to circulate again on a planetary scale. In his book *Common as Air. Revolution, Art and Ownership*, cultural critic Lewis Hyde argues against the universal applicability of the idea of art as (intellectual) ‘property’ and

writes: ‘The commons is not so much the land in question but also the social relations and traditional institutions that organize its use’ (Hyde 2010, 29). He goes on to advocate the vital importance of protecting art and culture in general. Hyde describes the privatization of the spheres of ‘immaterial’ production and intellectual and artistic ‘property’ as an ‘enclosure’ of ‘the cultural commons’, extending the concept of a right of common access to the land. This principle of common access bounds together common folk, ‘free thinkers’ and peasant farmers against the encroachments of the landed gentry in the early modern period. In *Common as Air*, Hyde analyses creativity as a communal initiative, where artists draw on the contributions of others, including fellow artists and the inherited archive to make ‘new’ work. A comparable model of collective authorship and ownership underlies Chris Kraus’s *Where Art Belongs*. In this recent examination of collaborative art projects, Kraus sets out to ‘reclaim the use of lived time’. She states: ‘There’s no such thing as a failed utopian community; for, if the collective is an experiment in shared time, how can time fail?’ (Kraus 2011, 169)



Fig. 3.2. Exhibition *Civic Virtue VI, Grand Tour, W139*, Amsterdam, 23 February – April 2013.
Photo: Henny van Beek.

Civic Virtue

In 2010, the four members of what was to become Civic Virtue were invited to mount an exhibition at the *Arti et Amicitiae* (Arts and Friendship) building in Amsterdam. Behind the building's neoclassical facade and the dark wooden hallway designed in 1839 by architect H.P. Berlage, we found a world that, while still operating on the ideals and principles of the original Art and Friendship association, was clearly in decline. The hallway is decorated with the names of historic members of the society, including famous 19th century painters such as Jozef Israels and Jan Toorop. On the ground floor there is a bar and restaurant, open only to paying members or by invitation. Nowadays 'art lovers' greatly outnumber actual artists visiting the restaurant and bar of *Arti et Amicitiae*. The latter spaces have become a good place to smoke cigars with aging lawyers and politicians who treat the location as a private club and appear surprised when installing artists covered in saw dust and paint show up at the bar. The group show we mounted was entitled *Civic Virtue* as a sort of revival of or homage to the building, and

its founding principle was one of artistic solidarity. For the show we began developing a revivalist retro-neoclassicist aesthetic, and set out to resurrect a largely superseded 19th century neoclassical aesthetic, by combining paintings and items selected from the society's extensive art collection with antique Mediterranean artefacts borrowed from the Allard Pierson Museum across the street. These we installed alongside our own classically inspired wall drawings, paintings, sound installations and videos. As we scavenged through the institutional archive, we came to realize that *Arti et Amicitiae* had had a more radical history than is apparent in the organisation's current incarnation. We came across glass slides of drawings that documented communal political activities like street protests, some of which we projected in the final exhibition.



Fig. 3.3. Exhibition *Civic Virtue I: Stedenmaagd* (Ruchama Noorda), wall drawing marker and acrylic paint, *Arti et Amicitiae*, Amsterdam, 2010. Photo: RN.

The organisation provided us with two large white rooms on the second floor of the building to accommodate the show together with some technical assistance and a six month free membership in the Society, which included the possibility of

attending a weekly live drawing class. During this period I found myself obsessed with the famous slogan of the French revolution: ‘Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité’, which seemed to me to join up the dots between classical and neoclassical ideas and iconography. Geirthrudur Finnbogadottir Hjorvar exhibited a marble head of Aphrodite and three large bronze clocks ornamented with classical female figures in Empire style on loan from a local antique store, and the installation was augmented with an audio tape recording of dolphin calls. The disembodied head of Aphrodite mutilated by the passage of time was intended in Finnbogadottir Hjorvar’s own words (supplied in the exhibition text) to contain ‘a reference to the guillotine as the outcome of an awkward combination of terror and virtue, while the style of the Empire, like that of the clock, was the flip side of the same coin—an emerging market economy regenerates the proper kitsch of classicism.’² Across the room diagonally opposite this piece, I drew directly on the wall using graffiti markers a six metre wide tableau depicting Marianne, the figurehead of the French Republic in her Phrygian cap holding up the tree of liberty. The 6×4 metre wall drawing *Stedenmaagd* (City Maiden, the Minerva-like goddess and allegory of the Republic) was a cartoonish contemplation of the female body in relation to the reproduction of forms, of people, of culture, and of ‘fertility’ in the broader sense. The style of the drawing was inspired by the early caricatures that won popularity around the time of the French Revolution. Caricature was then employed to make serious, social or political points and other propagandistic material.

I had previously experimented with the use of outside collections within my installations, for example with objects from De Stijl movement in Leiden at the Lakenhal/Scheltema exhibition *Statisch Vooruitgangsmonument*. What I always found interesting, and even mildly alarming, is that these objects cannot protect themselves from our appropriations and re-codings. We can incorporate them as elements in

² *Civic Virtue Magazine*. 2013. Interviews with curator Tim Voss and the members of Civic Virtue on the occasion of the Grand Tour, published by W139 and designed by Paul Gangloff, Amsterdam.

assemblages based around our own private pre-histories, mythologies or ideological commitments. In *Arti et Amicitiae*, Brian McKenna showed 3-D video footage of a public sculpture with a soundtrack of a scratched compact disc recording of a classical concert, and a temple-like installation with two animated videos and Ampex 456 recording tapes installed in such a way that they functioned effectively like the ornamental scrolls on classical Ionic pillars. Gijsbert Wouter Wahl showed minimal paintings and an anonymous portrait from the collection exhibited upside down. The *Arti et Amicitiae* exhibition also included a fifth contributor in the person of Lebanese artist, Mounira Al Solh, whose inclusion set a precedent for the group which we repeated on several occasions afterwards—providing other artists with ‘guest spots’ in subsequent Civic Virtue exhibitions. Al Solh’s work entitled: *A Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses: A Proposal for a Dutch Cat, a Dutch Dog, a Dutch Donkey, a Dutch Goat and Finally, a Dutch Camel* was a video and slide projection in which the artist asks the five animals referred to in the title (which were played by herself) questions about philosophy and existence.

In preparing for Civic Virtue’s debut exhibition, which was more a group show than an organically collective effort, we held regular salon-like meetings around a backyard campfire in an apartment block in the eastern part of Amsterdam. Over time, these fireside gatherings became the catalyst and incubator for many of the group’s projects and served to create a mutual bonding whilst we were maybe also pretending to be camping in the forest. Around 2009, we undertook a protracted process of research in the form of tours of historically significant sites and participated as a group in early protests against austerity measures in Holland. This in turn stoked our interest in the Age of Revolution and revolutionary aesthetics. All these group activities to some extent fed into and helped shape my later work, and the continuous dialogue among group members. They were sustained in the intervals between Civic Virtue’s exhibition projects, which were based around the sharing of images and texts via collaborative online platforms, and have proved generative. Our main activities prior to the exhibitions, involved historical

sightseeing and small-scale, research-driven excursions that later would develop into a contemporary revival of the 18th and 19th century aristocratic Grand Tour. The excursions already supplied a conceptual framework and an aesthetic format for us—a format which could unify our interests in history, cultural radicalism, tradition, and social experimentation. I came to call these outings ‘recreational aesthetics’ as a play on, and partial critique, of Nicolas Bourriaud’s much-hyped concept of ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud 1998).

Around this time the four core group members decided to use the title of our first exhibition to name the group itself. In the summer of 2012, the collective now called Civic Virtue undertook a Grand Tour of (northern) Europe travelling (to quote from our own published account) ‘through the entrails of history and past important monuments of revival’.³ We toured the Netherlands, Germany and Italy starting from an interest in the signs and symbols that define our world, and the power structures that have shaped it and are still visible in architecture, monuments and institutions.

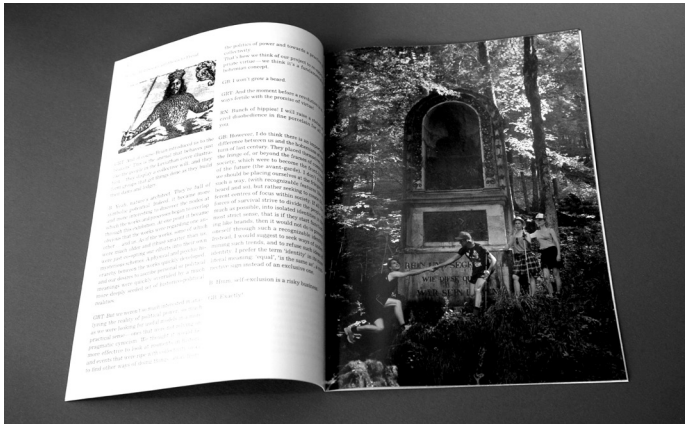


Fig. 3.4. The Grand Tour publication, 2013. Design: Paul Gangloff.

Some of our mutual interests were inspired by a reading of the novel *Q*, by Luther Blisset, an Italian authors’ collective. *Q* is a novel about Europe’s radical 16th century religious Reformation. The fact that the work was written by a collective while simultaneously connecting to places on our German-Dutch itinerary gave us sufficient cause to buy a Dutch and English language copy of the book prior to setting off. We regarded our prolonged outing as a revival of the kind of self-directed education advocated by romantic figures and champions of the *Bildungsroman*, such as Goethe, in contrast to the instrumentally or technically focused educational programs favoured under neoliberalism. As we put it in one of our publications at the time, we were advocating for an ‘education directed towards the cultivation of an informed, self-reflexive citizenry rather than the production of bureaucratic representatives, or gears within the economic machine’ (*Civic Virtue Magazine* 2013, published by WV139).

The contemporary Grand Tour connoted for me something simultaneously upper class and euro-trash: a box-ticking version of the ‘been there, done that’ kind of tourism. We could not afford the complete package-tour along the Rhine and had to go back and forth over the period of a year to make the tour we envisaged in the absence of an adequate budget or enough free time to undertake it properly. During the tour, we relied on the generosity of people from the artists’ initiatives we visited. It was informative to see how independent initiatives of this kind managed to survive in the circumstances pertaining to the present time in Europe, given the on going financial crisis. The generosity we encountered was based far more on friendship, empathy and solidarity than art-world/art-market delusions of grandeur. These successful but often minimally subsidized, and sometimes almost entirely artist-financed ventures kept afloat by voluntary donations from people with precarious part-time jobs, were the contemporary equivalent of *fin de siècle* artist societies or craftsman unions.

³ <http://civicvirtue.info/weblog/?paged=4>



Fig. 3.5. Civic Virtue, Gewebe Project, Worpswede, 2013.
Photo: GFH.

The Gewebe Project: Weaving/Worpswede

In August 2013, Civic Virtue completed a three-week residency at the former artist colony of Worpswede in Saxony (Germany), a site on which the ideological conflicts that cut through the German art community in the first half of the 20th century had been dramatically concentrated. Founded in 1894 as a back-to-the-land artist commune by Fritz Mackensen,⁴ a conservative painter committed to what Lesley Chamberlain called a 'religious realism of the soil', Worpswede also played host for many years to writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann, and to expressionist painters like Heinrich Vogeler and Paula Modersohn-Becker whose work ended up in Hitler's 1937 *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. During the residency we collaborated on the *Gewebe Project*, a work that posits the invention of weaving as the origin of mechanization, hence references the idea

⁴ Mackensen later served as Director of the National Centre for German 'Nordic' Art in Bremen, under the Nazis, from 1933–1935.

of the 'primitive' that strongly influenced much of the work created and exhibited by the original artists in Worpswede throughout the history of the colony. In this context I was especially fascinated by the inclusion for many years at the Worpswede site of the Ludwig Roselius Museum for Pre-History and Early History. The Museum which had housed the private art collection of Roselius, an early 20th century Bremen coffee merchant, was closed in 2004 partly because the unscientific and invented nature of the 'history' of 'Nordic' and early Germanic art and artefacts exhibited there had become a source of embarrassment.

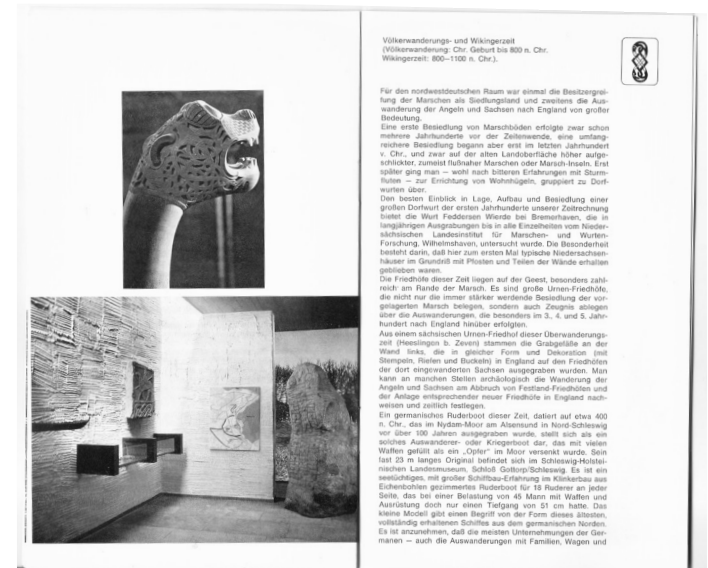


Fig. 3.6. Collection catalogue Ludwig-Roselius Museum für Frühgeschichte (Museum of Early History), Worpswede (n.d.).

Some of the colony's original female artists had experimented with weaving and the remnants of the weaving mill they constructed is now on display at *Haus im Schluh*, the former home of Martha Vogeler which was turned into a museum after the Second World War. From 1894 to 1945, Worpswede had served as a test-site for experiments in art

and collective living at the point where modernism, nationalism and radical utopianism(s) converged and clashed. To reference this history we constructed a primitive back-to-the-land loom out of local materials, stretching the fabric between a shovel and a rake and installed the bizarre-looking apparatus in a field behind the colony's main buildings.

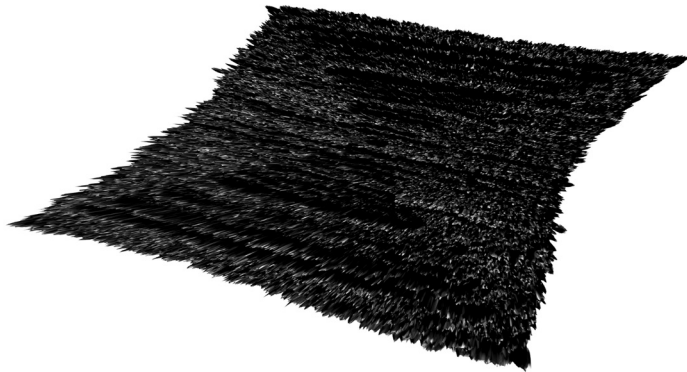


Fig. 3.7. Digital translation design for the *Gewebe project* (Geirthrudur Finnbogadottir Hjorvar) at *Immergo Identidum*, Civic Virtue at Stadthausgalerie/Kunsthalle Münster, 11 October – 10 November 2013.

Whilst the loom thus represented a response on our part to the tangled history of the Worpswede community, in this piece we were also intended to explore the links between the millenarian ideology of the 16th century Anabaptists and survivalist strands within contemporary apocalyptic thinking via the twin tropes of back to basics/back to the land. In the process we set out to investigate the resilience of basic materials such as turf, which according to Anthroposophical beliefs, provides protection against the effects of modern hazards like radiation poisoning. While it did not prove possible for us to weave turf into wool at Worpswede—our

initial alchemical aspiration—Civic Virtue nonetheless built a functioning loom. The primitive machine served initially as a frame for thought, in which the warp and weft, out of which the fabric is fashioned, functioned like a fishing net. We laboured intensively as a group to reconstruct an Iron Age technology, which looks altogether out of place and out of time, resembling as it does, a cross between a piano and a prototype computer capable of writing code. The following passage is an extract from the pamphlet we produced for the exhibit:

'How it works:

Perspective and destination are interchangeable when knots form a system of binary opposition, wherein a code can be sequenced and then tuned.

Due to the minimal amount of transportable material, the code of the loom has been simplified to a singular sign.

Two triangles form an X, one going towards the future and the other towards the past. The middle signal contains a single line.

Indeed, the way to travel cross-dimensionally is by deciphering two opposing elements in a sign.

Additionally, the wool must be sorted, cleaned, spun and woven.

The membrane is the only substance existing in a state between liquid and solid. It is the exchange between position and shape. New configurations are carried through serial models of two-dimensional surfaces.

The antennae of the loom use a symbolic order—the pitchfork and the shovel—to attract electrical currents that travel to us through the psycho-sphere.

A pan-historic signal may carry an algorithm containing

each past movement, together with a calculation of the future outcome.’⁵

We worked together for days in a row washing and spinning by hand the fleece of a single sheep on a machine composed of rocks, string, wood, bamboo, plastic binding material and tape. The final product of the Worpswede weaving project was a blanket that held protective qualities exclusively through its symbolic iconography: part hourglass, part radiation symbol, part triangle, part letter X. Gewebe (see fig. 3.9.) functioned as a modern-day cipher merging past hopes and present dilemmas. The fabric produced by this machine became a centrepiece in Civic Virtue’s *Altar to the Cult of Radical Reform*. We included it in *Time to Recollect / Immergo Identidum*, our 2013 exhibition at the Stadthausgalerie located in a historic building at the centre of the ‘medieval’ city of Münster (a city which had in fact been systematically carpet bombed in October 1944, and has entirely been rebuilt in the post-World War Two period). *Time to Recollect* was supported by Kunsthalle Münster and curated by Suzie Hermán and Jürgen Dehm, who also provided us with a temporary fifth member in the person of fellow Dutch artist Sil Krol, whose piece for the show combined aspects of church architecture with a hexagonal platform from which gallery visitors could be addressed. The exhibition was accompanied by a film series which included works by, among others, the Otholith Group [*‘48’* (2009)], Dan Graham [*Rock my religion* (1984)] and a finissage/closing event with performances by noise and video group VHSUHF (including Civic Virtue member Brian McKenna) and a performance by artist Giles Balley.

⁵ Gewebe, self-published design for an online handout, Civic Virtue, Amsterdam 2013.



Fig. 3.8. *Baptisterium* (Ruchama Noorda) and *Triptych* (Geirthrudur Finnbogadottir Hjorvar), *Immergo Identidum*, Civic Virtue, Stadthausgalerie/ Kunsthalle Münster, 11 October – 10 November 2013. Photo: GFH.

We used the invitation to design an exhibition at the Stadthausgalerie to delve into the history of the Anabaptist Münster rebellion (1534–35) in an attempt to recuperate what was once a populist movement within the Radical Reformation. We duly incorporated formal aspects of northern European Protestant aesthetics and ideology into the individual works. We were interested in exploring how far the visual language of the original Anabaptist counter-culture retained a potential for transferring symbols of radical reform into a modern-day context. What tied the works together was described by Finnbogadottir as ‘the re-politicizing of a religious aesthetic’, the presumption being that knowledge should be held in the public domain, and that the right of freedom of assembly implies a politics of collective action. Works produced for *Immergo Identidum* at *Time to Recollect* included *Baptisterium* (fig. 3.8. and fig. 3.13). It also included *Triptych* (the altarpiece as propaganda, see fig. 3.8) by Finnbogadottir in the form of a large photo print glued on wood, which combined the aesthetic of a futuristic

prophecy with reflections on the nature of the public domain; *Dome* by McKenna (the shape and sound of religious architecture) made out of copper water pipes and included a sound piece with a self-resonating church bell; and *A Word is a Broken Sign* which was a performance piece by Wahl. The exhibition also included a shroud of the apocalypse entitled *Gewebe* (fig. 3.9), a textile piece woven at Worpswede, which was presented at Münster alongside documentation of the construction of the loom in the *Gewebe* project.



Fig. 3.9. *Gewebe*, *Immergo Identidum*, Civic Virtue, Stadthausgalerie/ Kunsthalle Münster, 11 October – 10 November 2013. Photo: GFH.

One of the pieces I made on site at the Stadthausgalerie was *Baptisterium*, a pool made out of sandbags and tarp designed for baptism and self-baptism, which I conceived as a physical and spiritual detox centre. The work set out to reflect on the logic and history of contemporary self-purification rituals and focused, in particular, on the contemporary role of the commercial health and beauty spa as a site for recharging one's inner batteries. But by using sandbags for the scaffolding, the pool evoked images of war and violence, conditions of threat in which the elevated barricade functions as a shelter for protection. The piece is intended to reference the story of the Anabaptists' persecution, the encirclement, capture, torture and extermination of Jan van Leiden and his fellow insurgents in Münster in the wake of their failed revolution in 1535. The pool was installed alongside an instructional light box containing a pictorial, step-by-step guide to 'rebirthing'—a cure for spiritual ills based in alternative regimes of knowledge.

The works produced by Civic Virtue members for this exhibition thus picked up threads and pursued themes across two distinct historically documented radical interventions: the artist colony at Worpsswede and the short-lived Anabaptist republic at Münster, though we opted not to attempt any absolute fusion of the two 'moments'. Instead we sought to constitute Civic Virtue itself as a latter-day nomadic colony, a contemporary vehicle for the idea of a revolutionary life on the road. In these and other projects we intended to explore the opportunities for mobility and temporary communal living opened up by the institution of the artists' residency. In many ways, the artists' residency functions in the 21st century both as a translation into physical terms of internet connectivity and as a revival of the medieval model of vagabond mobility associated with the Franciscan order or with a medieval journeyman scholar like Erasmus. Civic Virtue's concept of The Grand Tour-on-a-budget provides something of a broken down bridge between modernity and these much earlier traditions of rootless pauperism. The work of Civic Virtue can in this way be interpreted as an improvised site-specific rite of passage through the entrails, roots, and ruins of European civilization.



Fig. 3. 10. Civic Virtue, *Tympanum* (Ruchama Noorda), plaster, gravel, spray-paint and marker on wood, *Civic Virtue VI, Grand Tour, WI39, Amsterdam, 2013*. Photo: GFH.

To mark the end of Civic Virtue's Grand Tour as both homecoming and grand finale, we installed an exhibition at the WI39 artist run centre in Amsterdam, which was open from late-February to mid-April in 2013. The centrepiece of the exhibition consisted of our 'remake' of an ancient Minoan temple made from industrial sewer pipes on loan from the municipal water company and covered with black gravel and glue. The works were presented as archaeological finds as excavated from a newly discovered ruin. For this show I created *Tympanum* (fig. 3.10), a wood and plaster sculpture which was placed to one side of the fabricated 'temple'. The painted figure of Marianne appears again on this piece as a quasi-goddess of the modern age, Queen of Revolution and the Sans-Culottes (fig. 3.12). The tympanum was also marked with graffiti and other act of vandalism, giving testimony to the multiple layers of dissent inscribed on a façade that now lies in ruins. The form of the pediment itself originates in the archaic period of Greek antiquity and the oldest surviving example of a tympanum at the Temple in

Corfu has an image of Medusa as its central figure. Inspired by the image of the snake-headed Gorgon carved into one of the earliest surviving examples of classical Greek architecture, I created three *Emoticons* out of hammered copper, taking the shape of oversized square masks based on the archetypal grimacing and grinning figures of Tragedy and Comedy from classical iconography (fig. 3.2). In addition to the visual bridge I was setting out to build via this piece between classical symbols and contemporary digital icons, the *Emoticons* were used in performance as theatrical props and metal noise-makers which sounded like claps of thunder when shaken.



Fig. 3.11. *Emoticons*, Ruchama Noorda, 2013, hammered copper. Photo: we-find-wildness.com.

The image on the *Tympanum* also featured in some of my earlier works in which I appropriated versions of a muscular heroic female character, commonly found on the fascia containing socialist or communist ‘workerist’ motifs, of buildings designed by architects in the Art Deco period.

The figure seems to function as a celebration of female labour power in a way analogous to the American World War Two female labour icon, Rosie the Riveter. I am particularly interested in this figure’s association with social housing and trades unions within the Dutch context. Cities speak their ideological formation in layers as it were, through architectural symbols that invoke mythologies as remote from contemporary concerns and possibilities as ancient Rome is from the ruins of the welfare state. Such symbols bear witness to the moment of their own construction and thus became a monumental historical record of the ideologies that produced them. Much Dutch architecture built in celebration of labour was designed by people who were theosophists as well as socialists. Such figures include H.P. Berlage (1856–1934) and K. de Bazel (1869–1923) who were both members of the theosophical Vahâna Lodge which flourished in Amsterdam from 1896 to 1931. These architects connected iconographic images of physical labour, including heroic representations of the female labour force with images of spiritual progress. ‘De Verheffing van het Volk’ (The Elevation of the People) ethic and aesthetic signified both social mobility and a spiritual ideal.



Fig. 3. 12. Civic Virtue, *Tympanum* (Ruchama Noorda), plaster, gravel, spray-paint and marker on wood, *Civic Virtue VI, Grand Tour*, W139, Amsterdam, 2013. Photo: GFH.

The Collapse of Civic Virtue

It is generally acknowledged that the art world and most especially the art market is organized around the modeling and promotion of the solo career. Works tend to be separated from the collaborative context in which they are of necessity, conceived, fabricated and displayed in order to be sold as objects with a traceable provenance and re-sale value. In the age of corporate identity and ‘branding’, even more than under the romantic-modernist custom of the individual creator-genius, the solo show is the epitome of prestige and is seen to concentrate more cultural capital (which can potentially be translated into economic capital) than the group show. And by the same token, the group show is typically seen to be more prestigious than the collaborative or participatory event where the principle of unique authorship is in question. As Claire Bishop states in her influential critical review of public/social art, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012): ‘... Collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists, and less likely to be ‘works’ than a fragmented area of social events...’ (Bishop 2012, 2).

While the Civic Virtue collective, like most collectives eventually imploded under its own internal and external pressures, I remain interested in investigating the potential of the collective as an alternative way of living and working. But I would also argue that permanence as a value in itself within this context is overrated and misplaced. The fact that collectives do not become permanent institutions should neither be surprising nor seen as incontrovertible evidence of failure. The point is not necessarily to provide a permanent alternative but to intervene in a cultural context: to demonstrate that alternatives to the status quo—the apparently ‘natural’ ways of doing things—however temporary and provisional, are nonetheless thinkable and therefore, for a time at least, doable.



Fig. 3.13. *Regress, Progress, Conserve* (Ruchama Noorda),
CV V at Kunstverein Milano, digital prints, 20 × 25 cm, 2012.

Full Immersion, Co- Knowledge and Hydrotherapy

The waves of reform that spread over Europe in medieval times came initially from both orthodox Catholics and heretics. Calls for moral reform were often combined with proposals for financial reform and were rooted in a critique of the Roman Church's system of buying dispensations, indulgences and spiritual improvement—with wealthy Christians literally paying for salvation. The people's moral debt had been reduced over time to a financial transaction, where full remission of all sins became available for a price. 'Financial debt' and 'guilt' are the same words in both German and Dutch. What draws me to the northern European heretical reform movements of the medieval period are the countless similarities they bear to their 20th and 21st century reform and counter-cultural inheritors and counterparts. Among the most important predecessors of the modern Lebensreform movement for my work are the Anabaptists, who form an enduring preoccupation, which directly shaped my contribution to *Immergo Identidum*, the previously mentioned exhibition in Münster in 2013. The Anabaptists rejected the idea of infant baptism and advocated that self-baptism be administered by freely choosing adults without the intercession of a priest. Apart from the radical implications of bypassing priestly authority, the belief on the part of the Anabaptists in the purifying power of immersion baptism, in which the entire body is submerged in water, has a contemporary albeit weak equivalent in the widespread commitment to the culture of the spa.



Fig. 3.14. *Baptisterium* (Ruchama Noorda), detail of a light-box, *Immergo Identidum*, Civic Virtue, Stadthausgalerie/ Kunsthalle Münster, 2013.

The cleansing and rejuvenating routines of the spa connect the individual to the primary experience of embodiment through the sensory system of the skin. The ritual of baptism could be interpreted as a simulated re-enactment (though less traumatic) of the experience of being born. Baptism implies a new beginning, a chance, as the American fundamentalists put it, to be 'born again'. Recently I have researched some contemporary rebirthing techniques based on immersion baptism and diaphragmatic breathing, and I have begun integrating these techniques into my work. Diaphragmatic breathing is performed by contracting the diaphragm, the muscle located horizontally between the chest and the stomach cavity. According to some advocates of this technique when the air enters the lungs, the belly expands and this in turn causes an alteration in consciousness. These techniques are applied in certain strands of yoga where they are known as *pranayama* exercises. The technique could be described as

a form of space travel within the human psyche by means of oxygen deprivation. In certain alternative bathing group therapies, the ritual is described explicitly as a re-enactment of the birth trauma. The most well-known alternative therapies using this kind of oxygen deprivation exercises are Leonhard Dietrich Orr's 'Rebirthing-Breathwork' and Stanislav Grof's 'Holotropic Breathing', both of which were pioneered in the 1960's and 1970's. They focus on the de-sublimation of powerful emotions repressed during birth and are oriented via catharsis toward a general positive whole-system paradigm shift. My interest in these techniques eventually lead to *Redemption Value*.

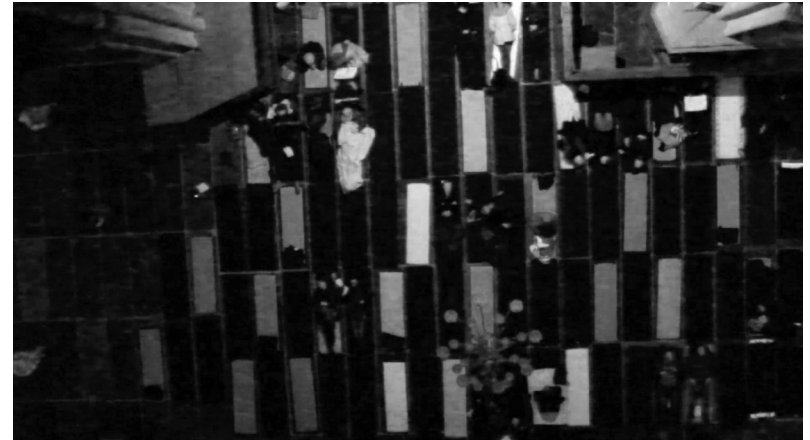


Fig. 3.15. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Video still: Liza Houben and Hannah Reede.

Redemption Value

Redemption Value was an hour long performance piece I designed and executed on the evening of 15 November 2014 as part of a series titled *Nachtelijke Dwalingen* curated by Julia Geerlings and Rieke Vos and organized by de Oude Kerk, (Amsterdam's oldest building, ca. 1213) situated at the Wallen in central Amsterdam. For this work I led a walking tour and clean-up crew through the heart of the Red Light

district encircling the Dam Square, the ancient trade and transport hub, and (by no means incidentally) the site of the naked Anabaptist uprising of 1535. The tour mapped the secret history of Amsterdam via the lines of spiritual intensity, persecution, transcendence and immersion in the flesh that crisscross at the city's heart.



Fig. 3.16. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

The 'dwaling' began with members of the public converging in the Oude Kerk for an organ recital, composed and performed in the main body of the church⁶ by composer and musician Gunnar Gunnsteinsson with counterpoint provided by fellow organist Thom de Jager. The floor of the Oude Kerk consists of 2500 grave stones and the eighty audience-participants (henceforth referred to as 'the pilgrim-participants') were told to recline on the brightly coloured yoga mats laid out in a grid on the floor (fig 3.17) and to synchronize their breathing in time with the organ piece. As

⁶ The vaulted wooden ceiling of the Oude Kerk, installed in 1390, accounts for the superb acoustics which many claim to be among the best in Europe.

the air began vibrating with the solemn tones of the organ, the reclining pilgrim-participants were asked to relax, and to use the breathing diaphragm as a vehicle for merging with the music and the space. After the recital, the clean-up crew which was assembled out of friends and colleagues dressed in orange robes and matching iridescent vests picked up the traditional besom brooms which had been placed against the stone columns of the church and led the pilgrim-participants out onto the street which was crowded with tourists.



Fig. 3.17. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

The group walked slowly in a silent procession through the crowds of tourists, past the brightly lit windows behind which women sat or stood in scanty underwear.



Fig. 3.18. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

In planning the piece, I looked for a site roughly midway on the route with a significant link to the secret esoteric history of Amsterdam. This site would serve as a temporary resting place and the spiritual fulcrum of the ‘dwaling’, a place where pilgrim-participants would be invited to pause, centre themselves, and open up to the ambient energies concentrated there. The Albert Heijn supermarket at Prins Hendrikkade 20, directly opposite the Central Station was ideally suited for this purpose.

Here, close to the former mouth of the Amstel river where the city of Amsterdam was founded in 1200, is the point where, according to esoteric wisdom, the city’s spiritual energies are centred. The supermarket is housed within the Mercurius building, a mannerist folly designed by the architect Y. Bijvoets in 1882–83, complete with cast iron Corinthian pilasters, masterons, elaborate friezes with myriad hermetic devices and pastel glass windows set in ornate circular frames. The building is fronted by a statue of the wing-hatted figure of Mercury (Hermes), the Roman god of commerce, boundaries, luck, trickery and thieves whose task it is to lead

the souls of the dead through the underworld. In the 1990’s, Ronald Jan Heijn, spiritual entrepreneur and heir of the Albert Heijn fortune, set up the Oibibio New Age Centre on the premises and the place flourished for several years in this capacity until the Centre was forced to close its doors in 2001 due to financial difficulties. The Mercurius building with its elaborate ornate interior still intact is now leased to the Albert Heijn chain. According to dowisers, the epicentre of the city’s spiritual energy field can be located in the store directly underneath the shelves assigned for baby food and infant diapers.

On the night of 15 November 2014, the orange people/ clean-up crew led the pilgrim-participants in silence through the turnstile at the entrance to the supermarket, formed the group into a circle in front of the baby food and diaper aisle and issued the following printed instructions:

At the first ring of the bell, close your eyes and focus on the energy emanating from underneath the building. On the second bell ring open your eyes and exit by the supermarket’s rear door.



Fig. 3.19. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

Along the procession route at random points the clean-up crew distributed spiritual 'redemption value' coupons to passers-by.



Fig. 3.20. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014.

The coupons, mimicking the form and mode of address of supermarket discount coupons made the following redemption pledges:

*FUSION WITH THE LIFE FORCE
IMMEDIATE ACCESS TO THE INFINITE WITHOUT
INTERMEDIATING AUTHORITIES
ETERNAL LIGHT*

On exiting the supermarket, the group, led by Georgia Haagsma and myself, headed through a narrow alleyway past the police station and the Stock Exchange towards the Dam Square.



Fig. 3.21. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

While the clean-up crew blessed passers-by, I drew a circle on the ground with chalk and placed emergency vehicle lights at regular intervals to further mark out the encircled space as sacred. Meanwhile the clean-up crew began ministering to the crowd, which had grown in number with the addition of tag-along tourists and curious shoppers from the nearby Kalverstraat. In solemn silence the orange street cleaner priestesses engaged individuals, patted them down as if conducting a strip-search, then knelt before them grounding their disparate and sometimes chaotic energy flows with the earth (some of the passers-by were clearly drunk).



Fig. 3.22. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

The 'dwaling' ended with the clean-up crew dousing the heads of the brooms in flammable spirit and setting them alight before tilting what were now two meter torches together at the centre of the ring to form a pyramid of flame.



Fig. 3.23. *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Indiana Audunsdottir.

Our pilgrimage/road-sweep had shadowed at an angle the route around the Oude Kerk taken by the Silent Circumambulation (*Stille Omgang*), the Catholic ritual that takes place every year to commemorate the Miracle of the Host (1345).⁷ The multi-layered significance of the Dam Square for this piece was underlined in the leaflet which the pilgrims (each of whom had paid five euros before entering the Oude Kerk) received at the beginning of the 'dwaling': 'The Dam located on the river Amstel is the navel of the city—its trade and transport hub and point of origin. Behind the navel lies the cervix of the city, capitalism's birthplace—where the world's first stock exchange was built in 1607 alongside the Rokin canal. Here, on the 10th of May 1535, a group of radical Anabaptists stripped naked and stormed the City Hall (now the Royal Palace) to proclaim the New Jerusalem declaring they had a direct link to God and no need of priestly mediation. The Anabaptist rebels occupied the seat of power for a day before the revolt was savagely suppressed—the heretics were executed, quartered and their heads impaled on sticks.

⁷ Every year in mid-March the Miracle of the Host is celebrated in the ritual procession of the *Stille Omgang* (Silent Circumambulation) through Amsterdam's Wallen district. On 15 March 1345 a dying man vomited up a consecrated wafer while receiving the last rites in the Oude Kerk. The regurgitated fragment was thrown into a fire but when it failed to burn it was taken as a sign of God's grace and was officially recognized as a miracle by the Catholic Church. Prior to the Reformation, pilgrims were drawn in their thousands to the site. After the Reformation the miracle was commemorated by a *Stille Omgang* which to this day still takes place on the ides of March.



Fig. 3.24 *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Photo: Nachito Pike.

On 19 January 1795, one day after the revolutionary Patriots anticipating the imminent arrival of the French revolutionary army took over the administration of the city in a bloodless coup, people of Amsterdam celebrated the founding of the Batavian Republic by dancing round a Liberty Tree planted in the centre of the Dam Square. Every December, to herald the arrival of the Christmas shopping season, a giant pine tree from the German Ardennes wrapped in 4 kilometres of coloured lights is erected on this same spot.⁸

A Note On The Colour Orange

According to Hindu Tantrism, orange is the colour of the second chakra, which is located in the pelvic area. Orange is the colour Indian monks wear in the Sannyasa stage, and it signals that henceforth they have to renounce materialism and dedicate their lives to spiritual pursuits. In The Netherlands the colour orange also stands for Protestantism and the House of Orange. It is the colour of the national

⁸ See fig. 3.26. *Redemption Value* (map).

football team. In addition I chose this colour for the costumes because the uniforms of Dutch street cleaners, service workers, paramedics and first responders is orange, which made it easier for me to conduct the ritualized performance I was planning in public space and inside the supermarket without getting official permission. Finally, orange was the colour of choice because of its association with the sannyasin, the followers of Osho, the Bagwhan Shree Rajneesh who were a common sight in Amsterdam's city centre decked out in their flowing orange robes in the 1960's and 1970's. The orange costumes thus underscored the proselytizing personality of the monk-nun-witch like characters who led the pilgrims through the city in this performance whilst handing out redemption 'coupons'.



Fig. 3.25 *Redemption Value*, Ruchama Noorda, performance, Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Video still: Liza Houben and Hannah Reede.

Redemption Value brought together many of the themes that crop up throughout this chapter in a densely populated public space in a central metropolitan location: the place of history, myth and ritual in contemporary 'séance art', the role of the collective (in this case the crowd) in the staging of events, the connection between spiritual militancy and

political action, and the links between religious faith and the Reform movement. The title of the piece invites the reader to reflect on the contrasting meanings of ‘redemption’ and ‘value’ in a Christian setting and in retail. The give-away redemption coupons we handed out in the Red Light district play on the contrast between saving souls and saving money.

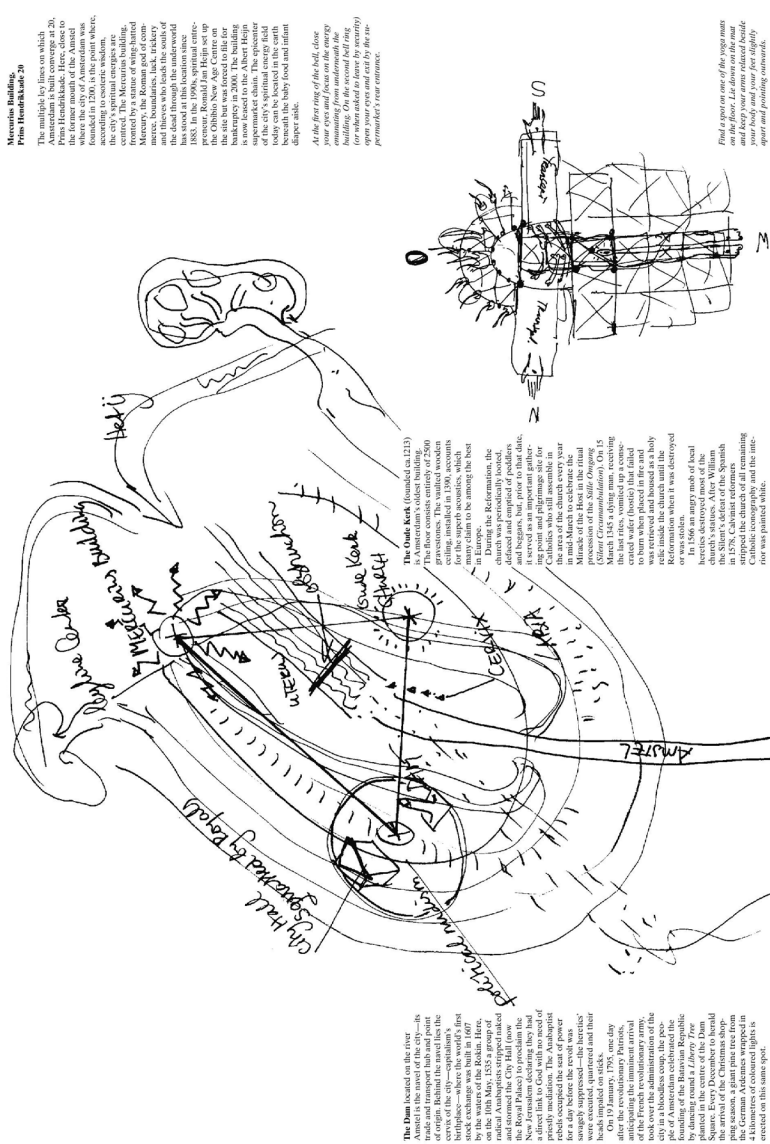


Fig. 3.26. *Redemption Value* (map), Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 2014. Design: Paul Gangloff