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## ReForm

Noorda, R.A.

## Citation

Noorda, R. A. (2015, December 9). *ReForm*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/36549>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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**Author:** Noorda, Ruchama

**Title:** ReForm

**Issue Date:** 2015-12-09

# Conclusion

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This dissertation is an integral part of the larger ReForm project I have been pursuing through my art practice, as the focus of my studies in the PhDArts programme of the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts at Leiden University. Instead of setting out to simply document the performances and installations completed during the period of study, my intention has been to use this text:

- to extend and elaborate on the strategies and techniques adopted in the making of the art works,
- to reflect upon the implications and the sources of those strategies and techniques in the Lebensreform movement and
- to draw out what, for me, are the key issues embedded in the project of Life Reform.

The written component of the ReForm project is designed to complement, not supplement the artworks which constitute its practical-experimental branch. The impulse to reform human beings individually or collectively presupposes a belief in the possibility of beneficial change. In the romantic tradition to which early 20th century Lebensreform thought is linked, such change is often seen to require a reversion to an imagined 'natural', pure or original state of being. Lebensreform is, as the name suggests, focused directly on altering human life ways. I remain committed to that possibility in and through my work, through subjecting the philosophy and practice of the Lebensreform movement to trial-and-error experimentation.

My primary objective throughout has been to work out in what ways, and to what extent, my own sense of self: my personal aesthetic, political ideology, ethical beliefs and approach to making art have been shaped and influenced by the Lebensreform philosophy, which has played such a central role in my education and upbringing. This meant acknowledging from the start my own personal stake in the venture. Rather than approaching the topic of Life

Reform from the outside as a purely historical or theoretical phenomenon, I realized from the outset that I would have to dive into the substance and the spirit of Lebensreform thinking as well as into the historical archive. Specifically, if I wanted to really test the magical and mystical strands, which formed such a central part of Lebensreform thinking and practice, I would have to suspend disbelief by immersing myself inside the system. I believe that the resulting tension between faith and critical thinking, between entering into the Lebensreform 'mind-set' and maintaining the distance essential for any kind of objective assessment has been fruitful and worthwhile.

I believe it is this tension, the product of my continuing ambivalence towards the 'methods and the madness' of the Life Reform project, that distinguishes my work from the current trend within the art world for 're-enactment'. The performances and installations exhibited at Leiden, Diepenheim, Münster and Marfa, in Worpswede, Southern Limburg, Wonder Valley, the Oude Kerk and De Wallen in Amsterdam were not in any sense re-enactments of earlier experiments, but rather fresh interventions in the contemporary milieu inspired by the utopian ideals and aspirations of the Lebensreform movement. Instead of opting for the role of either militant convert/cult member or dispassionate critic/outsider, throughout this project I sought to position myself in between the two extremes, at the crux of the conflict between sincere belief and 'healthy' scepticism. The relationship between my work and the histories I recount varies at different points. Sometimes the research follows the work, as I go about interpreting and tracing out the meaning of a project once it is been completed, and seek to pinpoint where it comes from, like a psychoanalyst or an archaeologist re-assembling a broken piece of pottery by digging up the fragments bit by bit. On other occasions, the research has fed directly into the process of conceiving and making the work. As someone who sees pure conceptualism as an aesthetic ideology, which gives ideas unjustified priority over all the other elements involved in the making of a work, I prefer to call myself a *para*-conceptual artist. I believe that works come into being between lines of thought, theories, dreams, actions and whatever materials I choose to employ.

Eventually, in my view, any artwork can undertake a life of its own, sometimes even stubbornly opposing the conscious intentions of its maker. I believe it is often the case that artworks function best when they work against any pre-conceived meaning.

When I began this project, I pictured the task before me as a mountain to be climbed. The metaphor seemed particularly fitting in this case, as Monte Verità, the Hill of Truth experimental colony located at the foot of the Alps in Ascona, Switzerland, is regarded as the historical and spiritual centre of the Lebensreform movement. However, once I dug deeper into the history of Lebensreform, I saw that what I had imagined as a mountain could be better thought of as a pro-biotic compost heap fed by a tangled subterranean network of organic material. Deleuze and Guattari's figure of the rhizome thus offered a more fitting metaphor and model. The concept of the rhizome turns the idea of the mountaintop, the peak of knowledge to be scaled by the courageous research-mountaineer on its head. With the rhizome, every element within the network is connected to every other element and the network stretches out in all directions spreading laterally far beneath the surface. As I gave up on the idea of an overview, the research process became more like an excavation, a dig through the mud of the past. In the course of the excavation I had to revise my initial preconceptions about the meaning of reform and the origins and legacy of the movements it gave rise to. I knew, for instance, when I began the project that the present-day ecological and organic movements which I strongly support have their roots in the 'back to the land' ethos that spread across both northern Europe and the USA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I understood these movements to be part of the reaction by concerned intellectuals and artists to the onward march of industrialization, urbanization and colonialism during that period and regarded them as positive and progressive. However, as the research got under way I also came to see that elements within Theosophy and Anthroposophy moved dangerously close to the edge of the counter-Enlightenment. As I dug deeper, I touched upon material that is controversial to its very core concerning the complex relationship between Lebensreform and National

Socialism. Eventually I realized I could no longer identify with a position that supports a form of what I call Cosmic Racism, a belief in spiritual evolution based in eugenics and a mythology built on the imagined superiority of the 'Aryan' or Nordic races. While I continue to believe strongly in the life-sustaining properties of local and organic produces and the anthroposophical system of biodynamic farming, I resist absolutely the myth of 'Blood and Soil' and the ideologies of race and territory that underpin it. So I soon realized I needed to take care when approaching this tradition and handling these ideas.

I am, of course, not alone in re-visiting this history. In the years since I began the project in 2007, the Lebensreform movement has begun to attract a great deal of attention from scholars, artists and curators, and has become a topic of renewed discussion and debate. The role of theosophical thinking, which until quite recently tended to be repressed or marginalized in much of the published work on modernism, has become the focus of many new studies and exhibitions. Attention has recently been paid, for instance, to the connection between Lebensreform and the avant-garde in a series of exhibitions and conferences including: *Utopia 1900-1940. Visions of A New World* (De Lakenhal Leiden, 2013); *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy and the Arts in the Modern World* (University of Amsterdam, 2013); in exhibitions on Rudolf Steiner at the 2013 Venice Biennale and at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein (2011) and in the Kunsthall in Rotterdam (2014) titled *Rudolf Steiner, Alchemie van het Alledaagse*. In addition, the connections between occultism and Nazism have been thoroughly analysed by historian Peter Staudenmaier in his recent book *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Staudenmaier 2014).

Throughout the project I have been interested in tracing the connections and continuities between Lebensreform and pre-modern and post-modern forms of Utopian thinking. I have researched dissident and counter-cultural practice including heretical sects, most notably the Anabaptists in medieval Europe, and the hippy movement in California in the 1960's. I set out to uncover an underground or 'secret'

history connecting all these movements in a circle that leads back in the end to my own formation as an individual and an artist. Ultimately this dissertation traces a circuitous route from the starting point, my family home in Leiden via Bussum and Diepenheim, through Germany to California and back again in this conclusion to the Netherlands.

When I began the ReForm project I never imagined that my desire to get 'back to the basics' and the land would lead me to immerse myself literally as well as metaphorically into the element of primordial Dutch mud. But as the research got under way, I began to feel increasingly drawn to that substance, because I felt that it might somehow provide a key to where I come from as a person and artist. I kept going back to the statement made by Mary Douglas and William James that 'dirt is matter out of place', and began focusing on the hygiene rituals that, from my perspective, represent the modern war on dirt, and by extension nature. Against the emphasis on cleanliness, the Lebensreformers saw dirt as both fruitful resource and raw material: as the ground on which the garden we need to get back to can be grown. All my artworks that came out of the ReForm project can be seen in one way or another as attempts to redeem the dirt which modern life has tried to insulate us from. Looking back I can see how in all these works I am attempting to literally *think through* and complicate an already complex and murky heritage, to work through mud as a medium, which can function as both a poison and a cure. The famous mud and water cures introduced by Lebensreform naturopaths like Sebastian Kneipp, Benedict Lust and Adolf Just all centre on connecting the body to nature by transgressing the boundaries that humans everywhere construct to separate themselves from nature and the other living species with which we share this planet.

## Postscript

After I had put the finishing touches to the mud hut that forms the centre piece of the Asocialen installation in Diepenheim, and stood back, along with my two assistants to admire what we had accomplished, I was surprised to see amongst the dredged up scrap metal debris embedded in the roof an object which I had not consciously noted earlier: a mud-covered bicycle wheel. I remember now that the act of salvaging discarded objects is closely related to a Dutch expression for pulling up old or repressed memories or coming to terms with the past. Standing there that afternoon on the abandoned camp-site in Diepenheim looking up at the roof, I am suddenly thrown back to a scene from my childhood. I see the low light of the winter sun shining behind two rows of pollarded willow trees on either side of a narrow path running alongside a frozen canal. The trees spaced out evenly work together with the sun to create a stroboscopic effect with the light flashing in and out at regular intervals in a tight staccato rhythm. Mimicking the rapid eye movement we experience when dreaming, I do not know at the time that the stroboscopic effect is prone to trigger seizures in people suffering from epilepsy though I do know that my father is an epileptic. I am nine years old and I am sitting on the back of a bicycle with my arms around my father. He will drop me off at school as he sometimes does before going on to work. Suddenly without warning we veer off the path and next moment are crashing through the thin layer of ice, before going down into the dark brown water. The canal is not wide but very deep and we are soaking wet, frozen and in shock. We quickly scramble back onto the canal bank and trudge home, uncomfortable, embarrassed but otherwise unharmed, covered in duckweed and mud leaving a trail of wet footsteps behind us. It must have been five years later that the same thing happened again at the same spot, though this time I was not there. When I came home from school and entered the house, I immediately recognized the rank smell of the canal water. My father's bicycle was once more covered in mud and the aroma of wet leather filled the kitchen as his shoes, bag and wallet were left to dry on the heater. This time there were consequences. My father had hit his head on something sharp on the bottom of the canal and there was a small bloody gash. My mother dressed the wound and put him to bed. We thought he would soon be up and well

again but a few days later he began developing flu-like symptoms. Within a week he started turning yellow. Two weeks later he died in hospital—a victim of *Leptospirosis* (Weil's disease) caused by bacteria transmitted in the droppings of the rats endemic to all Dutch canals.