



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/36549>

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

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/36549> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Noorda, Ruchama

Title: ReForm

Issue Date: 2015-12-09

Biography

Biography

Ruchama Noorda (Leiden, 1979) is an artist who uses diverse media and materials in performances and installations. She was awarded a BA in Visual Art at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague in 2002 and completed her MFA at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam in 2004. In 2002 her video piece *Annunciatie* (Annunciation) was acquired by Museum het Domein in Sittard. In 2008 she installed *Statisch Vooruitgangsmonument* (Static Monument to Progress) across five rooms in Museum De Lakenhal's Project Space in Leiden in which she combined selected works from the museum's De Stijl collection with her own specially designed ceramic pieces and items from the artist's personal collection of anthroposophical artifacts. The exhibition juxtaposed ideas of progress-through-design alongside occult elements within modernism to produce a space in which the desire for an all-encompassing ideology of transformation was materialized within a subjective historical framework.

Since 2009 Noorda has been enrolled in the PhDArts program at Leiden University where she researched the impact across the arts and culture in Europe and the USA of the early 20th century Lebensreform (Life Reform) movement. In her practice Noorda recycles elements of Reform pedagogy, arts, crafts, dance, diet and ritual practices in performance and installation works that both engage and challenge contemporary communitarian and counter-cultural aspirations, practices and beliefs. By highlighting the mystical and magical elements within the Reform tradition along with other undigested and 'irrational' material, her works perform a séance-function, excavating the repressed and buried histories within the Modern in ways that set out to complicate hard and fast distinctions between progressive and conservative social and artistic movements. In recent works such as *Asocialen - Private Prophesy - Detox* [Diepenheim, 2012] and *Diopharma* (Mojave Desert 2014) this concern with first principles has led her to engage with basic materials like dirt and mud as she hosts transformative invented rituals in temporary structures built literally from the ground up.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors Professor Kitty Zijlmans for the support of my PhD study and related research; Dr. Janneke Wesseling for her encouragement over the years, first as a professor during my studies at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, and later for giving me the opportunity to explore in more depth the relationship between my practice and its inextricable links with research and theory at the PhDArts Program. I also would like to thank the director of the Leiden University Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Frans de Ruiter, for his work on bridging art academy and university. My sincere thanks also goes to Professor Stephan Dillemoth, who gave me access to his Lebensreform archive and inspired me as well as guided me through the first stage of my research by providing new perspectives on Lebensreform. This PhD thesis is the result of a challenging journey, many people have contributed and given their support, but I am particularly grateful to Professor Richard Hebdige who helped me to integrate the history of the Lebensreform movement into the account of the development of my own art practice. I also wish to thank my mother, archaeologist Jeannette Boertien for her encouragement, and inspiration. Further I like to thank artist Brian McKenna for his support, and the other members of Civic Virtue: Gijsbert Wouter Wahl and Geirthrudur Finnbogadottir Hjorvar for the time we spent and for countering individualist culture. Of the individuals who supported my projects, actively encouraged its development and influenced my research, I would like to thank curator Theo Tegelaers, artist K.G. Guttman, graphic designer Paul Gangloff, artist Georgia Haagsma, curator Tim Voss, artist Andrea Fraser, curator Julia Geerlings, artist Vera Hofmann, composer Gunnar Gunnsteinsson and curator Rieke Vos. I also would like to thank the artists Irina Birger and Kathrin Schlegel for their support and friendship. Further I would like to thank the UCSB for the opportunity to work in their Library and for their excellent collection of books on counter-culture and life-reform. I am also grateful to the Mondriaanfonds for awarding me with a basis-stipendium in 2009 and 2012, grants that enabled me to continue developing my work and research.

Summaries

ReForm

This dissertation together with the artworks documented in it is the result of an investigation across multiple media over a seven-year period of the cultural, artistic and spiritual legacy of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *Lebensreform* (Life Reform) movement. In the course of this research I situate this movement with its origins in Europe and its promotion of a back-to-nature lifestyle (health foods, sexual emancipation, rational dress /nudism, pantheism/ syncretic New Age religions) in a long line of radical reform projects, that lead back to the Reformation and the Anabaptist rebellions in sixteenth-century Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. At the same time, I link the passage to America of Lebensreform beliefs and practices with the rise of the hippy counter-culture in California and with the global spread of today's ecological, organic food and naturopathy/Wellness movements in the decades since the nineteen-sixties.

In both the dissertation and the series of artworks discussed within it, I set out to unravel and confront the complicated legacy of Theosophy and Anthroposophy, the holistic systems of belief that formed the spiritual backbone of the Lebensreform phenomenon. In the process I probe the question of how it came to be, that an occult world view based on a synthesis of world religions could appeal equally to purist avant-garde proponents of abstraction such as Kandinsky and Mondriaan and to figurative painters and illustrators such as Fidus (Hugo Höppener) and Fritz Mackensen, whose work promoted an idealized 'Aryan' aesthetic in line with German National Socialist ideology. As such, the present work forms part of the larger reappraisal—currently under way among artists and scholars—of the history of utopian counter-cultural thinking and alternative life-style experimentation in the West. Following in the footsteps of historians such as Peter Staudenmaier, Janet Biehl, and Susan A. Manning, I argue that this reappraisal forces us to acknowledge the anti-rational esoteric roots of Modernism along with the progressive strands in Modernist thinking and practice, that tend to be foregrounded in most historical accounts.

However my interest in this project as an artist is not conventionally historical or academic, but rather personal and performative. And the way the arguments are made, for the most part through installations, drawings, sculptural objects, video works, artist statements and performances, bears little relation to the orderly modes of presentation and detached forms of analysis that mark traditional academic discourse. Instead, the project unfolded over time as a prolonged archaeological dig into two intersecting strata, the muddy history of the Lebensreform movement and my own formation as someone born into an anthroposophical/Reform Church household in Leiden. The tension between Progress (social engineering/ the collaborative ideal) and Regression (back to nature/childhood/basics) dictates the rhythm of the dig. The excavation metaphor gets literalized as I move closer to home, and in many of the artworks (Dutch) mud and compacted soil become the primary material: both the medium in which the inquiries are conducted and the consumable message/medicine dispensed at the door in pill-form to the exhibition visitor.

ReForm

Deze dissertatie vormt samen met het daarin gedocumenteerde beeldende werk een verslag van een zeven jaar durende zoektocht naar de culturele, artistieke en spirituele erfenis van de *reformbeweging* (*Lebensreform*). Het beeldend onderzoek heeft de vorm van een opgraving die dwars door verschillende tijdlagen, structuren en materialen voert. De reformbeweging was een Europese hervormingsbeweging, die een terugkeer naar een natuurlijke *back-to-nature-lifestyle* propageerde en zich bezighield met de bevordering van reformvoeding, landbouw, seksuele hervorming, reformkleding, naturisme, natuurgeneeskunde, pantheïsme en nieuwe syncretistische vormen van spiritualiteit. In dit onderzoek situeer ik deze laat negentiende- en vroeg twintigste-eeuwse reformbeweging in één tijdlijn van radicale reformprojecten. Deze lijn loopt vanaf de zestiende-eeuwse Reformatie in Duitsland, Zwitserland en de Lage Landen via de Wederdoperrevoluties uiteindelijk naar de hippiebeweging in California in de jaren zestig van de twintigste eeuw. Ik verbind de verspreiding en de trans-Atlantische uitwisseling van *Lebensreform*-ideeën tussen Europa en Amerika met de hedendaagse wereldwijde beweging die zich bezighoudt met biologische voeding, natuurgeneeskunde en gezondheidsleer.

In dit proefschrift en het daarin gedocumenteerde beeldende werk analyseer ik de gecompliceerde erfenis van de holistische reformbeweging en de rol daarin van het theosofisch en antroposofisch gedachtengoed, dat de spirituele ruggengraat vormde van deze beweging. Ik stel de vraag waarom een occult wereldbeeld, gebaseerd op een synthese van verschillende religies, zowel pure avant-gardisten als Kandinsky en Mondriaan kon inspireren, maar ook figuratieve kunstenaars en illustratoren zoals Fidus (Hugo Höppener) en Fritz Mackensen, wier werk eerder de geïdealiseerde 'Arische' esthetiek van het nationaalsocialisme uitdroeg.

Mijn *ReForm*-onderzoek maakt onderdeel uit van de huidige herwaardering door kunstenaars en theoretici van het alternatieve gedachtengoed dat aan de wortels van het modernisme lag. In de voetsporen van historici als Peter Staudenmaier, Janet Biehl en Susan A. Manning betoog ik dat

deze herwaardering ons ertoe dwingt, naast de algemeen bekende progressieve elementen, ook de esoterische, occulte en anti-rationele wortels van het modernisme onder ogen te zien.

Mijn belangstelling voor de *reformbeweging* en de manier waarop ik besloot dit onderzoek uit te voeren, was niet conventioneel historisch maar eerder persoonlijk en performatief van aard en de argumenten bestaan grotendeels uit installaties, tekeningen, sculpturen, pamfletten en performances. Het onderzoek heeft weinig overeenkomsten met de gebruikelijke afstandelijke manier van analyseren die kenmerkend is voor een traditioneel academisch discours. Mijn beeldend onderzoek heeft de vorm van een opgraving dwars door verschillende tijd- en bewustzijnslagen en delft zowel in de troebele geschiedenis van de reformbeweging als in mijn eigen prehistorie in een antroposofisch/hervormd gezin in Leiden. Het spanningsveld tussen vooruitgang (sociaal beleid en het collaboratief ideaal) en *Regressie* (terug naar de natuur/kindertijd/basis) is bepalend voor mijn onderzoek en de manier waarop ik deze bewustzijnslagen naar boven haal. De opgravingsmetafoor wordt letterlijk wanneer ik dichterbij huis kom en als het onderzoeksmateriaal en de primaire grondstof van mijn werk—aarde en modder—bijkomen in gecompriëerde medicinale vorm.