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## THE PRODUCTION OF A PRODUCTION AGAINST THE ADVANCE OF CAPITALISM

Reflections on the Lebensreform movements and today's globalized capitalist society

Interview with Stephan Dillemoth by Karen Mette Fog Pedersen

Stephan Dillemoth is an artist who sees artistic research as a tool for critical reflection on the circumstances of contemporary life. The impact of 'lifestyle' as a new ideology of self-fulfilment and liberation has led Dillemoth to investigate the German Lebensreform movements at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. For the REFORM opening seminar in Copenhagen 15 June 2013 Dillemoth presented his film and performance Lichtmenschen im Sumpf der Sonne – Studien zur Lebensreform (Sunpeople in the Slush of the Light – Studies on the Reform of Life). This film is about Dillemoth's investigation of the Lebensreform movements, a variety of utopian, revolutionary, reactionary and reformist groups, who attempted to reform life and break free from society. Through a complex agglomeration of clips, quotes, footage and other assembled material from archives along with produced scenes and acts, the film humorously investigates the conflicts of the Lebensreformers' utopian visions and how these conflicts have transferred into alternative lifestyle choices of today. As a contribution to the REFORM publication Karen Mette Fog Pedersen has talked to Stephan Dillemoth about the Lebensreform movements in general, how they tried to break free from society and what these movements can offer in relation to a current globalized capitalist society. The interview was conducted via email in May 2014.

**Karen Mette Fog Pedersen** In 2000 you started your research on the Lebensreform movements in Germany. Could you tell us a little bit about these movements, their aspirations and the historical situation at that time?

**Stephan Dillemoth** The term Lebensreform (Life Reform) originated in the 1890's attempts to renew the whole conduct of life, especially health became the big topic; hygiene, clothing, naturopathy, nutrition and the reform of dwelling places became the issues. More particularly, you could notice movements like those that were anti-alcohol, anti-inoculation or anti-vivisection. More generally, any kind of attitude against established constrictions of society. Around 1900 it

The images are from  
Stephan Dillemoth's archive  
at his homepage:  
<http://societyofcontrol.com>.  
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was really still the era of 'Old Europe', the ruling monarchies were overaged and ossified, unable to cope with the demands of a society in change. Due to the heavy industrialisation, a lot of people moved from the countryside to the big cities and found themselves exposed to the excesses of capitalism, i.e. poverty, misery, overpopulation and environmental problems. Even though the working class became more and more organised and modest betterment was on its way, the more general social progress stagnated and it appeared to many that this society was rotten and stuck in the hollow representation of power. Especially the intellectuals and the lower middle classes experienced this situation as a crisis, with a two-class system imminent. Therefore people started breaking out of the rigid old structures, looking for what seemed to be original, natural and spiritual in culture, mind and body. They simply walked away from the cities into the forests, or stopped eating meat, or started to take off their corsets and invent new clothing... or they began to experiment with communes and tried to create autonomous and sustainable economies. Subsequently, the new spirit of "Reform" spread across all sectors of society. And these approaches characterised the most varied attempts to break free from the Empire of the day: the chauvinistic, capitalistic and monolithic Wilhelminian Reich.

**KMFP** You have done research on various Lebensreform movements and groups such as the Monte Verità, Vagabundenbewegung and Völkische Bewegung. What did these different groups focus on and how would you describe them? – As counter movements, reactions to a sick society or as reactionary approaches, holding on to something that had already gone away or even both?

**SD** The counter, the reactive and the reactionary are often converging, just look at today's green party in Germany! None of your examples are Lebensreform groups in a closer sense. Monte Verità, a kind of self-organised sanatorium and settlement, was an exception, because it was a meeting point, a kind of hub, where the movements that were otherwise disconnected, would meet. Monte Verità attracted anarchists, vegetarians of all genre, nudists, spiritualists, artists etc. Then, the vagabond movement was something very specific for the time between the two world wars, where leftist activists wanted to organise what they found as a disrooted sub-proletariat. And the Völkische Bewegung was a nationalistic, racist and esoteric movement that took from Lebensreform what they found suitable for their ideology.

**KMFP** How did you initially get interested in the Lebensreform movements and what were your guiding interests?

**SD** A trigger for my interest was the research project that I conducted at Kunsthøgskolen in Bergen in 2002. This was the attempt to map a shift in the idea of the public sphere induced by a corporate world economy. One of the questions was if the idea of a national public sphere (in the sense of Jürgen Habermas) is not to be replaced by the idea of a fragmented public sphere, as Simon Sheikh puts it: "Instead, we have to speak of the public sphere as fragmented, as consisting of a number of spaces and/or formations that sometimes connect, sometimes close off, and that are in conflictual and contradictory relations to each other."<sup>1</sup> This sounded right, but I wondered if this was a new phenomenon or if it had historical precursors – and I thought of the Lebensreform movements, roughly 100 years earlier – I knew of them because my grandmother was a dedicated second-generation follower. But consequently, if 'The Fragmented Public' was not a new phenomenon, maybe today we have to speak of a 'Corporate Public' instead? The latter would mean that today's multitude of fragmented publics (patch worked life-styles, tribes and self-organised circles etc.) have one pattern in common: They are seen and organised as corporate markets, which means they are all depending on a globalised corporate economy. They are constituted by this economy, as much as they are a constituent of it, and this seems to be a new and overall identity in regard to the idea of fragmented publics: the multifarious multitude is reduced to one idea if it comes to economy, which in other words means that the plurality of 'The Fragmented Publics' has become the entity of the 'Corporate Public' (that, nevertheless, allows diversity to happen). Regarding the current and future development of the arts we have to ask, if this new shift in the idea of the public sphere might go hand in glove with a different function for art and with a different conception of the role of the artist.

But back again to my investigation into the Lebensreform movements... As an artist my interest in this period was not to tell how it objectively really was back then, rather I wanted to understand certain motivations of that period in relation to today. For example, the question of a break-out from a society, its norms, its regulations and agreements, that is found to be incredibly and increasingly suffocating, profit-oriented, and hostile. In my studies I found the liberation from society that the Lebensreform movements were

<sup>1</sup> Simon Sheikh in his introduction to the seminar *In the Place of the Public Sphere* held at the Art Academy Odense, Denmark, 2002.







after, had also a very liberating effect on that society, and they were often also interlocked with other movements, e.g. modernism. Generally we can observe that those roughly 40 years of the Lebensreform movements have changed society as it was back then and we can also observe how some of these ideas travelled to the USA and came back again via the hippie movement in the 1960s and 1970s. If you want we can call this “the second wave of Lebensreform movements” and this has impacted our western societies effectively until today. So in view of the development of multitudes of parallel conceptions of life, the Lebensreform movements were certainly predecessors of today’s escapist constructions of identity, formed via lifestyle conceptions. I recommend seeing ‘The Century Of The Self’ by British documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis.

**KMFP** Why do you think the movements were so efficient in affecting society, mentally, aesthetically and socially? And in what way did they think of themselves as political forces?

**SD** I guess they were efficient because they conducted bohemian research. A term that I borrowed from Jürgen Fohrmann and Erhard Schüttpelz, which means research that is located in a bohemian context, where people find each other by elective affinities. They share similar problems, but bring along different knowledge and a variety of cultural backgrounds. In order to communicate successfully people have to be sufficiently different otherwise they would just mirror themselves, and yet again, they have to be similar enough, in order to communicate at all. This mutual attraction can lead to an increasingly differentiated discourse, a collective process that can be called research. This research is self-commissioned and often carried out under precarious circumstances, often without any monetary funding and without institutional back-up. To a large extent the interests and problems of the group itself determine this research, they are investigating problems at hand, arising from the daily practice of life, and the efforts to tackle these very own problems become a condensation point for social and critical and research-like activities. This means researching life by living it! Not only the Lebensreformers, almost every 20th-century avant-garde group (e.g. the Surrealists, Situationists, Kommune 1, etc.) practiced such collective methods. Here we find the awareness necessary for research; there are critical tools for self-observation and analysis (e.g. keeping archives, logs and diaries), planning strategies and methods for staging experiments, and there are processes and criteria of evaluation that may well lead to more experiments.

In how far the Lebensreformers thought of themselves as researchers is not known to me, but they certainly knew they were exploring new territories, and now we could ask, was that political, or, what is political, but maybe that is a bit of a tedious question after all...?

**KMFP** Perhaps however even though some of these lebensreformers didn’t think of themselves as political forces they were nevertheless used by politics. And I would like to talk to you about this ambiguity within these movements – the extreme in each direction with e.g. eco-movement, ideas of emancipation, National Socialism and Nazi ideology. Could you explain a bit about these problems in relation to the movements and about the consequences for society at that time?

**SD** Ok, now I say, what the Lebensreformers did WAS political, however, most of the groups lacked a clear localisation within the political spectrum of the day, because they thought of themselves to be outside of these worldly politics and/or ideologies. In each group there was a certain amount of chiliastic hope, that sparked their particular approaches, and which gave their ideas an unconditional absoluteness. They thought of this as ‘propaganda of the deed’ – which meant the fact that they really had to DO IT and they DID IT, which was to be an example for others to follow. However, since the Lebensreform was more a symptom of the endangered middle classes, there was neither solidarity with the workers’ movement, nor did they learn from their collective way of organisation. There were a lot of publications within the groups, often self-made brochures, small prints without proper distribution, but there were no overarching organs between or above them that could formulate a strong political programme that would be able to include the various concepts of the groups and give them a common political voice. Instead, the irrational and esoteric, which was initially seen as to run counter to the rationality of a techno-economic society, became the breeding ground for all kind of foolish ideas, some of them closely related to Ariosophy, Anti-Semitism, nationalism, and race. When I started my inquiry I thought I could separate the good from the ugly, the left from the right, but the closer I looked the more interconnected I found these territories. E.g. hygiene was a big issue back then and if you associate it with ‘building’ it leads to Bauhaus and modernism, if you associate it with ‘race’ it leads to Auschwitz. So what helped in shaping the ideology of arising National Socialism? Some of the Lebensreform ideas certainly lent it a sense of metaphysical depth.

But other ideas were appropriated and utilised. After all, the Nazis were a populist party, and they picked up a lot of current ideas, esp. those regarding bio-politics, i.e. issues about health. Other ideas were dismissed and led to their oppression and persecution. By now, in the 1920s, Lebensreform was already 30 years old and had become mainstream.

**KMFP** On your website <sup>2</sup> you have collected an impressive material about the Lebensreform movements – Can you describe how you have worked with the historical material?

**SD** When I started to collect this material in 2001 or so, I wanted the archive to be kind of a knot from which several strands of investigation and experiments could be drawn. Back then Wikipedia had not covered much of the Lebensreform movements yet, and there were a lot of researchers out there. During my guest professorship at the academy of fine arts in Hamburg I started a Lebensreform interest group, a seminar 'Sumpf Sonne', where we invited the German Historian Ulrich Linse, (probably the best researcher in this field) and Hermann Müller (a disciple of Gusto Gräser). We also developed a theatre play and made a film together and a set of fanzines in relationship to the Lebensreform sources. With the artist Nils Norman we made a tour to the Lebensreform places in Germany and Switzerland, and I made an art exhibition Der Deutsche Jüngling and the video Lichtmenschen im Sumpf der Sonne that travelled to various places, amongst them to Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen in 2002.

**KMFP** How did your research into these movements influence your artistic practice?

**SD** It is always a danger that you end up with a mere illustration of the investigated matter. Research and art do not relate in a way where one illustrates the other. Instead research and art permeate each other – they are indistinguishable from each other. So, the exhibitions were easy to make, because the quality of the Lebensreform material was really inspiring when hotwired with the problems of art-making. The film on the other hand was harder... I had this DIY idea to edit everything on my laptop, which I felt was close to the historical DIY attitude, but in 2002 this was still very difficult and I had a lot of technical fuckups. So I was forced to keep editing really simple, that was probably to my advantage. But the problem was also, that I had tons of material and I could have made a somewhat didactic documentary series for TV, in ten parts, however that was certainly not my intention. The days of the premiere (at Werkleitz Biennale) was getting closer and closer... and my exit strategy

from this disaster was to have the Tanz-Grippe-Tokken dancing and no film at all. But then I realised how lame that was, and the troupe would not do a live performance anyway. Finally when Josephine Pryde in one of the film-scenes said: "I never could see a revolutionary or utopian way in how they lived relationships with each other. The more tedious side of relationships would still continue in all of those places, Monte Verità, Hellerau etc... the girls were dancing and the men were pronouncing..." I understood that I had to dance myself, even if that was disgraceful. And that also meant that I had to break out of the flat plane of the film, as the early Lebensreformers had broken out of their flat everyday life – into another dimension. That is why this 'film' is interrupted by three life performances, where I step out of the film and DO expose myself and make myself vulnerable as this guy, who cannot dance.

**KMFP** From your perspective, navigating in today's globalized society heavily controlled and colonized by capitalism, what did and do you hope to learn from your analysis of the Lebensreform movements?

**SD** As I mentioned in the beginning I was particularly interested in how the Lebensreform movements tried to break free from a homogenous, white, nationalistic, patriarchal and militaristic society and started organising themselves sub culturally. However, some of these experiments also laid the foundation for Nazi-ideology and once the Hitlerites were in power the development of a more fragmented public sphere was stopped and again, a homogenous, white, nationalistic, patriarchal and militaristic society was installed that oppressed every difference. So one of the things I hoped for was to understand the embedded problems within those self-organised structures that helped the Nazis on the horse. I realised that 'autonomy', 'self-organisation' and 'community' were not per se 'good terms' that might stand for 'good leftist politics', they were also keywords for the right wing.

**KMFP** It is interesting that you mention this implication with these terms, when thinking about how these strategies are perceived today – mostly as productive leftist counter strategies against capitalism. In your opinion what can the Lebensreform movements offer in relation to a current capitalist society?

**SD** The desires for communal living and for self-sufficiency are understandable, necessary, and to a certain degree anti-capitalistic, but not necessarily leftist. I think learning from the Lebensreform movements can start on a basic level. Here we can learn alternative techniques and methods. Standing





on a dung heap of failed projects we can learn from their failures: How to communise, how to produce and what to produce. But we also have to learn from the shortcomings of the Lebensreform movements. For example the shortcomings in support of the workers' struggle and a general vagueness in relationship to radical leftist theory and practice as mentioned before. Also the problematic construction of an identity, "we", "us" and "them", inclusion and exclusion... we have to learn from the research that is going on right now, regarding questions of queered gender, of speech and voice, of gesture and behaviour, of anti-authoritarian non-hierarchies – these were politics that Lebensreform did not do much to cope with.

**KMFP** In your performance and film *Light People in the Swamp of the Sun* you address some of these conflicts and problems, both for the Lebensreform movements and today's attempts to break free from capitalist society and change life, being that many utopian approaches in their effort to formulate an alternative way of living exactly end up reproducing the already dominant structures. E.g. many of the aspects of Lebensreform with the focus on health and body seem very much to have become the perfect instruments for today's capitalism (bio-politics). Do you think there are any "spaces" "left", where new and alternative ways of living life can still be formulated and tested?

**SD** Yes, of course these spaces are possible, they are there, and they have to be made. But similar to the time of the Lebensreformers, today we have very fragmented fields of life-style politics, and they are often only issue-based – still no overarching politics and methods of organisation or communication. Yet the radicality, or absoluteness of the Lebensreform is missing. Maybe that is a good thing? But the hard way, to wrest oneself free from the entanglement with capitalistic production and consumption has been replaced by a commodified life-style. Today we are part of a Corporate Public and we can speculate which parts of 'Lebensreform' I and 'Lebensreform II' have helped to generate some of this ideology and which other parts were adopted to make the system more stable and attractive. Despite of what 'alternative' life-styles offer, they are only temporary models for consumption and identification, no real models for a political change or concepts for life. Back then, Lebensreform originated from an unconditional search for a way out, and this was a very painful process. Lebensreform was not something to be consumed, it had to be made, it was production; the production of a production against the advance of capitalism.