

Researching Bohemia: Stephan Dillemath and Nils Norman

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In a fictional interview by Werner von Delmont, set in 2033 and occasioned by the aging educator's overdosing on ginkgo pills, Stephen Dillemath's professorial persona makes numerous direct assaults on the stranglehold of corporate power, railing repeatedly against global capital and its destructive effects on the civic sphere. Yet equally telling are the professor's asides that reflect critically on his own involvement. Conducting the interview is von Delmont's son, Hans-Dieter, who describes at one point how in school, under the influence of corporate power, courses on "Enterprise Strategies," "Team Abilities," and "Individual Initiatives" have replaced other topics. The young man then recalls how his father "freaked out" when the family was supposed to set up its own private company during the summer holidays instead of making a trip to Italy. Von Delmont *père* laments: "Indeed taking a holiday from . . . Neo-liberalism, just did not seem possible any more. . . ." ¹

The professor's words, which might be taken as an offhand remark, are in fact doubly reflective (insofar as his own "holiday" mind-set may be seen as integral to neoliberal thinking), while also shedding light on Dillemath's and Nils Norman's practices both individually and working together. Operating within the condition of pervasive neoliberalism—a condition so pervasive that it may seem impossible to project oneself definitively beyond its horizons—provides the basis for their intersecting investigations into the academy and its connections to the commercial sphere. The idea signals, for one, how the Möbius strip-like character of the neoliberal world is properly an occasion for much ambivalence. This is a world in which one's own self-initiative, autonomous reading club, or learning center is just as likely to end up generating a new counter public with attendant forms of counter-knowledge as it is to end up inspiring new enterprise strategies, generating profit for capital, or on a tertiary level of capitulation, contributing to the schemes of real-estate speculators. Such a closed-circuit situation, with self-organization shading so easily into commerce, rightly brings with it not just ambivalence but also vigilance—a range of strategies that exceed the flatfootedness of most critical art which is so easily assimilated to profit.

The artists' critical self-vigilance comes fully into view in the manner and methodology of their current project, which grows indirectly out of a dialogue that the two carried out in 1997. That exchange, which took place over the internet, made light of the daily workings of the art world and a few of its key figures. Never published for that reason, Dillemath and Norman's dialogue has sustained a long afterlife, resulting in a series of satirical drawings, an array of plaster sculptures, and most recently *Brecht & Cruickshank Schnitzelshanke*, a life-sized model of a bohemian café said to be from "London's murky pre-culture-regen-boho zone of the outer reaches of East London . . . where the remains of the day mingle and mosh." ² The *Schnitzelshanke* installation, created for a group show at Berlin's Kunst-Werke in 2004, proposed to address the two-sided character of bohemia in cities such Berlin and London, especially artists' often-unwitting role as the vanguard of gentrification processes. Since Baltimore is no exception to the workings of the modern metropolis, it is appropriate that their current project, an informally-constructed "bohemia research garret," picks up on the *Schnitzelshanke* project's exploration of bohemia as both a site of possible self-determination and probably co-optation. ³ Proposed as a location for real socialization ("mingling") and learning, the garret nevertheless contains a distinct moment of self-satire. Further, its allusions to romantic depictions of the artsy life from Spitzweg to Puccini function to mine a somewhat embarrassing lineage of bohemian representations and map that body of images onto an urban context in which bohemian ideals continue to operate, luring youth and artists into the schemes of developers.

As is illustrated by the garret, Dillemath and Norman's strategies for confronting the threat of co-optation, though clearly in the service of a critical project, often call into play strategies that fly under the flag of the playful. In Dillemath's case, his practice is considered *research*, a process which he scrupulously distinguishes from *investigation* by claiming that research makes advances in the very field under examination. Hence, artistic research would make a contribution to the arts and would as well be itself artistic. Dillemath's decision to frame his work as "artistic research"—and locating it within the field of visual art—not only



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distinguishes it from a host of artists practicing investigations into other fields yet not making contributions to those fields, but also allows him to favor artistic or literary means that privilege a host of framing devices, performance strategies, and fictional personae over the more usual information aesthetic of research-oriented artists. The result is a practice that is happily irregular, often amateur in appearance, and with its built-in self-criticality is quite resistant to being picked up by the normalizing flows of capital and of affirmative professionalized art.

In a comparable way, Norman's work, which often involves utopian projections that he calls "Proposals" framed as blueprints for better Kmart's, schools, re-designed parks, or info hubs, employs a complex "ironic" delivery mechanism. The utopian aspirations which these proposals wear on their sleeve are employed critically as lever against the present, while the project most often remains clearly unrealizable. ⁴ Norman's visual gambits in these works are made more complicated by texts that seem to offer more direct, even first person critique of the manipulation of the urban environment. Despite both artists' sophisticated gamesmanship, their work is hardly of the art world parlor game variety. In different ways for each, an allegorical or referential mechanism operates allowing their work to reach far beyond itself and the artistic sphere. Norman manipulates schematic signs—blueprints and diagrams—whereas Dillemath engages in a process he terms "dramatization," which proposes to address the world within the *theatrum mundi* of the stage. Both the humor and

referential capacities of the work operate in tandem in their practices: if humor especially in the guise of satire allows one to poke holes through Capital, referentiality extends its reach. Hence, while, as von Delmont rightly maintains, it may not be possible to wholly depart from Capital, it may be possible to open a rift in it. Further, insofar as this rift reaches beyond itself through the referential capacities of drama or schematization, the work's critical scope is enhanced considerably. ★

1. Werner von Delmont, *Corporate Rokoko and the End of the Civic Project* (Copenhagen: Pork Salad Press, n.d.), p. 15. The book's title alludes to Dillemath's thesis that contemporary art may be considered a new form of rococo or court art in the service of corporations rather than kings and nobles.

2. From a wall text in the exhibition "Now and 10 Years After" at Kunst-Werke, Berlin, 2004.

3. Dillemath views bohemia as a matrix that can be interpreted in two ways: as offering the possibility of self-determined life on the one hand, and on the other bringing in problems such as co-optation. Stephan Dillemath. Telephone conversation with author, 5 August 2005.

4. T. J. Demos points out that if the work is not realizable, this is not for technical or economic reasons. "The Cruel Dialectic: on the Work of Nils Norman," *Grey Room 13* (fall 2003): 33–50. Demos's principal concern in this article is the complex, ironic delivery mechanism of Norman's work. He observes that the work "distances itself from the very forms of criticality it evokes" and points out "this art attacks not only its targeted object . . . but also reflexively revisits its own form, self-consciously complicating its own mode of transmission." Another, related account of irony is given by Dillemath who traces the contemporary understanding of irony to a misunderstanding of Romantic irony by Hegel. The earlier mode of irony, which is the one that Dillemath attempts to deploy, referred to self-critical "moment" built into one's assertions. Dillemath locates in Hegel the solidification of this concept into its contemporary usage, which removes the self from criticism.

Above: Stephan Dillemath and Nils Norman, *The Brecht & Cruickshank Schnitzelshanke*, installation shot at Kunst-Werke, Berlin, 2004.