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Aquarius and Beyond: Thinking through the Counterculture

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This paper is shaped by personal experience of time and place. In January 1973 I was a 12-year-old child living in the conservative, rural town of Lismore, northern New South Wales. Twenty miles to the north was the village of Nimbin. The Australian Union of Students had just chosen the village as the site of the second Aquarius Festival, a biannual arts and cultural festival, and at a town meeting the village agreed. The Festival, held later that May, altered the course of history for Nimbin from a declining banana and dairy economy, to countercultural capital of Australia. The village now attracts a daily crowd of tourists from the nearby global backpacker destination of Byron Bay, who are in search of something of the '70s in 2014. Nimbin is a country village where shops are rarely vacant and the commercial buzz is mixed with drumming and incense. As Lismore is the closest service town to Nimbin, it also experienced changes, albeit more subtly. To its then predominantly rural, agricultural and conservative outlook, Lismore added a countercultural current that flows through and around the town to this day. It brought new people, books, clothes, music, ideas, religions, architecture, therapies, foods, medicines, politics, celebrations… I'm not sure I could make the list comprehensive.

This situating is important for while this paper begins with an interest in the idea of, and approaches to, "counterculture", the main interest I have is in what counterculture does and the types of cultural problems it addresses and attempts to solve. And this latter interest, and my reading of the former, is shaped from a local cultural milieu in which the counterculture is not consigned to a period in history, nor confined to popular culture (most often through a connection with rock music). Instead it continues to have relevance as a biopolitical, problem-solving cultural force with generative potency and sustainability as its intent (Garbutt). This might be styled as an idiosyncratically "Nimbin" approach to counterculture, though I'm sure it is not absolutely unique as at the same time it is engaged with a "complex, intertwined set of global practices, discourses and styles of liberation" (Stickells 564). Nonetheless, I do want to signal that countercultures are geographically and historically diverse.

What Is (the) Counterculture?

As already flagged understandings and representations of the counterculture vary widely. Typically the term conjures up that flowering of a "youth" culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s that was intent of countering the mainstream or "parent" functionalist western culture of the time (Altman). This could be termed a periodised view of counterculture, and because of its paradigmatic status could be marked by capitals as The Counterculture. Elizabeth Nelson, for example, takes this periodised approach in her book *The British Counter-Culture, 1966–73*. This idea of counterculture is often accompanied by a narrative that tells of the birth, flourishing and decline of a naïve, failed, utopian "dream" (Nelson 8).

At the other end of the spectrum of meanings is that of Talcott Parsons (522) who is often cited as the originator of the term counterculture. Parsons created a concept that could name any alienated, deviant group throughout history, from a "delinquent gang" to love-inspired flower children (see also Yinger *Countercultures* 24). More recently Lawrence Grossberg has taken a similar stance, by proposing that the Tea Party movement in US Republican politics is an instance of a counterculture (Grossberg). For Grossberg, to connect the term with a specific movement is to "confuse empirical description with conceptual development" (14). Here, Grossberg takes counterculture one step beyond Parsons' who did not necessarily connect counterculture with movement. Parsons proposed that when a counterculture developed the ideological means to have wider social influence it could become a movement, and that the counter might possibly one day become dominant with its own set of countercultures to contend with (see also Yinger "Contraculture" 629).

George McKay takes a middle path between the tightly periodised empirical view and a purely conceptual view. In *Senseless acts of beauty* McKay views the historic high-point of the twentieth-century counterculture as sparking a "utopian project [… that] is still with us" (6). Here the concept of an oppositional cultural movement is imbued with a specific set of identifications: the idea of counterculture is funnelled through The Counterculture of the 1960's and '70s, but is not in any way dead. This is the approach I take in this essay. I acknowledge that counterculture is conceptually valuable when stripped of its conjunctural content, however, at *this* conjuncture, writing in Lismore amidst the echoes of Aquarius—the Age and the Festival—and its contemporary manifestations, and asking what it is that *this* counterculture does and the types of cultural problems it addresses, to do otherwise makes little methodological sense.

So what is the empirical and conceptual content that defines this counterculture?

The historical trace of the counterculture is multiple. Anthony Esler (72) locates the first modern counterculture in 1830s Bohemian Paris and charts it as a tradition of youth dissent in the industrial West. Musgrove also takes a long view arguing that periods of rapid technological change and economic growth often produce "Dionysian" nonconformist responses (196). Grossberg argues that such countercultures have a range of common characteristics. Rather than being easily definable via a singular identity, they are instead spaces of "variation, hybridity and experimentation". And while they have a sense of inevitability about them—to use the 1972 Whitlam campaign slogan, that sense of "It's time"—participants feel the need to "usher in that new era" (15). As a result there is an affective sense of giving life to a new reality, attended by a feeling of unity despite the variation that is part and parcel of the counterculture's experimental spaces. One of the unifying aspects emerges from the rejection of mainstream structures and ways of being that in turn is productive of new cultural formations and practices (16).

The term counterculture, in its 1960s clothing, was popularised in Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*. Roszak identified the focus of the *counter*, that is the mainstream, as "technocracy":

> that social form in which an industrial society reaches its peak [… and draws] upon such unquestionable imperatives as the demand for efficiency, for social security, for large-scale co-ordination of men and resources, for ever higher levels of affluence and ever more impressive manifestations of collective human power. (5)

This culture was read by the counterculture, not in terms of progress and prosperity, but as heading towards "the Apocalypse" which was heralded by such signs as the Cold War nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War, environmental degradation and the destruction of "those older and more communal structures that had sustained human life for millennia" (Jiggens 12). As Denis Altman argues, however, a wider formulation than technocracy was required to define this mainstream culture. Drawing on a new wave of thinking and activism that pointed to that culture's traditional, functionalist, hegemonic patriarchal and heteronormative underpinnings, Altman and others identified a primary object of resistance in "the prescribed routine of job/marriage/suburbia" into which all good young people should willingly subject themselves (Altman 451). The predetermined closure of life that this represented may have provided a form of prosperity, but it came at the expense of freedom, peace, the environment and "minority" cultures. To borrow Deleuze's words the response was "a collective phenomenon in the form of: 'Give me the possible, or else I'll suffocate…'" (Deleuze 234). The "possible" was a desire for a sustainable celebration of life.

If the mainstream provided obstructions against which to think and act, it also provided conditions and space for countercultures to germinate and flourish. Economic prosperity and "the 'movement legacy' of the workers' movement, first-wave feminism and radical-democratic liberalism" had provided a life-space for some that was relatively free of labour through such things as accessible or free education and "survivable" welfare and unemployment assistance (Cox 103–04). One of the under-examined themes in countercultural literature is the dynamic interrelationship between mainstream culture and its counter, the flows and exchanges, as well as the blockages and counter-flows that were, and are, part of the scene.

Of course counterculture is not just about *counter*, however, defining the *culture* of counterculture is, as Grossberg suggests, not so much about identifying specific characteristics but mapping the space of experimentation. Indeed, defining counterculture goes against the epistemological grain of many of its proponents (Braunstein and Doyle 13; Munro-Clark 57–59). Craig McGregor wrote in the mid-70s of his scepticism of a "single, identifiable [counter]culture. It seems more likely […] that there are a number of alternative cultures and that these are sometimes more opposed to each other than the established culture" (15).

Nevertheless, due to its counter to the mainstream culture, similarities can be found. If one takes the idea of culture as including "'maps of meaning' which make things intelligible to its members", then the political culture of the counter is in reading, or mapping the meaning of, the dominant culture as apocalyptic rather than progressive. Braunstein and Doyle suggest that members of the counterculture defined themselves first by what they are not, before clearing the space for what they might be (10). As Gilles Deleuze puts it, writing of the May 1968 student movement in Paris, it was "what amounted to a visionary phenomenon, as if a society suddenly saw what was intolerable in it and also saw the possibility for something else" (234).

This sense of hopeful openness to the future, gathered around a range of concerns and practices with varying emphases. At the risk of providing an ahistorical and despatialised list: if the concern was war, then peace; mutually assured destruction, then nuclear disarmament; environmental catastrophe, then environmentalist sustainability; social alienation, then tribal love and community; hypercommodification, then do-it-yourself anti-consumerism; functional social strictures, then experimental forms of sociality and expressiveness; rationality, then mind expansion chemical or otherwise; Christianity in suits, hats and gloves, then Jesus freaks and eastern mysticism; the military-industrial complex, then appropriate technology; constricting clothing, then loose fitting fashions. The list is necessarily partial: back to the earth movements, natural medicines, and organic and vegetarian foods are missing. These and other cultural markers each had their own histories connecting them to "cultures of resistance" from the 1950s and before (Braunstein and Doyle; McKay 3–5; Esler).

But while these lists help with pinning down countercultures it is the utopian impulse that also sees them as unfinished, ongoing projects. George McKay (xi–xiii) provides an unfinished chronology of cultures of resistance in the United Kingdom that, he argues, have their genesis in the counterculture. This includes the Free Festivals, animal rights actions and protests against a range of motorway developments. Cox charts similar threads in anti-establishment politics in Germany and Ireland. In this spirit Bennett develops a dynamic understanding of counterculture that after its initial separation as a cultural category in the 1960s and 1970s, is no longer definable in binary terms of counter and mainstream, if it ever was. Rather, countercultures are

> fluid and mutable expressions of sociality that manifest themselves as individuals temporarily bond to express their support of and/or participation in a common cause, but whose lives are in fact simultaneously played out across a range of other cultural terrains. (26)

This puts the idea of counterculture beyond stasis, no longer preserved in a particular period of time, nor separate from other aspects of culture or identity.

Aquarius and Beyond

For the remainder of this paper I'd like to engage with the notions of counterculture discussed above through a particular instance to ground them in a historical and geographical context. The 1973 Nimbin Aquarius Festival provides a paradigmatic case for Australian countercultures. The account and analysis I give is only the start of the story. More attention is long overdue. By way of method, I'm interested in following ideas Claire Colebrook proposes in her interpretation of Deleuze's philosophy. Here, historical events develop out of complex, overlapping "series" and present themselves as a problem: "something that disrupts life and thinking, producing movements and responses. [… All] social-historical movement needs to be understood by way of the problem which is its motor" (Colebrook xxxiv).

The 1973 Nimbin Aquarius Festival was the fourth arts festival organised by the Aquarius Foundation, the arts and cultural wing of the Australian Union of Students. Unlike the previous three festivals which took place on university campuses, this ten-day event was designed to be off-campus in order to begin imagining an "experimental alternate society" (Dunstan "Which Way"). In their *May Manifesto*, Graeme Dunstan (Aquarius Foundation Director) and Johnny Allen (Cultural Director) intended "that the festival itself be an art form, [and that…] the theme of the festival be survival on earth and a living affirmation that we do not need to be sold our culture". To enact this intention the Festival would have "no pre arranged [sic] programme of events and instead the community will be provided with free media […] through which interested groups could advertise activities they plan" (Manifesto in Dunstan "Nimbin" 20).

This open festival design was a response to a range of problems. On an immediate level was the critique of the 1971 Aquarius Festival in Canberra. Firstly, this Adelaide Arts Festival style event presented a "bourgeois", pre-planned program of performances in standard venues with rows of seats. Secondly, with the festival sited in the national capital, and the accommodation located five miles from the performance spaces, student energy became directed outwards in protest, rather than inwards towards "alternative styles of living" (Dunstan "Interview"; Dunstan "Which Way"). Dunstan had formed the view that despite the necessity of protest, the clash of oppositions was not generating creative alternatives for a peaceful society, but entrenching oppositional politics.

1971 in Australia was the peak of the Vietnam Moratorium movement, and many young men who might be delaying conscription via university study feared for their future. There was also the ever-present nuclear threat of the Cold War, as well as environmental apocalypse. In the midst of such fears, the counterculture provided an alternative path, but exactly what the new culture might look like was not clear. To develop a new culture of peace and sustainability, of survival, required practical experimentation on a community scale.

Dunstan did not form these ideas alone, but in conversation, and with Johnny Allen in particular (Dunstan "Which Way"). Johnny Allen's influence on the Festival idea emerged from his experience of organising gatherings at the Ourimbah property, just north of Sydney, of the Nutwood Rug band. Allen, who operated the Arts Factory in Sydney's Surry Hills in the early 1970s, would announce from the stage that a gathering would be held on a given weekend and the rest was improvised (Allen "Country and Eastern"). The idea that a festival with no pre-arranged program could work on a larger scale was a result of these happenings. Johnny Allen would later comment that

> People tend to think back on [… Aquarius] as Australia's Woodstock [… but] it in fact was an antithesis to all that. We were looking at the model of not just arts festivals but of rock festivals and saying that […] it was about creating our own culture rather than the commodification and buying of other people's culture. (Allen "Interview")

This sense of social and experimental possibility was heightened from late 1972 with the election, after twenty-three years of conservative rule, of the Labor Party with Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. The new government exempted all Australians from conscription and abolished university fees. The flow of the mainstream had not reversed, but government doors were open and students—who via the AUS had supported the Labor campaign—were being listened to.

When the AUS advertised for a Director and Cultural Director for the Aquarius Foundation and 1973 Festival, Dunstan and Allen independently and successfully applied. At their first meeting they developed the Festival *Manifesto.* For it to become reality two things were needed: people and a site. For the year prior to the Festival, they spread the word through university and counterculture networks on what the 1973 Festival would be, but most importantly, "how people should come" (Dunstan and Allen): that is, as an "experimental community [that would] be organised on a tribal basis of self sufficient (from the point of view of catering, sleeping and perhaps performing) groups of 10-20" (Manifesto in Dunstan "Nimbin" 20).

The site was a challenge of a different type. The initial manifesto called for "a fairly isolated rural setting where the participants will be relatively free from interactions with the surrounding established communities and where architects and the like could develop new styles in community organisation"(Manifesto in Dunstan "Nimbin" 20). For a May event, the sub-tropical north coast of New South Wales was thought to be an ideal climate, and there would be no welcome further north in Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland. Johnny Allen imagined a large field running down into the sea. By late 1972 a greenfield festival site was elusive, and with time running out, would be impossible to develop in time for the following May. Instead—and divergent stories exist as to precisely how—the village of Nimbin appeared as a solution to the festival site problem. As Sydney University architecture lecturer and

key organiser, Col James, would put it, "Let's recycle a town!" (Garbutt 10).

Nimbin was also experiencing problems both local and global. This spirited community contemplated ongoing decline. Changes to the economics of agriculture, in the dairy and banana industries especially, had taken its toll (Wessell 9; Taylor 29). Many of the shops in the once thriving village had shut and children found their futures by leaving town. When Dunstan and company discussed with the Showground Committee the organisers' plan to use the showground as a possible venue for the Festival, it was quickly realised that a larger site was needed for a possible 5000 festivalgoers. "It's going to involve the town," they said. "We'd better have a town meeting" (Dunstan and Allen). Allen and Dunstan began working with key community members. At the town meeting in January 1973, the village overwhelmingly voted yes to hosting the students; with no better scheme on the horizon for Nimbin it seemed worth a go.

During the months prior to the Festival, Nimbin was prepared as a festival venue. The AUS bought a number of vacant buildings, including the former Returned Services League building which was painted with a huge Union Jack and became the Festival Headquarters. A large store became a food cooperative, and another was turned into a café. A performing troupe, the White Company, toured the surrounding region promoting the Festival. Each weekend students would arrive from Brisbane to help with infrastructure and other festival elements. The Sydney video collective Bush Video cabled the whole town to create one of Australia's first cable TV networks. Architecture faculty and students contributed to the festival infrastructure from saunas (instead of bathing to reduce effluent) to bridges over creeks and dome structures. Volunteers were paid in "Nimbuns", Nimbin dollars redeemable at the food coop. Some worked as Community Liaison people to ensure good communication between the Festival Organisation and locals, even to the extent of having one student assigned to drink at the pub with the influential tug-of-war team (Dunstan and Allen; Allen "Interview"; Dunstan "Interview").

Over two hours of "home video" deposited in the National Film and Sound Archive by Megan McMurchy and Jeune Pritchard provides a sense of the 1973 Aquarius Festival experience: a festival of formless freedom is transformed via a drug-bust encounter with the riot squad into scenes of anger, and then by the fifth of seven tapes, begins to resolve into longer term plans for extending the social experiment into the future (McMurchy and Pritchard "Nimbin Aquarius Festival. 1973"*;* an excerpt is available as McMurchy and Pritchard "Street Scenes"). The planning that emerged from the Festival resulted in a large intentional community out of town. Numerous other communities sprang up and while it may be that the northern rivers of New South Wales would be destined to be a key countercultural region in Australia, the Festival provided a model that was distinctly self-organised and community spirited. While the initial impetus was to develop new visions for society away from the dominant culture, this "new settler" community spirit sits alongside, rubs up against, and entangles with the "old settlers": the term "new settler" itself designed not to be counter- or alternate-, outside of, against, but about new ways of living separate to but alongside old models (Dunstan "Interview").

In a sense the 1973 Aquarius Festival never left Nimbin. In its wake are diverse counter-, and not-so-counter-cultural elements. On the one hand commercial and capitalist entanglements with countercultural ideas present themselves in the main street of the village, while are others engaged in the "total" countercultural life, the lived experiment of creating a life geared against consumerism and towards long-term survival. Either-way and in-between, the counterculture permeates the area and the wider North Coast region, now rebranded the Rainbow Region. Arguably, it was the form of the festival that brought countercultural ideas "out-of-the-textbook" and through creative communal engagement made them into an ever-emerging practice that has led to a lasting presence in the region.

Thinking through the Counterculture

How, then, does this example fit with the concept of counterculture as defined? And what is it that counterculture is doing? The Nimbin Aquarius Festival was a paradigmatic countercultural event in that it was imbued with ideas and practices from over ten years of a global movement even as it was waning in the United States and the United Kingdom. In reflecting on Nimbin's Aquarius Festival—its intentions, the riot squad and planning for the future—Johnny Allen identifies a "second innocence […] emerged—a little battered and torn, a little sadder, older and wiser, but nonetheless [a] dream" (Allen "Nimbin" 29). Counterculture in Nimbin had a 1970s flavour.

In terms of Bennett's analysis of the counterculture forming as fluid and temporary coalitions, there is an element of this in the 1973 Festival. Most of the 5000 festivalgoers (some accounts put the number at 10,000) came together for their own purposes, then left. The disparate interests such as open access media, new healing modalities, "country and eastern" music, mind "expansion", and forming new-settler communities presented a countercultural smorgasbord. Yet as Grossberg notes, there is an affective unity to the event, a sense of shared purpose, or at least shared curiosity in what was going on and what might go on.

Yet while this temporary sense of countercultural coalition has some traction, it is significant that the legacy of the Aquarius Festival is also an enduring countercultural presence in Nimbin and in its region to this day. This exists in the form of intentional communities, alternative enterprises, and perhaps more significantly in a sensibility, a sense of countercultural affect that entwines around individuals, groups, the landscape, villages and towns. This sensibility does emerge in, and imbue, events—most notably in protest and also in celebrations (see Hartman and Darab in this issue)—but is also present in an enduring way of life. This way of life is not always distinctly countercultural, but a hybridised counterculture-mainstream entanglement of varying knottinesses. It is most noticeable in regular produce and makers' markets throughout the region, but in other forms too: the Lismore local government area has been called New South Wales' composting toilet capital (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). In a more widespread sense, then, the entwining of technologies of care, care for self and environment, have become part of cultural practice and awareness: "appropriate" technologies and recycling no longer solely belong on the countercultural fringe.

Beyond what it is, how do we understand what the counterculture does in episodic outbreaks and its enduring presence? The experiments at the 1973 Aquarius Festival provide some insight, for while it was an attempt to create an event "free from interaction with the surrounding established communities" (Manifesto in Dunstan "Nimbin" 20), the against is always in relation to the dominant. This was amplified when the Festival was forced by circumstance back into town: the infrastructure of Nimbin provided an active site, whether in the form of vacant shops or existing services—Soward's Garage for motor repairs, Daisy's Café for a milkshake or the Terania Shire Council garbage collector for removal of festival refuse (Dunstan "Interview").

Further, in the Manifesto there is also a sense of the importance to the survival experiment of "country arts" expressed in the desire that "the festival seek to rediscover the meaning that agricultural fairs once had for country people" (Manifesto in Dunstan "Nimbin" 20). The counter is not total. Rather it inserts conflict selectively into the immanent processes of the Festival and its aftermath to produce community in new configurations that extend beyond the bounds of the counterculture. It is here that Roberto Esposito's response to the "question of the relationship between antagonism and immanence, […] between "inside" and "against"" in the unfolding of history, can be seen as important (25).

Indeed, just as the against was never absolute, neither was the counter totally "outside" the dominant Australian culture. Rather, the counter is a view from the mainstream and only "outside" from an exclusionary stance on what mainstream culture includes. At the Nimbin Aquarius Festival the mainstream often viewed this counter in terms of *excess* via mainstream fascination with such things as dirt, sexual promiscuity, naked bodies, mind-altering substances and wild music and dancing, in fact anything that hints at a lack of restraint regarding the body. What the mainstream could not so quickly recognise was that the counterculture is marked just as significantly by restraint, also born of fear.

The fear of apocalypse and annihilation produces in this counterculture on the one hand a return to the body, its environment and community. Concomitantly there is restraint: restraint on the form of reason that was driving Roszak's technocratic society, that civilising project which depends on the national and rational individual actors of capitalism and the Enlightenment (Esposito 83). This restraint can be understood as a survival response, the stated focus of the Festival, and evident in later plans to develop communities that enabled self-sufficiency and survival through cooperative experimentation. Esposito terms such responses "immunitary" in that they "are concerned with assuring [a community's] own survival" with respect to outside contagion, here the contagion of a culture of war and environmental destruction (Esposito and Paparcone 50–51). In the face of this many Aquarians sought self-preservation, immunising themselves and (more-than-human) others from this fate.

Preservation in this case calls for the reinstatement of "the common" in the form of the promotion of communal self-sufficiency in the service of the environment, and restraint on consumerism. By adopting pantheistic spirituality, in such ideas as the Gaia hypothesis, the counterculture found a whole earth that for its sake required humanity to seek salvation through restraint: living sustainably, rechanneling the technocracy towards "creative technology which will not be destructive to the land" (Manifesto in Dunstan "Nimbin" 20). This necessarily required the return of the body, the reorienting and contextualising of reason back into the material world that connects the intellect to the earth.

This is, of course, a speculative interpretation of what a counterculture does using one manifestation as an example. In it there is a tendency to

universalise, and here I want to pull back from that desire. Instead my intention is to end, as I began, to point to the varying milieu from which counterculture is defined and its significance is discussed. While counterculture is global, it has local inflections and instances from which there is much to learn. The 1973 Nimbin Aquarius Festival and its aftermath is one such instance, located away from events in space and time that dominate interpretations of countercultures. This counterculture functions not so much as a failed revolution as providing ongoing and productive antagonism aimed towards survival.

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