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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 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 unique 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, food, 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 social forms 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 many after the catastrophic events of the mid-20th century, and was read by the counterculture as a period of crisis and decline. 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 term is best 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, 1956–73. 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).

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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 Giles 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; hypercommercialization, 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 vegetable foods are missing. These and other cultural markers each had their own histories connecting them to “cultures of resistance” from the 1950s and before (Brownstein 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 animal rights, animal rights actions, and against a range of motorway developments. Cox charts similar trends 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 John Allen (Cultural Director) intended “that the festival itself be an assemblage, 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 would 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 entrenched 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, 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 John Allen in particular (Dunstan “Which Way”). John 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. John 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 Bjele-Petersen’s Queensland. John 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 a shit load of work,” 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 domes. Volunteers were paid in “Nimbuns”, Nimbin dollars redeemable at the food co-op. 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 lug-of-war team (Dunstan and Allen; Allen “Interview”; Dunstan “Interview”).

Over two hours of “home video” deposition 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 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 societies 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 entitlements with countercultural ideas present themselves in the main street of the village, while are others engaged in the “tourism” business. The live 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 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 —Johny Allen identifies a “second innocence [...] emerged—a little battered and torn, a little saddler, and wiser, but nonetheless [a] dream” (Allen “Nimbín” 29). Counterculture in Nimbin had a 1970s flavour.

In terms of Bennett’s analysis of the counterculture forming as fluid and temporary communities, there is an element of this in the 1973 Festival. Most of the 5000 festival goers put down their purposeful root only for the week. The 10,000 people who attended each day had different motivations. Some were interested in art, others in music, others in the “architectural” possibilities of the festival and the living experiment it presented. The disparate interests such as openness to access media, new healing modalities, “country and eastern” music, mind “expansion”, and forming new-settler communities presented a countercultural practice that has led to a lasting presence in the region.

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 centre 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 Nimbin Festival 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 “Nimbín” 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 then left. The disparate responses 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 counter 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 was 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. Countercultural restraint: restraining the destruction of previous conditions by restraining the destruction of the future. Exposito’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).

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 “Nimbín” 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 infections 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.

References


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