

WHICH WAY AQUARIUS

The vision of the people who organised the Aquarius Festival was undeniably grand. No student body in Australia had ever before attempted such a vast project. It involved arranging and co-ordinating hundreds of entertainers and entertainers, and involved thousands of dollars expenditure and it involved providing for thousands of students.

Only four years before under the guidance of Richard Walsh, the First Universities Arts Festival was merely an administrative game concerned with co-ordinating all the various separate inter-university cultural happenings into one university at one time. In Canberra Robin Love and co. had set about creating the student alternative to the Adelaide Festival of Arts with big names like Sculthorpe, Ronne Arnold and Ray Price bolstering the status.

But in execution something went wrong. Sure, there were lots of good things about Aquarius but there was also lots of conflicts between the organisers and the participants. Bad vibes were all about and the litter, the vandalism, the hostility of the debate were indices of this. The festival freaks, it was plain to all, were not relating as a group.

When one thinks back on the terrible conditions which the participants suffered, it is a wonder that there was any spontaneity and goodwill at all. National U (7 June) *A Festival Consumed* listed the individual gripes of food, accommodation, ticketing and general rip offs. But the root of the problem was deeper than that. It was a structural deficiency in the planning rather than a series of peripheral mistakes.

There was a basic clash of expectations between the organisers and the participants for whereas the organisers planned for an Adelaide type festival, the participants wanted Woodstock, a pop festival sans hip capitalism. It was the difference between bourgeois culture and counter culture.

The organisers were pretty glib with the word 'counter culture' in their promotion but in their deeds their colours were exposed. What sort of people would sub-contract to a war profiteering U.S. corporation for services and give it sole franchise?

The fact of the counter culture is with us. The social stresses of the Indo-China war, the obvious but "powerless-to-alter" pollution crisis, conscription and a host of other issues have produced a profound disaffection within our society, and it is profound because the questioning does not stop at the realisation that war in general and the Indo-China war in particular is immoral. Finding the cause for the perpetrating and perpetuating of this immorality leads to a complete rejection of all the alienating and violent institutions that make up bourgeois society.

The result of this alienation is what the bourgeoisie call the "drop-out". It is a further indictment of bourgeois society that it has the division of insiders and outsiders of society (— why not a society of humanity all interacting as a whole and fuck the depersonalising abstractions of national, racial, cultural or what ever boundaries?) but the obvious question is never asked. Drop out to where?

These essentially highly moral people who reject the bourgeois value system develop, more or less underground, life-styles that have their own value systems. They develop a web of contacts with people of similar life styles and all over one finds outposts of freedom with groups of people experimenting with new styles of living that will do away with the violence that kills Vietnamese and poisons our food and air.

Occasionally they come together and discover the strength of their feeling (and this was the significance of Woodstock). After that they feel they need to come together to work out after social styles on a larger scale. This is counter culture.

Was this a good description of Canberra participants? Of course the particular social consciousness was not verbalised in the way I have done, but the feeling was there. Consider the popular demand for self criticism of the organisers at a mass meeting. Consider the free food phenomena and the Robin Hooding of the funds. Recall the self conscious militancy with which buildings and theatres were liberated of their petty authoritarian rules. And most of all consider the demonstrations.

The demonstrations were not isolated phenomena, but an intricate part of the cultural scene. The bourgeois press missed this point but there was no debate and no opposition to the demonstrations. There was very little agreement on or debate about objects. Yet some 2000 turned up and had a Day of Rage, a demo without a specific object, in which the pigs with batons flailing chased the students back to their sanctuary. Some 187 of our "cream of the nation's youth", our "leaders of tomorrow" were busted and so contemptuous were they of the law, they smoked dope in the cells and spray-painted slogans on the walls.

The counter culture feeling was there sure enough but it was thwarted by the physical constraints of the Aquarius organising. Eating pies on the run is shit and people give shit as a result. And separating of the tents from the entertainment by five miles is like bourgeois suburban planning where art and "living" are considered as separate compartmentalised functions which must not be confused for fear of interfering with that other isolated function, work. But so much for the griping.

The fact is that the Arts Festival has made a huge loss and in the process upset the corporations who provided the capital and the university administration who provided the facilities. What happens now?

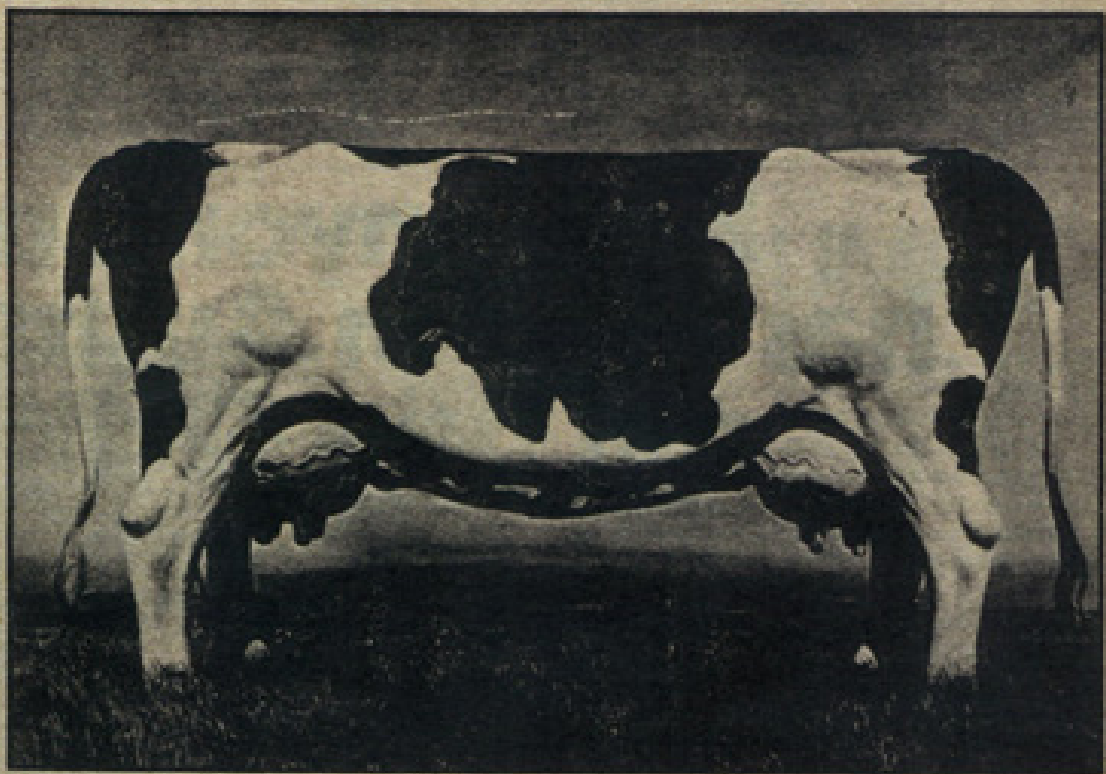
The Canberra Times editorial on the last day was probably right when it spoke about the "Evening of Aquarius". Arts festivals like Canberra will never happen again and not so much because they are financial disasters and attract the "wrong types" who don't respect university and municipal by laws, more because students will not let the organisers get away with those sorts of mistakes again — there is too much political consciousness to tolerate a repeated ineptitude and authoritarianism in Festival organisation.

But is it a question of wither Aquarius, but whither Aquarius. What then is the alternative?

The answer seems quite clear. If what was wrong with Canberra was the absence of the "pop festival" approach then ditch the 'Adelaide'/bourgeois concept and go all out for a total counter cultural happening.

Here are some ideas that have come up from discussion with friends like Johnnie Allen from Macquarie and others:

- * Select a site not at a University, but away from it all in the country, in spring or summer by the sea, a river or lake. By isolating the festival from the conflicting



Picture: a sacred cao.

society one gets the energies directed inward instead of outward in the form of demonstrating. Demonstrations are not being condemned here, rather it is proposed that an arts festival should be used as an opportunity to explore the alternative styles of living. The proof of the politics is in the life style.

- * Make it an outdoor scene, with street theatre, open air cinema and, of course, open air rock. With no doors or seats there can be no hassle with tickets within the festival.

- * Concentrate on those arts which do not require elaborate props and/or can offer more participation. This not only saves on expenses but keeps it simple and back with the people.



- * Get architecture students involved in designing the site and its facilities as they did at their recent symposium in New Zealand. This should be an essential part of the art of the festival. Geodesic domes for light shows and work shops, and cardboard painted prefab structures for sleeping. From these unit structures groups of people could set up their own communes and paint them.

- * Think, plan and promote ecology.

- * Provide food both in the form of groceries for spontaneously formed groups to do their own communal cooking and cafeteria style with simple cheap staples — brown rice, lentil bean stews, fruit etc. Allow people who consider food preparation an art, e.g., the macrobiotic people, to set up free services.

- * Keep alcohol out by not providing it at all. Beer brains have been bores at all festivals.

- * Work out the community services and organisations on an experimental co-operative basis. Encourage non-institutionalised religious groups to come. Set up alternative medical services with young head volunteer medicos. Start up child minding centres where non mind fucking education can be provided with theatre and painting work shops for all. Bust the child/adult barriers and have people rediscovering the world through young eyes.

- * Publicise it as a total cultural happening and win attention from the media with far out proposals for the community services. Consider the medical service, nursery, sewerage system, the internal media or whatever as an exercise in imagination and turn people on with the potential.

- * Organise like crazy and then when it starts let it happen without holding it back or forcing it.

This is obviously a sketchy proposal but the essence of it is Aquarius as the experimental alternate society — total culture. If you have any further ideas write your own scenarios.

It was suggested earlier that this direction may be the only path open for University Arts Festivals because of the forces acting from within and without Aquarius and its followers.

But I want to finish with a plea: The history of pop festivals in Australia has been a sad one. They were raped from the beginning by hip capitalists and trivialised by such ego tripping turds as Adrian Rawlins. The institutionalised Methodist Church via Alan Walker complete with walk socks, shorts and parents vigilante committees have had a bash at using pop as bait for their alienated hot gospel world view. Festivals recently entered a new phase with the Deep Purple/Free tour being taken over by Sydney's underworld. At every turn the counter culture is confronted, by an all accommodating bourgeois ethos that would superficially accept then warp its values to fit its money grabbing materialism.

The national student organisation is one of the few bodies that both is big enough to handle the organisation and could keep the profit motive at bay long enough to give such a cultural experiment a chance.

But more than that, the universities have access to talent — even in these alienating times — that could come up with ideas to make such a scheme, a workable and interesting experiment in living.

The question "How shall we live?" confronts us all with a soul searing urgency. It is plain that established culture does not have any answers, for it seems obsessed with the converse question "How shall we die?"

Aquarius as total experimental culture then is not just an alternative — it is a real need for us all.

GRAEME DUNSTAN.



Plant your seeds children.

