

## Chapter 4

# ConFest: Alternative Cultural Diversity Celebrated

## Introduction

This chapter offers a summary ethnography of ConFest. Focussing specifically on five events (held between April 1994 and April 1997), I provide a detailed description of ConFest in two parts. In the first, I discuss event foundations: the events researched, participants, the effects of social organicism, preparations and the volunteer ethos. In the second, I describe the cultural topography of ConFest in detail, with particular attention to key event zones and villages.

Consequent to DTE's democratic impetus in this period, I note two basic themes apparent. First, a diverse spectrum of alternative neo-tribes and subcultures (owning a vast range of discourse and practice, beliefs and motives) have been accommodated on site, a result of the Society's empowerment of multiple 'units' (villages) within the greater counterscape of ConFest. Second, in some respects a result of the first, ConFest is contested. Participants do not hold an homogenised interpretation of the meaning and purpose of the event, the polyphony of extant groks resonating ongoing disputes over that which constitutes 'alternative'. The existence of diverse cultures and interpretative frames renders ConFest radically inconstant, yet the persistent *return* of those holding divergent 'alternatives', and their on-site coexistence, insinuate the enduring logic of *organicism* underlying and conditioning a commonly desired experience.

## Part I. Event Foundations

### The Events

All five events detailed were held on or near the NSW bank of the Murray river (see Maps). Tocumwal III (Easter 1994) and Tocumwal IV (Easter 1996)<sup>1</sup> were five day events held on private bushland adjoining the Murray 11 kms from the town of Tocumwal. Featuring a secluded billabong, the site had been occupied first at Easter 1993. To avoid

overburdening the land, Toc IV was concentrated on a different region of the site. Both events were attended by about 4,000 people and there were 12 and 17 villages at Toc III and Toc IV respectively. Toc IV, a demonstration of the 'new' ConFest, featured a greater diversity of villages, many of which had community food kitchens (food supplied by DTE) and community base radios.

Tocumwal 'Birdlands' (New Year 1995/96), held on a nearby property, and the first week long event, attracted about 9,500 people (with thirteen villages). There are many retrospectively ambivalent about Birdlands. Following events discussed in chapter three, DTE were unexpectedly deserted by several key co-ordinators, only two months prior to New Year 1995/96. While ultimately liberated by this departure, the Society was left in a state of confusion as they sought a new site for the summer event. Though a site was found, much of it was marshland and lacking adequate tree cover. As Param said 'Australians are a swimming culture ... this is a swamp'. After the landowner failed to honour an earlier agreement to lower water levels, DTE and ConFesters had to contend with a wide irrigation channel running the entire length of the site. The channel, separating the market and car park from the rest of the site, was spanned by a makeshift one way bridge which broke several times during the event precipitating frustrating bottlenecks and long detours.<sup>2</sup> However, due to the manner in which participants responded to 'the bridge' (see Chapter 8), and with subsequent events widely acclaimed, the new Society avoided a potential disaster.

Moama IV (New Year 1996/97) and Moama V (Easter 1997), attracting 6,000 and 5,000 people/and 21 and 16 villages respectively, were held on Pericoota Station, 25 km west of Moama on the Murray. The site was a virtual island, bushland almost completely flanked by a billabong and the river. The 'island' was gained at one end by a land bridge or hand operated punt, and by a small footbridge at the other. As a planning design, more of the site's terrain was used for camping and villages than at the three prior events held there.

There is significant variation between the Easter and New Year events, mirroring the way such periods are celebrated in Australian culture. The New Year ConFest has a 'party atmosphere', a fact which attracts scores of young people searching for hedonistic pleasures - the 'good time'. Since there are greater numbers attending, the market is larger and it is generally a popular occasion to promote therapies and herald prophetic visions, to

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation 'Toc' for Tocumwal will be used.

<sup>2</sup> To make matters worse, a teenage girl was allegedly sexually assaulted on New Year's Eve.

hawk local political agendas and global spiritual panaceas. The Easter event, on the other hand, is smaller in scale and family orientated. Commonly regarded as a more 'intimate' and harmonious event, it is a time for serious healing.

## **Participants**

Though accurate demographics are difficult to establish, with an average age in the early to mid 20s,<sup>3</sup> and predominantly Euro-Australian, during the research period there are about 5-6,000 regular ConFesters: a diverse amalgam of students and teachers, artists and scientists, accountants and anarchists, ferals and professionals, musicians, activists, crafts people and the unemployed. A great proportion of ConFest participants are tertiary educated, or as George commented, 'those who can afford the Hippie uniform'. The Melbourne suburbs of Fitzroy, St Kilda, Northcote, Brunswick and Sydney's Newtown are common sites of emigration. Here, the two components of the 'new middle class' - 'humanistic intellectuals' (those involved in the teaching, helping and personal service professions) and 'technical intelligentsia' (administration and technical experts like bureaucrats and scientists) (Gouldner 1979) - are present alongside 'decommodified' groups.<sup>4</sup>

Participants are predominantly, though not exclusively, middle class. Most identify with the ACM, participating in workshops, site work and performances. There is general consensus between participants in the need for tolerance and to be responsible in one's actions (see ConFest Ethos below). Such value requirements probably capture the essence of the 'like-mindedness' many survey respondents appreciated in their fellow ConFesters.

Tolerance, however, has its limits. Due to the high ratio of tertiary educated participants (especially in the Humanities), and the inevitable deep impressions effected by the feminist, ecology, peace, human rights and alternative health/spirituality movements, the majority of ConFesters sustain elements of a culture of critical discourse. Within this discourse, anything deemed 'natural' - 'organic', 'green', 'earthy', 'vego', 'folky' - is valorised, and to express one's commitment to such, via apparel, diet, music, courtship, childcare, and conversation, garners acceptance and respect. The identity of the

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<sup>3</sup> Based on observations and confirmed by Berry's questionnaire results (1979:20). From a sample of 317 ConFesters surveyed at Berri, Berry found that 47.3% were between 20-24 and 22% were between 25-29 years old.

<sup>4</sup> Those outside the labour market such as students, the unemployed, the retired and those marginally employed like itinerant traders, fringe artists and street performers, for whom

alternative lifestyle is here revealed to be a DiY assemblage of desirable argot, icons and gestures. As practices which controvert the 'correct' critical discourse tend to be distasteful or offensive,<sup>5</sup> practitioners - who may also be suspected of indulging in a range of other homologically 'incorrect' pursuits - may not be accorded respect.<sup>6</sup>

Marked variation in on-site behaviour is largely determined by differential motives and expectations - which are controlled by a participant's interpretation of the purpose of the event. One way to work through this is to investigate these expectations disclosed in the form of questions participants may arrive with. In fact, at a general level there is a rather extreme division of inquiry, a division which tends to reflect differential commitments to either of the Conferencing or Festival dimensions of ConFest. As Coquito suggests, for many, the central and pertinent questions remain: 'Where's the family? Where's the tribe? What are we doing for the planet? What can we do?' However, for a growing number of those participants who are primarily seeking hedonistic pleasures, 'Where's the party?' (sexual gratification and intoxicants) constitutes the leading question. New Year's Eve has become the prime time of the *space invader* - particularly young males from local and surrounding districts. For most such attendees, ConFest is pure spectacle, an event 'put on' for their entertainment, the entire affair approximating an exotic/erotic circus.<sup>7</sup> Such participants are content as access to an informal drug economy, especially small scale trafficking in 'grams' (marijuana), 'trips' (LSD or 'acid') and 'e' (ecstasy), is never difficult.

Yet divisions are more complicated as there is, on the one hand, dissension over that which is believed to constitute the serious business of the event. And the disparity is made obvious by the presence of a miscellany of neo-tribes with which participants are affiliated (like Friends of the Earth, Spiral Dance, the Church of all Worlds, the Australian Nudist Federation, Food not Bombs, the Prostitutes Collective, Willing Workers On Organic Farms, The Vegan Society). On the other hand, there is considerable

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ConFest, according to Hakea, is 'the answer to Moomba'.

<sup>5</sup> For example: cooking and eating meat, displaying corporate logos, listening to 'ghetto blasters', discussing the cricket scores, male predatory behaviour and displayed gestures of possessiveness.

<sup>6</sup> Participants are somewhat similar to Gillespie's 'folknik', defined as someone holding 'a vague commitment to left-wing politics, peace, truth and beauty' and holding the belief that 'American [here, read mainstream Australian] culture is plastic and artificial' (1987:157 in Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:202-3).

<sup>7</sup> Other groups displaying different hedonistic behavioural patterns at this time include ravers and the Highwaymen motorcycle club.

debate over the definition of a 'party' (e.g. between jobs, bikies, ravers and ferals). Furthermore, one person's serious pursuits are, for others, mere diversions.

### **Planning Chaos: Proto-Community**

The principal term denoting the way a ConFest unfolds and operates is 'organic'. The word is an extremely appropriate metaphor. It immediately invokes several related terms and processes - 'local' or 'grassroots', 'self-determined', 'interdependence', 'balance' - all of which are integral to the unfolding or 'growth' of a ConFest. ConFest possesses DiY status. I have already referred to Les' relevant description of ConFest's social organicism as 'local action that works' in Chapter 2. There, I drew attention to the core traits of ConFest (co-operation, tolerance, autonomy and immediatism - see Appendix D), all of which are dependant upon the vouchsafing of a relatively spontaneous community process.

The ongoing negotiation of such organicism reproduces a *proto-cultural* community event. Proto-cultural events are, according to Handelman:

occasions and happenings which are yet to be given form but are emergent and divergent configurations of routine and mundane life ... [P]erformance [is] the seedbed of form [and, over time] ... logic coalesces ... the structure of performance tending to give way to the performance of structure (1990:20-1).

Despite the qualification that one's experience within the 'closed phenomenal world' of ConFest is far from mundane, the definition is relevant for ConFest in two senses. First, there are many proto-performances and concretisable or replicable processes occurring simultaneously on-site, as the moments when 'action in concert supersedes reflection in common' (ibid:20) are manifold. Second, *the entire event* is on every occasion *proto*, as a result of its organicism. Being perpetually in-composition renders the event distinct from most other community events, since, despite divergences from this ideal, the received strategy is to embrace fresh ideas, to welcome autonomous units (individuals and groups), and, ultimately, to encourage the contributions of all participants who 'work for ConFest'. Over successive events, and perhaps years of repetition, the infrastructural arrangement, workshop operations, market set-up, the presence/input of locals and authorities, and the Conference/Festival balance itself, were all negotiated *in situ*. Original enactments, impromptu spaces and subevents, often by a process of refinement, became successful working mechanisms of the total ensemble. Through compromise, ad hoc innovations

became recognised components of the ConFest script. The result of such processes is that which participants know as 'ConFest' - the collection of negotiated 'structures' which are 'performed' - yet there is always something unexpected to be discovered around the next bend in the path.

ConFest is an extraordinarily unpredictable social landscape, generating a desired feeling of uncertainty amongst liminaries. And, the peculiarity that seduces participants back to this environment, another consequence of its organic logic, is its *unpredictability*. Its predictable quality is its very unpredictability. Cestrum, commenting that the event is permeated with a 'sense of organised anarchy', provides a common grok on the experience. Though ConFests possess familiar landmarks and presupposed arrangements (even though the site itself may change), every event is characterised by disorderliness, a derangement of the familiar, a sense of chaos that is indeed cultivated by DTE's ConFest Committee; an experience highly sought after by ConFesters who have invariably interpreted this as a kind of 'magic'.

### **Event Preparations**

In parallel logic to the Rio Carnival, ConFest 'requires a great amount of order to produce sweet disorder' (Turner 1983a:118). The infrastructural arrangements for the events researched began evolving from a couple of weeks to several months before the events. As a result of DTE's current internal changes, events, including the last one considered here (Moama V), have benefited from an elevated commitment to organic pre-event and on-site processes as evidenced by organisational structures, most notably, the ConFest Committee. This central body, comprising members interested in being part of the 'site crew' evolved a set of guidelines approved at an RGM in March 1997 which stressed that the Committee: would have no leaders; will attempt to function by group consensus; may appoint subcommittees or individuals for special functions; and will have a budget allocated to it by an RGM of DTE to cover all costs associated with running a ConFest (Moama V ConFest Committee Guidelines - 11/3/97).

Since ConFest has traditionally been a nomadic gathering, there never being any permanent ConFest location, an appropriate site has first to be located and secured. DTE members explore possible sites (months in advance) on private land to be rented from the

owner.<sup>8</sup> Site searching may lead to disputes between members favouring different proposed sites. If such is the case (as it was for the '96/97 event) then it 'goes to a vote' or the result is dependent on the first successful permit application.<sup>9</sup>

There are several important criteria for selecting a site. It should be in bushland distant from major cities, though it seems that somewhat equal distance between Melbourne and Sydney is desirable.<sup>10</sup> There should be adequate flowing waterways, tree cover and firewood. It should also be accessible by vehicle (yet vehicles should be parked in a location separate from much of the camping space, though a space, *Gypsy*, is provided for buses, cars and camper vans).<sup>11</sup> Facilitators believe that the site should be selected on the basis of its 'context for possibilities'.

DTE must gain approval from the local council (possess a permit) and establish operating procedures with police, fire and health authorities, ambulance operators, conservation and environment departments, the landowner and neighbours prior to the event. Local organisations are often informed and locals invited. As ConFest has been a financial windfall to local businesses, retailers and councils have generally been receptive to the event. Following Baringa I and II, retailers in Wangaratta and Everton claimed the district stood to lose a potential \$1.5 million after DTE, partly on the face of objections from local landowners, decided to move on to the Daylesford area in 1986 (*Wangaratta Chronicle* 1985:1). Maintaining a good rapport with local police is desirable. Although 'there is a lot of negative attitude towards the police' the feeling is that if they are aggravated, they 'could give us a real hard time ... so we keep them on side'. Actually, continued Gundabluey, after strolling through the site on duty, 'some of them come back and bring their families'.

Once a site is found or secured, tickets are designed, printed and distributed (to numerous vendors including St Andrews market, Spiral Dance, Fuzzy's Farm (SA), vegetarian cafes, environment centres, book shops, galleries). The event is promoted via the DTE newsletter and web page, posters, alternative magazines (like *Grass Roots*, *Soft Technology*, *Earth Mother*, *Green Connections*, *Beat Magazine*, *Tekno Renegade*),

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<sup>8</sup> This contrasts with North American Rainbow Gatherings which are held on 'public lands'. Since these are 'ostensibly held in trust, everyone shares equally in their ownership' (Niman 1997:184).

<sup>9</sup> Only one of the three different locations detailed here was on a fresh site - Birdlands. A strong push for a new site in East Gippsland (for 96/97 and 97/98) was defeated.

<sup>10</sup> Consequently, most participants must travel hundreds of kilometres (by car, train or bus). This is unlike Woodford/Maleny which occurs relatively close to Brisbane.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike Rainbow Gatherings where participants are required to trek some distance (at least two

community radio (e.g. 3RRR and 3PBS), newspapers (e.g. *Nimbin News*), and local rural newspapers. Prior to the site set-up, the budget for site infrastructure and villages is allocated at a ConFest Committee meeting at an RGM. Those present seek to achieve consensus, or if unachievable, vote on capital outlays and village proposals submitted over a number of weeks (see below). Recent budgets for a ConFest average around \$100,000.

In early reconnaissance of fresh sites or unused regions of past sites, the landscape is surveyed and evaluated for the suitable positioning of key sub-site locations and facilities. Many take the opportunity to 'walk the site' and cast an eye over the terrain with the purpose of locating the appropriate topographical contexts for different villages and performances. Early site visits encourage the exchange of 'visions' and the imagined uses of space.<sup>12</sup> In this pre-liminal period, individuals and crews of volunteers, both in Melbourne and on-site, make considerable logistical preparations, laying the foundations for the gathering. Fragile or potentially hazardous areas may be identified and eventually taped off and signposted. As the momentum builds, volunteers combine skills and talents to devise plumbing and showers, provide power, dig toilet and fire pits, install base radios, position rubbish and recycling points (including the 'dickhead bin' for people dumping unseparated rubbish) and build/maintain roads and paths. About a week prior to ConFest, more people arrive and a temporary counterworld gradually takes shape, as the Gate, Information Centre, Market, *Healing*, Community/workers kitchen(s), Pt'chang (peacekeepers camp), performance/entertainment arenas, and all the other villages appear. Though infrastructural mechanisms are often not in place by the first event day, at the events researched they were usually operational, maintained and, finally, dismantled, via a co-operative ethic.

### **ConFest Ethos**

The product of 30 events, a distinct community ethos has gradually coalesced resonating the broader concerns of the alternative sector. This ethos has several aspects.

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kms) from the car park in order to reach the site.

<sup>12</sup> As an example of appropriate place making, a wide glade with a slender tree standing at its centre was the area chosen for the *Pagan* village at Moama I (1993/94). The site was selected on the basis of its possibilities, an appropriate context for a range of workshops and rites that may occur there (Les).



First, participants are expected to adhere to several rules or agreements, normally conveyed in the newsletter and information sheets handed out at the Gate. These rules generally cover health and safety issues, environmental responsibilities, and the contingencies of 'living together'. Participants are informed that they should observe: alcohol and drug restrictions in certain zones; the 'no pets' policy; fire and car free zone regulations; and the instructions for taking home non-compostables or separating garbage for recycling (according to the Toc IV fact sheet, 'rubbish is *Very Bad Bad Karma*', as is, for that matter 'sneaking in'). They are also encouraged to: avoid using biodegradable cleansing agents in or near waterways; use ground wood or firewood provided rather than damage trees; and drink/cook with drinking water only.

In the main, DTE is concerned with the gentle *encouragement* of appropriate behaviour as opposed to the oppressive *discouragement* of inappropriate behaviour. There is a tendency to avoid blanket prohibitions, as the ticket message 'alcohol and other drug abuse is not welcome' (rather than 'no alcohol and drugs') indicates. And what are popularly regarded as appropriate behaviours are encouraged, especially in new-comers, by the example that is set by many. I think this lies at the heart of the ConFest ethos, and is revealed in the information communicated to entrants. For instance, a handout 'ConFest Agreements' states:

We care for all children - especially near the river ... We consider the needs of others and allow them their own space. We don't make loud noise late at night. Those of us who smoke and drink consider others (we don't smoke in workshops or enclosed public space). We take communal responsibility for observing these agreements and for the work involved in running ConFest.

This last theme is perhaps the most critical measure of a successful event. After all, ConFest, in all of its stages (planning, building, operation and dismantling), relies upon the input of volunteers, upon people taking *responsibility*. Therefore, along with the expectation that participants observe the various rules listed above, everybody is encouraged to contribute their skills, labour, and interest to the unfolding and maintenance of the ConFest community, and, thus, assume equal share in the ownership of the event-space. Volunteering is promoted as a crucial and, ultimately, rewarding experience as conveyed in the statement:

[r]elax, volunteer, participate and enjoy every minute of *Your ConFest*. [It's] a labour of love. Volunteers are the lifeblood of ConFest. Volunteering is a unique experience. Everyone is granted the privilege to volunteer. (Toc IV 'fact sheet')

Volunteering engenders a sense of belonging and purpose, a fact exemplified by Graham, a long time ConFest worker and director. Formerly harbouring ‘a feeling of worthlessness and lack [of] ability’, his involvement with ConFest provides him refuge and proved to him that his skills and abilities were valued. Indeed, ConFest’s rewards are immediate and of the immanent kind - they are not delayed or transcendent, as a Maleny maxim ‘all volunteers go to heaven’ (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:203) would suggest.

DTE, as they are keen to stress, is not a service provider ‘putting on’ an event, and participants are not clients. Indeed, participants are reminded upon entry that:

[a] ConFest is a self governing, self starting, self generating, self organising group of people ... The ideal ConFest site development is to do nothing and let people develop what they need ... Facilities develop as people get together and plan and start the work’ (Toc IV ‘ConFest on a page’ gate hand out).

Accordingly, ‘despite breakdowns in organisation, the people themselves create ConFest and overcome difficulties. The people themselves are the most powerful ingredients for a ConFest’ (Sage). As such, ConFest Committee members and other ConFesters are generally indistinguishable from one another.<sup>13</sup> New processes coalescing in DTE - devolved powers of responsibility, horizontal organisation, interdependence, the championing of an ‘organic’ group process - provided the nourishment for processes on-site.

In their commitment to specialised tasks, many ConFest Committee members and other workers demonstrate a noble ethic of selfless service, often emulated by others. Indeed, some ConFesters modify their own behaviours as they are swept along by individuals’ enthusiasm for making ‘it’ happen. There are those who are inspired by the random acts of kindness of those who care more for the realisation of a successful ConFest than any personal recognition for their laborious contributions. Laurie is a notable illustration of this. He conveyed to me that, at his first ConFest, it took him twenty minutes to find ‘the emitter of the pattern’, David Cruise. Three years later Laurie was a director and a key site crew member. Instrumental in establishing Earthlink (Community Food) and committed to garbage recycling, his desire is to see others adopt such duties, to find his own replacement: ‘you just make sure ... the thing carries on going. It’s not dependent on you as a structure. And that’s the hardest thing to do when

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<sup>13</sup> Though directors and co-ordinators remain largely inconspicuous throughout the event, and usually do not seek to assert public authority, the possession of a hand held radio - a kind of

you play these roles in ConFest, is not to get people dependent on you'. A selfless, transitory custodian of the organic process and the Spirit of ConFest, Laurie desires to see ConFest reproduced such that the experiences of novices are not unlike his own.

## Part II. Spaced Out: the ConFest Topos

The event topography harbours familiar landmarks, but out here on the interstices there are plenty of surprises. This section, comprising the remainder of the chapter, introduces ConFest culture by way of its spatial configurations. First, I detail the principal infrastructural mechanisms or key event zones and their functions. Second, I detail each village centre and its workshops.

### *The Gate*

The gate wants everyone inside, in their own open format - the gate wants people to leave their baggage there - the gate can handle the baggage. (Paula, DTE email-group 24/10/98)

The Gate is a marquee and portable room set up on an entrance road some distance from the open road to accommodate volunteers who collect and issue tickets, pass outs and handle the money.<sup>14</sup> David Cruise explains The Gate's interstitial status well: 'The Gate is not ConFest. The Gate is not the outside world. The Gate is both, a kind of half way place that one must pass through to reach the mythical land of ConFest'. Referring to the subtle protective network and flexible induction process honoured by gate volunteers, for Paula:

[T]he gate is a magical world and time zone all of it's own.... a doorway - a window - the entrance - like Orryelle's gateway [see *Labyrinth*, below] - a magical separation between the two worlds - the *magic* of it being one of the

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techno-sceptre - does communicate, an official role, and therefore, conveys status.

<sup>14</sup> A three tiered price structure exists. For the events researched, the price of admission was \$50.00 (gate price), \$30.00 (preurchased tickets), \$20.00 (for DTE members) or free for children under 16 accompanied by adults. Since there are many people who arrive with genuine issues (cars that break down, luggage lost, money stolen, tickets left on the fridge), these people may be issued an 'X-file' ticket (a special set of tickets printed with their own serial numbers but no sale price). Permitting gate crew to use their own discretion, 'X-file' tickets indicate that this event is remote from profit driven non-ALEs.

MOST critical parts - ensuring the difference between confest and the other big festivals I've been to. (DTE email-group 24/10/98)

It is at the entrance to the event-space that one may pass into the 'ConFest time' zone. There are two meanings to this. The first is the twice introduced ConFest-specific daylight savings of one or two hours.<sup>15</sup> The second is the sensation of atemporality, or suspension of normal time that takes effect upon entrance for those more familiar with the ConFest journey. By transferring to ConFest daylight savings time, or by making early threshold adjustments (which includes the temporary discarding of watches) at The Gate, ConFesters enact something like that which Falassi (1987:4) calls rites of 'valorization' or 'sacralization', which, he avers, are common to festivals where 'daily time is modified by a gradual or sudden interruption that introduces "time out of time", a special temporal dimension devoted to special activities'.

Gate volunteers, besides ensuring every person entering ConFest has a ticket (DTE's policy is that *everybody*, including site-crew and workshop holders, has to buy one), must contend with certain difficulties. Since DTE do not hire professional security to search cars or patrol perimeters, the issues of 'freeloading' (10% get in without paying according to George) and those looking for cheap entrance, exist. As David Cruise explains, some 'would try the patience of Job [as they] stage performances that could get an AFI award'.

David has helped facilitate the gate process over a few years. Interested in evolving appropriate strategies to deal with 'difficult situations', he argues people 'must enter your reality, you don't enter theirs'. Trev's disarming approach is exemplary. Trev is ConFest's naked ambassador. Guardian and translator of the ConFest Spirit to neophytes, he has rarely missed a ConFest since 1981, and he spends most of the time at the Gate. He even camps there now. By his reckoning 'it costs me 80c a week to go to two ConFests, and I make sure I've got that in the kitty'. But, besides the freeloaders who sponge on the community, there are those who come for the free or cheap 'PerveFest':

We've often had six, eight, ten car loads coming when the pub closes ... [but] the yobbos don't know how to talk to a naked guy, so I've never been physically accosted. It's disconcerting to them. I've got the upper hand ... 'Hi guys, welcome to ConFest. Got a ticket ... Just come for a look have you. Well you had your look. We're gonna turn you round here. But what can I tell you about ConFest? ConFest can change lives. It's a caring, sharing community of all sorts of people' ... And we've had beautiful wins out of this.

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<sup>15</sup> David Cruise explains that turning back the clocks around the site (at The Gate, Information and workshop wall) conserves energy as less artificial lighting is required. This also had the effect of making people adjust back to 'real time' upon leaving.

Usually unclad himself, David reasons ‘most people in our society cannot deal with a naked male. It’s just so outside their reality, when they enter our reality of a naked ticket box, they kind of lose all their control and reference points. It’s just outlandish’.

Sited on the other side of the car park from the gate, is the Welcome Tipi, a recent feature (at Moama IV and V). At the edge of the car park this second entrance threshold is the doorway to the village space. Entrants walk under the sign ‘Welcome Home’ (A Rainbow Gathering import) and encounter the guardian of the *Tipi* who imparts basic information and controls traffic. A map and doss down area for those arriving late at night are found here.

### *Information Centre*

The nerve centre of ConFest, this area is designed to facilitate the exchange of information. This happens in several ways. Participants are provided information on a range of issues regarding the day-to-day aspects of ConFest. There is a map of the site, usually an example of what Niman calls ‘participatory cartography’ - a map updated by various people as the festival unfolds such that it is ‘completely out of scale, bearing no resemblance to the actual geography of the area’ (1997:16). There are also signposts to villages, a base ‘radio on a stick’ and a telephone. It is the location for ConFest’s ‘non-verbal communication exercise’, as hundreds of personal notices informing friends of camping locations or pursuing lifts home, are posted. Most important, a wall of blackboards (‘the wall’) is usually positioned nearby upon which those who elect to run workshops over the week make their intentions known by scrawling the workshop/performance name and its time of day in columns identifying the location (normally a village). ‘The wall’ connects ConFesters to a live switchboard of alternatives. The area is also a storage space for community equipment (cool room, barrows, bicycles, four wheeled motorbikes or ‘quads’, tarps, tools, supplies etc.), the location for a worker’s kitchen, and the principal point for recruiting novices for site work - especially The Gate crew.

## *Pt'chang Peacekeepers*

The DTE funded ConFest Safety Project (CSP) formed the Pt'chang camp at Moama IV and V, merging with the existing 'fire and security' team (known as 'Pt'chang')<sup>16</sup> and also attracting the input of those involved with the previous *Community* village. The CSP is 'an informed and pro-active community controlled safety project' designed by people within the ConFest community to create safety and to empower ConFesters to respond constructively and nonviolently to unsafe situations. Anthony, instrumental in developing the CSP, says it was created by a small number of activists within the grassroots Australian Non-Violence Network. Anthony claims 'a lot of the techniques and skills and stuff that we are using here have been used in war zones'. The CSP, he said, has been inspired by the Gandhian Shanti Sena, a grassroots peace army which spread throughout India intervening in conflicts, including that between Hindus and Muslims<sup>17</sup> and the 'world peace brigades' including the nonviolent interventionist Peace Brigades International.

An ideal social laboratory for applying their techniques, ConFest was chosen as a response to the real threat of sexual harassment and abuse. 'Women friends of mine [explains Anthony] have been really clear in telling me that it's the perfect place for rape, and it's been highly dangerous for women ... Sexual harassment's rife'.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to Moama IV, as a result of funding from DTE, 40 people were trained in a range of skills. According to the *Pt'chang Handbook* (ConFest 96/97: produced by the CSP:19) the appropriate protocol is to employ 'actions that work consensually', using an 'enabling wellbeing' frame rather than one of 'conflict managing'. Accordingly, the training was a movement away from 'security guard', *power-over* strategies, toward *power-with* strategies. Anthony explains:

We're not police ... We've got a totally different way of using power than police or authority figures and use fundamentally different methods, such as simply using listening skills to intervene in violence, and peacekeeping skills.

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<sup>16</sup> Chris, who coined the term 'Pt'chang' explains - referring to the instant an individual arrives at a problem's solution - it is 'the sound [of] a realisation'.

<sup>17</sup> A Sanskrit phrase glossing as 'peace centre', Shanti Sena is also the name adopted by North American Rainbow Gathering peacekeepers (Niman 1997:118).

<sup>18</sup> Incidents at Moama IV were relatively minimal for a community of 6,000 over the New Year period. Pt'chang responded to and recorded: a sexual assault, an assault on two gay men, petty theft (burglaries of tents and cars), small fires, and 'a few minimal family disputes'. They also had a role in locating lost children, recruiting volunteers for site work, dealing with 'runners' at The Gate and dogs on site (Anthony; *The Pt'chang Report*: 39-41).

The training drew on a diversity of experience and networks, covering Aikido centring, briefings on drug and alcohol issues and harm minimisation, debriefing, sexual assault, non-violent intervention skills and crisis response strategies. The radical departure from *power-over* strategies of ‘crowd control’ is clear in a passage from the *Handbook* (7):

Nonviolent interventions are fun and we can be as creative and adventurous as we like. We can interrupt the old, boring, scripted patterns of violence with something that is new, different and unexpected. We recognise that there is thrill and excitement in taking risks and being scared, and finding the spontaneity and excitement of intervening nonviolently.

Pt’chang provided several key facilities: a ‘safe place’ marquee; a 24 hour crisis response network of co-ordinated peacekeepers (in pairs, on foot and on bicycles) trained for crisis intervention; a communication network connecting all peacekeepers and First Aid (the hub was the communications or ‘coms’ tent, where a log book was kept), and; the ‘Wellbeing Collective’. Forming Pt’chang’s core, the latter was itself comprised of three groups: the Support group (counselling, debriefing, healing); the ‘Purple Collective’ available in cases of sexual violence, assault and child abuse, and; the Conflict Resolution and Mediation group, acting as a mediation service (*Handbook:2*). Workshops were held on a range of safety issues. They liaised with DTE, and the Bush Fire Brigade and undertook ‘fire patrols’, disseminating information about fire regulations. A workers’ kitchen was set up and maintained in their space. They perceived their most important role is in encouraging all ConFesters to take responsibility and initiative for their own safety.

### *Community Kitchens*

The ‘Earth Link Cafe’ was conceived at Moama III (Easter ‘95), evolving out of a perceived need to supply volunteers with meals (food supplied with DTE funds). It was set up and maintained by a core of experienced people many of whom were connected to various alternative community groups from the Dandenongs: such as Mountain Co-op, Alternative Options for Youth and Mountain Net. Its principal co-ordinator, Laurie, designed it such that there were two fires: a fire ‘of the hearth’ ‘being from the mother’s spirit’, and the masculine ‘fire of the hunt’. The ‘Cafe’ idea has given rise to Community Kitchen developments at subsequent ConFests where huge ‘feasts’ have occurred towards

the end of the event. The idea of distributing food to participants, a portion of the Society's 'invisible hand', has precipitated the occurrence of events where several kitchens have appeared in different village centres (Toc IV being a good example).

### *Community Toilets/Showers*

There are normally about 20 toilets around the site. Before the event, pits are dug with back hoes, which are then skirted with hessian or tie-dyed cloth wrapped around star pickets. ConFesters are urged to 'adopt a dunny': keep toilets clean and maintain paper supplied from Information. Since pits are deep, covered and participants urged to cover their faeces with the lime provided, diseases often reported at Rainbow Gatherings - the 'Rainbow Runs' (Niman 1997:67) - are prevented. Toilets are finally filled in and pulled down by site crew. There are a small number of showers located around the site also. Toilets and showers are non-gender specific and users are often visible to one another and to those walking by. Often there are no barriers separating multiple toilets which means defecating can be quite a fear-confronting experience for novices who are accustomed to excreting waste in lonely cubicles. According to Chris, 'I think having a crap beside a stranger is about the most disarming thing ConFest gave [me]'.

### *Fire Circle*

A gathering area, the Fire Circle serves as a focal point for the collective release of energy. At Toc III and IV it was adjacent to the market, at Birdlands it was at the centre of the site on 'the sacred mound', and at the Moama events there was no single gathering space. The Fire Circle has been the site of collective daytime performances such as the meditative 'morning sharing',<sup>19</sup> Spontaneous Choirs,<sup>20</sup> Tai Chi, Yoga, belly dancing and children's parades. At dusk this space metamorphoses into a mischievous nocturnal playground where the boundary between performer and spectator is fluid or non-existent - a spontaneous combustion of youth, colour, sound and spirit. At Toc III, following an invocation of the original inhabitants of the area (the Yorta-Yorta), hundreds gathered to

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<sup>19</sup> Not so popular these days, the convention of gathering in a circle, linking, hugging, chanting and sharing thoughts and feelings can be traced back to Cotter, where 'tribal councils', akin to Main Council at Rainbow Gatherings, were held.

<sup>20</sup> Facilitated by Peter Gleeson, the Spontaneous Choir are a fluid extra-ConFest tribe who meet and perform at various Melbourne locations.



perform a fire walk under the fullness of the moon. Vertiginous dancers, many of whom were naked with mud, ochre and paint-based body-murals and facial designs, gestured frenetically to the accompaniment of tumultuous orchestras. On this, as with most evenings, the air dense with dust and the ringing of bells dangling from a thousand limbs, necks and foreheads, and with the roar of firesticks overhead, there occurred one rapturous Dionysian cacophony in which the fire remained a central element.<sup>21</sup>

For ConFest's duration, music is nearly always audible, especially the rapid strain or distant booming of drums accompanied by the intermittent roar and shriek of delirious crowds. The gathering spaces are pulsating centres of percussion. Every night a host of musicians appear in possession of a bizarre spectrum of instruments. There is an eruption of African djembe, dun dun (double ended talking drum) bongo, congas, doumbek, kalimba and chekere, together with steel pan, cow bells, clapping sticks, xylophone, rainmakers (carved hollow wooden tubes filled with beads), 44 gallon drums, frying pans, cooking pots and anything loud when beaten. I have seen and heard a range of wind instruments (flute, saxophone, tuba, horns, bagpipe, didjeridu), and an equally impressive range of vocals, from tonal chant to rebirthing scream. Together with fire jugglers and breathers, the convergence of hundreds of skilled and semi-skilled musicians in the Fire Circle, around camp fires and at other locations (like the chai tent or Market centre), especially on New Years Eve, generates an infectious frenzy.

### *The Market*

In the market, itinerant stall holders trade in goods and services palatable to New Agers and 'greenies': handicrafts, candles, folk-jewellery, leather goods, crystals, incense, hemp products, cheesecloth garments, recycled fabrics, herbs and oils. Here, one can find numerologists, aromatherapists, tarot, palm, rune and aura readers; buy 'tribal staffs', 'rainmakers', 'medicine sticks', roo-bone 'amulets', Feng Shui meditation products, a range of percussive instruments and didjeridus; and get one's body pierced or hair tied. Food and drink sales are strictly vegetarian, wholemeal and non-alcoholic - meat, animal derived and disposable products are prohibited, and inorganically produced foodstuffs are disfavoured. Bio-dynamic juices, like wheatgrass, are popular, as is chai tea (in the 'chai tent' - a familiar meeting place). The converted 'bus with the lot' of the bohemian 'Vege

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<sup>21</sup> Firewalks also took place at Toc IV and at both Moama events. These were longer, more controlled rites with fewer walkers.

Out Cafe' and the Earth Oven bakery are also favourite venues. Most vendors are itinerant traders following a circuit of alternative events and markets (like St Andrews market near Melbourne). Some are operated for the benefit of non-profit, ethical and community organisations. Stalls include Friends of the Earth (FOE) dishing up vegan fare, Ananda Marga<sup>22</sup> who erected large marquee restaurants serving Indian cuisine, Hari Krishna, The Dzogchen Community,<sup>23</sup> the Sun Cafe, which dispensed 'solar powered smoothies', and the Performer's Cafe. At these events, GECO and HEMP (Help End Marijuana Prohibition) also had tents wherein their own agendas were placed on display. At Moama IV, the market centre featured The ConFest Prayer Wheel. Upon writing their 'good feelings, prayers and wishes for the planet, us and the New Year', market patrons were invited to slip their wishes into the makeshift cylindrical device and give it a spin.

Along with conforming to health and safety regulations, and requiring a public liability insurance policy, food vendors must, in their application to the Market Committee, satisfy several criteria: no meat, no disposable products, no personal generators, environmentally sound cleaning products only and sullage should not disrupt the aquatic and terrestrial environment. From Toc IV a divisional recycling system and compost area was situated in the market. At that event, a 'participation policy' was also introduced. Each vendor was required to provide one breakfast, lunch or dinner for site workers, with the larger stalls obliged to take bigger sittings. Vendors were charged rent according to the stall's type and size. At Toc IV there were four types:

- Non-profit organisations, community GEN<sup>24</sup> types, and co-operative groups that use organic and biodynamic produce' (as much as \$100.00).
- Non-profit organisations, community GEN types and Co-operative groups.
- Other traders who use organic and biodynamic produce.
- Other traders (as much as \$300.00).

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<sup>22</sup> Ananda Marga is 'a spiritual and social service movement' (from leaflet) founded in India by Shrii Shrii Anandamurti (P.R.Sarkar). Its teachings are based on the 7,000 year old science of Tantra Yoga, and the purpose of its practice is to 'change our inner nature - and the society we live in; in order to foster the emergence of a new civilization, one based on spiritual and universalistic values, rather than on narrow dogmas and short sighted materialism' (from Wangaratta '83/'84 handbook:36). They promote the annual Ananda Mela (Festival of Bliss) held at their Ashram and spiritual community in Stanthorpe Queensland.

<sup>23</sup> The Australian Dzogchen community follow the teachings of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, himself a reincarnation of a great Dzogchen master of the early 20th century, Adom Drugpa. Dzogchen ('the Great Perfection) is 'the culmination and essence of Tibetan Buddhism and is a complete way of knowledge of an individual's state of being' (from pamphlet).

<sup>24</sup> Green, Ethical and Non-exploitative ('non-exploitative of people or planet').

Many vendors are regulars and have evolved long-standing social networks wherein they camp together, share stories about the health of the market and 'look after each other'. Sociality is similar to that described for car boot sales in Britain by Crewe and Gregson (1998). Far removed from the hostility of the conventional market-place, friendships between vendors often cut across any competition.

During this period of research, an area was demarcated in the market for the purpose of screening video footage of past ConFests. The film was narrated by a long time DTE elder and custodian of visual history, the late Gordon Ballard. Images, actions and concerns of participants at past events (including the original event at Cotter and the presence of controversial ancestral figures such as Jim Cairns) were projected. Participants, especially novices, were reminded of their heritage and provided the opportunity to position themselves historically. Videos on Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, vivisection and footage of UFOs were also viewed.

### **Villages and Workshops**

Villages form the cultural topology of ConFest. As 'social sculptures, dynamic social installations' (Marko), these theme-specific camping zones are the sites of both Conference and Festival. No ConFest is the same, as most of these on-site locations and their features undergo mutation between events. Each event is characterised by the appearance of new villages, mergers, clusters and satellite groups who have perhaps not yet achieved or desired the status of a 'village'. Some villages may disappear altogether, perhaps only to re-emerge in the same or a different guise. Proposed productions/areas are usually designated 'villages' after they have been allocated funding, sought, via proposal, from the DTE budget at meetings prior to the event. Regardless of funding, villages - home to the manifold organisations, therapies, co-ops, collectives, tribes, individuals on-site - are spontaneous productions providing supportive environments for the transmission and exchange of 'traditional' or more proto-alternate knowledge and praxis.

According to Cockatoo, ConFest is a 'vast school of consciousness'. The curricula appear in an extensive corpus of workshops (up to 300 at summer events). Many workshops are conventional fare and have gained popularity. Others are novel, obscure, positively strange, even fantastic. The format of workshops varies (open discussion, debate, lecture/demonstration, game, body movement/dance, theoretical/applied) and is

often multiple (with shifting emphasis throughout their duration). Workshops are a popular psycho-spiritual educational forum wherein the nineties 'esoteric tourist' (Goodman 1990:51) of the mind, body and spirit, has a smorgasbord of personal development stratagems from which to select. ConFesters have always had their 'choice of gurus, avatars and panaceas' (Wendy 1984). Some run healing workshops as primers for rural weekend retreats or city businesses. Others experiment with novel psychotechnologies. Yet, workshops also facilitate discussion on a range of social and political issues contesting spiritual pathos, nuclear family, drug prohibition, sexual repression and environmental abuse.

Many are not attracted to villages as such. Novices, especially, may rather choose a site for its geographical desirability. Also, there are many, particularly the site crew, who do not 'do workshops'. 'Never done a workshop. I've never had a massage', boasts Janet. Alleging he had never attended one either, Spinifex voiced the sentiments of many, claiming 'the whole ConFest is a workshop'.

The following list provides a vignette of each village present at the five events,<sup>25</sup> sketching their composition and purpose, and noting the events at which each appeared (see Maps). Some villages were characterised by a miasmic flurry of workshop themes. In some cases there was no clear explanation, other than practicality, why many workshops occurred in a particular village space. For example, workshop holders may just happen to be camping nearby; or other, more appropriate locations, may be reserved.

#### *Alternative Technology (Toc IV)*

A display run by the Alternative Technology Association, an organisation promoting the use of renewable energy technologies. The 'Energymobile', a nine ton mobile energy and technology display vehicle, and the 'Solar Shuttle' were present.

#### *Art (all events)*

Situated on the bank of a billabong, this has been one of ConFest's most popular zones. Normally, it features a mud pit ('primal ooze'), body painting, evening fluoro parties, 'the fridge' (a giant Coolgardie safe for people), a sauna, a kid's water slide and a 'sweatlodge'. Accommodating up to fifty people, the 'sweat' is a wood fired steam tent,

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<sup>25</sup> Since it was one of the few different villages appearing at Moama II & III, the inclusion of the *Women's* village is the exception.

often scented with essential oils.<sup>26</sup> After lying in the mud pit, it is common for people to stand at the edge of a bed of hot coals to dry the mud, creating a natural body plaster which later acts as an exfoliant. This is a collective process. Once dried, many have their bodies painted, by themselves or others. They are painted naked, partially clothed or mud splattered - using water based or fluorescent paints or even ochre. Many people, particularly at the summer events, wandered around the site in such chthonic uniforms.

#### *Celestine Prophecy* (Toc IV, Moama IV)

Also called *Macchu Picchu* (after the Inca citadel in Peru believed to be a global sacred site), the facilitators of the village were inspired by the insights contained within the prosaic New Age religious tract *The Celestine Prophecy*, a book which prepares its readers for the coming spiritual reawakening.

#### *Circus* (Birdlands, Moama IV)

With a geodesic dome at its centre, a fluoro-coloured space for workshops and performances on fire juggling and twirling, tight rope walking, and kids games.

#### *Community* (Toc III & Toc IV)

Sited on the periphery at Toc III, this was an experiment in communal living (called *Community Springs* at Toc IV). It was stressed that those camped at the village (about 35 people) must be committed to a community process of shared tasks and responsibilities. Cedar explained, since DTE 'wasn't going to change, what we had to do was change ConFest from within ConFest'. Therefore,

we camped right off the edge ... There was regular workshops there, and we had dinners every night which worked really well. We built ourselves a Coolgardie safe. We got some resources, scavenged them from around the site. And I put on the board most nights, 'communal dinner - come and bring some ingredients'. And that worked really well, and we got about the same number of people every night for dinner. Some of the people from the area would go off and eat elsewhere, but we'd have people from elsewhere coming and eating dinner with us and cooking and stuff. And just the cooking and working over something simple like that can really bring people together.

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<sup>26</sup> Although it has similar purifying potentials, the structure is not designed to accommodate rituals modelled on Native American or Celtic 'sweatlodges'.

Workshops here included discussions on economic reform, unemployment and permaculture, and it was the site for Les' 'spontaneous drama', a workshop designed to improve individual wellbeing and community relations through 're-living the stories of past tragedies and traumas [and, in the process] creating new endings'. Les figures that the process originated in the Philippines, where historically opposed villages would come together to re-enact past conflicts, but with the crucial twist of exchanging roles. This process, he suggests, places participants in 'sustained reflection'.

### *Cosmic Celebration (Toc III)*

A space available for a diversity of workshops, such as I Ching, 'ancient chanting and harmonics', 'astrology chart reading' and a 'discussion on dream symbolism'. Yet, the 'main event' here was a Psychedelic Spirituality workshop consisting of lectures (neurochemistry, responsible usage and spiritual and political ramifications) and 'hands-on', or experimental, phases. Co-chairing the early phase, Pipit had a fascination with the connections between spirituality and psychedelics:

I felt there was a great expansion of interest and experimentation associated with in particular the rave movement from the early 90s, and its subsequent evolution and fusion with the hippy trance thing. I think I was envisaging a 90s neo-psychedelic revolution. The ideas of Terrence McKenna for example were just beginning to gain currency. But at that time, there wasn't a lot going in the way of accurate science and experienced, reasonably level-headed people with sensible (e.g. harm reduction) advice.

The latter, 'shared experience' attracted 50-60 people who were requested to BYO LSD 'sacraments'. The aim was to ingest the sacraments and explore 'the epiphenomenality of a group of conscious people, communing meditatively & focussing on each other and common themes' (Svendsen 1999:40). Though an 'extraordinary event', apparently the larger meditation circle dispersed into smaller circles and groups who wished to traverse the wider event. Kurt, the principal facilitator, held similar workshops from Toc III through to Moama V, becoming the victim of an extraordinarily vicious rumour campaign (ibid:26-7) (see Chapter 8). He is skilled in designing spaces which he claims 'maximise the high semantics potential of the experiencing, so that the journeyers can walk away with greater self-organising integrity in navigating the terrestrial reality they are privileged to be incarnated in' (ibid:39).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> According to Pipit, the 'hands on' workshop 'made it into a soft-porn OZ magazine, as reported by an attendee, under a title something like "sex and drugs crazed hippies go wild in

### *EarthSharing* (Moama IV & V)

A solar powered stage for spontaneous ensembles, poetry and theatre sports. The space also promoted EarthSharing, the local branch of a world movement inspired by social philosopher and economist Henry George. *EarthSharing* is

dedicated to achieving economic justice for all people, and to reforming the way we treat our limited planetary resources. [It] connotes that we have a responsibility to share access to natural resources equitably - and to be mindful of the rights of future generations by caring for the global environment. (brochure)

Affiliates subscribe to the laws of geonomics ('Law of the Earth') holding that 'the Earth (land and natural resources) should be the equal and common birthright of all humanity'. Associated with Tax Reform Australia, they believe that the primary source of community revenue should be an annual rent on natural resources over which title is held, rather than through an employment inhibiting production tax (from pamphlet). Workshops on geonomics and tax reform were held on this site (Jessika).

### *Food Not Bombs* (Toc IV and Moama IV)

Also called the *Anarchist* village, such a presence goes back to the mid-eighties when the Redfern Black Rose Anarchist Collective organised the *Self Management* village at Baringa I and II, and Glenlyon III. Food Not Bombs (*FNB*) consisted of a kitchen/communal eating area and workshop/bookstore space. Each day at Toc IV, the *FNB* kitchen provided meals (organic vegan food supplied by DTE) at midday and in the evening to ConFest participants and workers (including food sent to the Gate crew). Their aim was to encourage 'a sense of community' around the village by providing free chai and fresh fruit throughout the day. There were several workshops per day conducted on a range of themes (including: vegan cooking classes, animal liberation, women and violence, ecosabotage, the politics of drugs, legalisation of hemp, alternative medicine, Koori land rights, squatting, theatre, permaculture, punk, alternative media, transnational corporations and boycotting, and the abolition of work). Both events had an anarchist library stocked with a range of material from Brunswick's Barricade Books.<sup>28</sup> Most of the material was given away at Moama IV.

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jungle orgy'" (cf. Brumer 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Including extracts from Bakunin, Rudolf Rocker's 'Anarchism: its Aims and Purposes' - the first chapter of his 1938 libertarian classic *Anarchosyndicalism*, E.G Smith Press' *Animal Ingredients: A-Z*, W. Kemp's *Message Sticks in Cyberspace*, *The Squatters Handbook*, *Green*

Prior to Toc IV, DTE provided *FNB* with funding for cooking ware and utensils which they used at their village, and borrow to outfit their urban mobile kitchen. According to their information sheet:

From that moment [Toc IV] Food Not Bombs had gone from strength to strength. Armed with a mobile soup kitchen, a van and a fast growing collective of people, Food Not Bombs is out on the streets providing free vegan food for anyone in need.

Inspired by anarchist free food kitchens operating with the same name in the US,<sup>29</sup> *FNB* Melbourne began in January 1996, and by 1997 they were operating four kitchens a week (Fitzroy Street St Kilda, Swanston Walk outside Timezone, Smith St Collingwood and Church St Richmond outside 'McDeaths'). They collect otherwise discarded vegan food from markets, shops and wholesalers and re-distribute it through these kitchens and by drop-offs to community centres and schools.<sup>30</sup>

Anarchists like those at *FNB* are most critical of ConFest, questioning what they see as the transient frivolity implicit in the Market and workshop culture - suggesting 'ConsumerFest' as the more apt title. For Acacia, 'a lot of people now come to ConFest with the idea that it's kind of a theme park ... the Disney World of alternative lifestyles, and they just move from workshop to workshop and rock up at them and say what have you got to give us?' Indeed, for many ConFesters, who select from a chic smorgasbord of vegan fare, DiY techniques of spiritual enlightenment, neo-hippie paraphernalia and fashionable words of wisdom, the commitment to an 'alternative' lifestyle is as temporary as the event. This freewheeling egocentric consumer attitude was the subject of a workshop 'why your alternative lifestyle won't change anything' held at *FNB* at Moama IV. Acacia explains:

The label 'alternative' is overused, misused, and has come to mean very little ... [A] lot of people come up to ConFest and it's their one week of living a different life, and experiencing a different life, and then they go back to living a really normal life in Melbourne. And I guess we really have problems with that idea, and we also have a lot of problems with people who really don't

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*Anarchist* newspaper, *Angry People* magazine and a copy of *The Celestine Fallacy*.

<sup>29</sup> What is now a loose network of autonomous groups throughout America, Food Not Bombs emerged there in 1980/81 after a few people concerned about homelessness, hunger and militarism, decided to recover and redistribute abundant quantities of discarded food. In addition to feeding the poor in public parks, *FNB* have a reputation for feeding activists at peace camps and other political demonstrations (Lawrence-Butler and McHenry 1992).

<sup>30</sup> They have also supported several community events such as Critical Mass, Koornung Creek Festival, the Anarchist Black Cross Conference, Wellington Street Squat Eviction.



have any politics apart from, you know, they see wearing hippie clothes and occasionally going off to a festival and doing a bit of fire twirling is ... creating some kind of alternative to the mainstream paradigm. And it's just not true. It doesn't change anything. So ... they should maybe think about extending their politics just a little bit further to ... creating actual alternatives to mainstream things.

### *Forest (Moama IV & V)*

[T]he more activists get involved in DTE the more ... you're gonna get people actually doing something, rather than just believing having seven days walking around in the nude is fucken alternative. (Banyalla)

Activists from GECO (Goongerah Environment Centre) merged with other groups such as FOE, OREN (Otway Ranges Environment Network) and TWS (The Wilderness Society), to form *Forest* at the Moama events. *Forest* is the principal node for activists on site. The village has functioned as a fund raiser and recruitment centre for logging blockades mounted in East Gippsland and has promoted the defence of the Otway Forest. It has consisted of an organic/vegan kitchen and workshop spaces where information (including photo displays and films) about the current state of forest management, boycotts, blockades, and skills in regard to tree climbing and rigging are disseminated by experienced activists involved in a host of anti-logging campaigns and protests. Banyalla is a GECO stalwart. A one-time Greenpeace canvasser, he is frustrated with DTE's inertia - what with:

old hippies still running around the place, ya'know, the old pot bellied men, that ya'know like to get their gear off and walk around ... They've got good capabilities in running a ten thousand [participant] ConFest right, but that's as far as they want it to go - just fun loving, all that sort of shit, right. (Banyalla)

Belalie is generally critical of ConFest:

It's a really escapist culture ... I don't think it's sustainable. Like all of the food just gets trucked into the place. It's still very cash orientated ... It's a holiday camp rather than like a community village. But [he concedes] it's good, I mean it opens doors.

As Banyalla descrys, despite the political vacuum in DTE and for all the shortcomings of ConFest, it actually holds the potential to open the floodgates. Generally, he argues, since there are various social justice and environment problems in Victoria, 'you have

got great political clout' if you take 10,000 people from a New Year festival and 'challenge the status quo'. You can 'do some pretty heavy negotiations'.

#### *Great Walk (Toc IV)*

The Great Walk Network (GWN) acquired funding from DTE to co-ordinate a free food kitchen and to obtain equipment to continue and improve Great Walks in Australia. At *Great Walk* there were workshops on deep ecology, circus skills and story telling and the space was used to promote walks, especially a walk conducted in East Gippsland following Toc IV. The GWN is a 'loose conglomerate of forest activists and social change workers' who organise fully supported (often 10 day) walks through wilderness areas. The walks are described as 'a moving village' with walkers using a 'communal T-pee'. 'Often [they claim] people do not know each other before a walk but by the end there is a strong feeling of unity akin to the feelings which may be experienced by people living in a tribal village'. They provide 'a unique opportunity for people to experience the Australian environment in a way which is social, interactive and educational'. The GWN is 'non-profit', they 'celebrate and support ongoing environmental action' in Australian forests (from the GWN village proposal Feb 1996).

#### *The Grove (Birdlands, Moama IV)*

The village accommodated those connected to a ConFest inspired drug and alcohol free healing community north of Sydney called *The Grove*, which holds small gatherings (of 100-200 people) through the year, including Pagan quarterdays. One Grovey says of the gathering: 'it opened me up a lot more. You can just be yourself and people won't think anything of you, no matter what you do, what you wear or what you don't wear'. At ConFest, Groveys are free to reproduce their habituated permissiveness. Workshops included shamanism and Celtic chanting. Indeed Profth, who has 'a fair amount of knowledge of the old rites of England', says The Grove 'tends towards the pagan' and the shamanistic. Having travelled around America in the sixties when Ken Kesey gave him his Prankster name, Profth eventually ran Street Communes (about 30 communal kitchens, squats, networks on street level) which were set up all over England in 1969. This was before migrating to Australia in the late seventies where he met his partner, and Grove co-founder, Sassafras, at one of the Baringa ConFests.

### *Gypsy* (all events)

This space on the event-periphery accommodates ConFesters who wish to camp in or near their vehicles. Hundreds of buses, kombis, vans and cars ‘park up’ in this zone.

### *Healing* (all events)

*Healing* was combined with *Massage* at Toc III (where workshops included ‘flower essences and gem elixirs’, classic homoeopathy and ‘life without therapy’). At the Moama events, the first aid centre accommodated a complementary approach to healing. With knowledge in both western (a medical degree) and eastern medicine (Chinese acupressure), Dr Marc has been instrumental in supervising this merger. At Moama IV there were 4 doctors and a variety of other healers (including naturopaths and Reiki practitioners) all volunteering to provide a free 24 hour medical service (though the doctors were paid a small sum from the village budget). Commenting on his position at ConFest, Marc says

I’ve always been the sort of alternative person amongst the western healers. And I came to ConFest and I was the western healer amongst all the alternative people. Even though I was into alternative stuff I had the western background, and, ‘cause I was the only one with the western medical background, I was ‘the western doctor’ ... That’s not really the way I look at myself, but for me it was a really good balance ... So I’ve found myself a little bit of a niche here.

Marc’s confidence in the multimodal approach is such that ‘we try to do the alternatives first, and only in a desperate situation go to the western drugs and western medicine’. In this open field of medical modalities, one sees suturing performed, antibiotics dispensed, poultices applied and herbal remedies prepared all under one roof. As Marc declares ‘[w]e’re doing what any general practice would do and more I guess, cause I refer people for didjeridu massage and stuff’.

### *Kids* (all events)

A conventional ConFest space providing specifically for children. At Toc III it featured a steel framed geodesic dome draped with a multicoloured silk parachute. Co-ordinators organise games, and clowning, maskwork, story telling and ‘Oki-Do yoga for kids’ take place. Most events are host to costume parades or even a ‘rainbow serpent pageant’ which spill out into the festival.

### *Koori Culture* (Toc III)

Featured a ‘bora ring’ and was barely populated. Workshops here included ‘Koori astronomy’ and ‘intercultural sharing’. The latter workshop - involving the painting of two multi-totemic murals at *Arts* - was initiated by two women (one Koori and the other from PNG) who later in 1994 organised the Cairns Indigenous People’s Festival, modelled in part on ConFest.

### *Labyrinth* (Moama V)

It’s a return to the womb. And often people have a rebirth experience by that.  
(Orryelle)

The *Labyrinth* was an interactive ritual initiation cycle weaving ‘a multi-cultural and multi-subcultural tapestry of ancient mythologies and modern technology’ (from ticket). Located in a tightly wooded grove on an elevated region of the site, the installation was demarcated by a hessian wall, and trees within were webbed with ropes and string to form spirals around a centrally positioned geodesic dome. The production incorporated a conglomeration of groups: the Metamorphic Ritual Theatre Company (MRTC), Mutation Parlour, band Dwellers on the Threshold and Mozart Project, Mutoid Waste Co (see *Tek Know*), DJ Krusty and Clan Analogue.<sup>31</sup> According to its designer, Orryelle Defenestrade, the *Labyrinth* is

a total interactive journey that people can go on where they meet all sorts of strange characters in different locations throughout their travels through the maze, and interact with them and become a character for themselves, in the process.

As it was repeated over three nights, hundreds of initiates were able to experience the journey.

In designing this installation, the MRTC were inspired by both the stone labyrinths of Ancient Greece (like that created by Daedalus entrapping the half-man/half-bull Minotaur), and forest labyrinths created by the Druids. As such, the *Labyrinth* is said to be an ancient pagan tradition. The usually spiralling maze is said to represent a womb, and

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<sup>31</sup> *Clan Analogue* is a national collective of electronic artists who facilitated ‘PolyTechnic’ workshops involving teaching synthesiser skills. Rather than playing automated rhythms, their idea was to generate electronic music with ‘a human feel’. With one person playing a base ‘groove’ and other ConFesters encouraged to ‘tweak’ a number of synthesisers, all constantly monitored and mixed to maintain ‘respectful musicality’, they boasted that the overall effect may have been ‘the most “live” electronic music in Australia’ (Wallaby and proposal).

the 'initiate's journey in then out of the labyrinth was a symbolic death and rebirth experience for them' (web site). Although possessing similar mythological/magical premises to an initial *Labyrinth* performed at Moama III (Easter '95), the Moama V production, with its use of modern technology and greater collaborative input, was a more spectacular event. Drawing upon various sources (an interview with Orryelle, the Labyrinth web site,<sup>32</sup> the entrance ticket and my own experience) I reconstruct the concept and journey here.<sup>33</sup>

Initiates entered via the 'Labia Gateway' ('a long fully-enclosing red stretchy fabric tunnel'). Out into the Gateway Chamber they met Clotho (the maiden), 'The Spinner of the 3 Fates', who sat at her spinning-wheel spinning the threads of destiny. The maiden requested they spin the Wheel of Fortune to determine which of the four elemental pathways they were to travel. Bearing the 'etheric' or life-threads given them by the Spinner, the objective was to achieve the centre of the maze. Each elemental path, lined with strange characters and installations, spiralled into the centre, 'the dome globe egg web'.<sup>34</sup> At the crossroads of all the elemental paths, there was a 'Mutation Parlour' where initiates could 'be physically and psychically mutated as a part of their journey' (web site). Once inside the dome they were calmly greeted by Lachesis (the mother), 'The Weaver of the 3 Fates', who took their life-threads so as to weave them into 'the web of relationship'.

Initiates then faced the Minotaur (half-man, half-bull) representing 'the beast within' ('peoples' shadows or primal selves') and were symbolically killed by him. At this point, Death, Atropos (the crone), 'The Cutter of the 3 Fates', came and cut the thread ('the lifeline') and gently led them into 'the mirror chamber', the *axis mundi* of the dome. Inside a tall chamber, its interior walls encrusted with slabs and shards of mirror, the dead initiates ascended a spiral staircase 'surrounded by infinite reflections of themselves' (said to represent 'the journey to "Caer Arianhrod", the spiral castle of Celtic mythology where you go when you die': web site). Emerging on top of the dome, initiates then climbed

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<sup>32</sup> <<http://www.paradigm4.com.au/crossroads/lab.htm>>

<sup>33</sup> Prior to entry, many initiates were handed 'tickets' which included Orryelle's brief narrative translation of the coming journey. However, others possessed no or little prior knowledge of the intent of the *Labyrinth's* designer. For such people, the experience was somewhat confusing.

<sup>34</sup> Many characters encountered on the paths played acoustic instruments (drums, didgeridu, violin, piano-accordion) their music blending with the throbbing electronic soundscapes created in the backstage area behind the dome. Beginning as soft background noises (as initiates started entering the *Labyrinth*), the volume and intensity of the music increased throughout the night, later culminating in a chaotic amplified onslaught (web site).

down rope ladders to 'the Netherworld', a space in front of the dome described as 'a kind of cosmic waiting room between incarnations', where they were reunited with other initiates/travellers.

They waited there until the hero Theseus, who was chosen from the initiates, entered the dome with a golden thread and an 'electrosword' (which sparked and crackled as it was scraped along the dome's metal structure) to face the Minotaur. As Theseus appeared, the Three Fates converged to form 'an eight-limbed (six arms, two legged) triple-headed kama-kali spider'. When Theseus lopped off the Minotaur's head (a costume appendage above the actor's head), the battle was over and he was crowned the new Horned God by Ariadne (also The Spinner). At the moment of the Minotaur's demise, the generator was switched off:

causing all lights and sound to de-generate into blackness and silence. From this rose an acoustic chant chorused by all the people involved in the Labyrinth's construction and enactment, the sound circulating as they formed a human web around the dome. Seven different chakra tones ascended the musical scale as the Minotaur ascended the seven steps of the spiral staircase, climaxed by a red flare shot off into the heavens with his spirit. (web site)

Atropos then cut the threads surrounding the Netherworld. Hermes, 'messenger, guide and psychopomp of the Labyrinth' (played by Orryelle himself), sent the initiates down the spirit path, back through the spinning chamber and out the labia gateway, 'to be reborn into the rest of the festival'.

Pagan tradition was honoured for, on the following night Theseus became the new Minotaur, who was then killed by a newly chosen Theseus. Thus 'the old Horned King dies, the new Horned King rises'. But on the final night of the performance, Theseus, now 'Thesea', was played by a woman. Upon slaying the Minotaur she became the new 'Horned God/Goddess/Demon/Demoness of the PandemonAeon: Baphomet!' (Web) who paraded around the dome with bare breasts wearing a large phallus (carved from a cow bone). This was 'the Age of the Hermaphrodite', of The Twins, Horus and Maat. And Hermes himself, who became 'HermAphrodite', displayed a symbolic bellybrand, performed a Caduceus dance with snake-skins (stitched onto his arms) and owl wings (invoking 'Quetzal Coatlicue'), and finally proclaimed: "Fuck the Patriarchy; Fuck the Matriarchy; Let's just have An -archy!" As the web site conveys, this transpired around

midnight initiating ‘the transition into an all-night de-construction doof’<sup>35</sup> in the *Labyrinth*. And so April Fool’s Day 1997 was ushered in.

#### *Massage* (all events)

Described as a ‘sharing, caring, safe area’ (Barry in *DTE News* 82:4) this is a covered space with about 30 massage tables where people gather to receive and reciprocate massages. According to George, past director and teacher of holistic massage techniques, ConFest possesses ‘this fantastic opportunity for everyone to live out their internal needs’ and the need for *Massage* is suggested by:

the gross neglect in our society of any kind of touching and physical contact despite all the evidence before us, where it is patently clear that the less touching, the greater the psychological disturbances.

#### *Music* (Birdlands, Toc IV, Moama IV)

The village has reproduced the type of music productions appearing at the Walwa events. A stage was set up upon which there occurred concerted performances by billed acts, spontaneous combos, and unplanned ensembles of amateur musicians. It has also been a site of fringe theatre performances. In concordance with the music, pop and folk festival genres, and in contrast to the unifying propensity of the Fire Circle, this zone is characterised by the presence of an audience, who, while variously engaged, are demarcated from the authorised performers, acts, and ‘stars’.

#### *Nothing In Particular* (Moama IV & V)

A non theme-specific camping zone. A banner first appeared at Moama II, indicating a region for ConFesters who wished to camp without any obligations of being ‘for’ or ‘with’ anything.

#### *Pagan* (Toc III)

The village incorporated a curious, ad hoc, mixture of themes including anything bordering on the occult. Workshops included knife massage, circle dancing, Celtic mythology, ‘meditation for pagans’, tantra, ‘wild women - celebration of the Goddess’ and rebirthing. Loud screaming in the night associated with rebirthing relegated *Pagan* to

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Doof’ is colloquial for rave, a techno dance event traditionally held outside established club

the fringes. The village has not appeared since that event. However, as a great many participants sympathise with paganism - Earth based religiosity - in some form, it has pervasive on-site manifestations (see Chapter 7). This is despite some misconceptions as Cedar's story reveals:

I was at the gate one day and the police turned up and these freaked out Christians on acid had walked all the way to Walwa, the town, and told the police that the Pagans were sacrificing a baby, which is part of the stigma that the Pagans have. And it turned out that one of the babies had fallen down a toilet pit ... and the parents [were] carrying it by a hand and a foot down to the creek to wash [the shit] off. And somebody saw that and thought 'OH they're sacrificing children'. And it's the sort of story and rumour that would go around about them for a long time.

#### *Queer Presence* (Birdlands, Toc IV, Moama IV & V)

A centre for the open celebration of queer (homo/bi/trans) sexuality. The emphasis on being obvious and public is crucial and particularly apparent at Moama IV where the village had a prime location next to the market. Mimosa, a Gay Spiritualist who had been distributing condoms and Coca-Cola flavoured dental dams, described *Queer Presence* as: 'sex workers, poofs, drug users, all of the people that most of society doesn't like to look at, being very obvious'. Promotions for the village emphasise an exposure or 'release' of almost millenarian proportions:

Unique persons, double spirited ones. All you who push at the boundaries of sexuality and gender ... For too long our message and teachings have been left unheard ... But do not despair kind folk, fear not good people, for the spirit is moving and evolving, we are coming together and our stories will be heard from the highest places to the quietest corners. Bigotry, corrupt morals, fascism and the climate of domination and power will be dispersed. We will be *thrust* into freedom. So rejoice, celebrate and prepare. Talk to each other in your places of meeting. Keep the spirit moving and live, share your dreams and desires. The time will soon be at hand. The time of our *release*. ('Queers' leaflet)

At Moama IV the village attracted people from the Melbourne Prostitutes Collective and Radical Fairies, they highlighted safe sex issues, and workshops were held on transgenderism (Norri May Welby), queer spirituality, bisexuality, sex-industry myths, IV drug use and crisis intervention.

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venues - often warehouses or the bush.



### *Sculpture (Birdlands/ Moama IV)*

A camp set up by the multimedia sculptural group Futurelic who specialise in constructing large scale artworks from scrap material. They used low voltage equipment with welders and oxy torches to create site specific sculptures. Dressed in army fatigues, Africa Core desert hat and jungle boots, Cooba, like many other artists here, is enthused by the potential of that which can be scavenged from places like the 'rust belt', a wasteland of abandoned factories in Melbourne's west. Commenting on a fellow artist's piece - a metallic skeleton which lay in a shallow grave (which he refers to as Robo Erectus) - Cooba explains: 'basically we like to dig up the past via junk and find out what we can from it and put a different twist on it, turn it into things monstrous or turn it into things delightful'.

Most objects and installations are sculpted out of 'locally found metals, scrap, factory offcuts, wire, gaffa, paints, plastics, pvc pipe, wood, natural stuff' which are then suspended in trees and placed around the site as landmarks (Nipa). Futurelic encouraged ConFesters to participate in creating sculptures, such as in 'the house of wax' body plaster casting, and, at Moama IV, they had an exhibition area. On the night before New Year's Eve, they lit up their site with:

little kero candles, little silver candles, kero lights, twelve volt spots and smoke effects ... we call it the twelve volt apocalypse ... And we did some spoken word stuff and performance and Tony had his percussion set made from bits of drums and ... metal equipment we found ... and we were all in outfits dragging chains around and it was really dark and smoke was pouring out over everything ... [And] it came across as a really strange vibe cause we've got so many things that are like graves and dark creatures and the house of wax ... That night we sort of gave this impression as being some sort of weird ghoulish low voltage cross between technology and barbarianism with all the noise and the screaming ... And for a whole four or five hours we just had something going on that's hard to describe. (Nipa)

### *Self Development and Therapy (Toc III)*

Popular central workshop space. A regular ConFest fixture himself, the Right Reverend Dr J. J. Fu (a Chinese Catholic priest) took workshops on past life regression therapy, 'Agape love and healing meditation', and taught self hypnosis designed to help people quit smoking, aid study and overcome asthma. 'Women's mysteries and spiritual midwifery' also transpired here.

### *Sexuality* (Toc III)

Located at a relatively remote *cul de sac*, a variety of ideas were exchanged and propagated about sexuality. Tantra and tantrik massage were popular. There were discussions on bisexuality, homosexuality and gender politics. Other workshops included 'the relevance of bondage and discipline to sacred sexuality', sensual massage, erotic techniques, 'radical intimacy and non-monogamy' and 'flirting'. According to its facilitator, Cedar, 'flirting' (which attracted up to 300 people at a time) was not a 'meat market' but was designed to explore what he called 'the politics of flirting'. Cedar has participated in orgies at past ConFests, but says 'they're not really my thing ... because I like to get to know people first'.

### *Spiral* (Birdlands, Toc IV, Moama IV &V)

Referred to as 'a sacred communal place', *Spiral* first appeared at Moama III. It is a drug and alcohol free community performance space precipitating the development of a larger drug and alcohol free zone at ConFest. *Spiral* is a collective of people, many in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions and broken relationships, who hold drumming and dance nights in Melbourne. Commenting on the philosophy of the group's name, Prion explains:

'spiral' relates to just about everything on earth. It's in everything. It's in our DNA, sea shells, just about everything that grows. It's also an old word used for dance - growing in spirals instead of going round in circles. There's a lot of symbology around the world. It's an ancient recognised symbol. A lot of what we're doing here is very community, tribal. We operate in circles. Whilst most workshops use the 'Roman system' where a speaker sits on a chair with an audience, as in schools [and] politics, with us ... guidance is through eldership and it's earned, and the idea is to get out of the way as quick as possible and allow things to happen. And our stuff is experiential - learning through experience rather than being lectured to and creating a passive audience. (Prion)

According to Prion, *Spiral* is about recreating 'sacred space in our community as a whole'. *Spiral* usually features a central medicine wheel, a broad ring of sticks and rocks with a central pole functioning as a 'dance, drumming celebration space'. According to Daemian - who first organised such a ritual space at Bredbo - the medicine wheel is a 'ritual healing circle ... based in the common lore of virtually every tribal culture and every timeless spiritual culture' (Daemian 1987:5). At Birdlands, this feature,

purposefully fashioned to resemble American Indian and Celtic practices of contriving 'sacred space', was 'initiated into the four directions [in] an opening ceremony'. These rites consecrated the space, and the wheel, which 'builds with energy as the days go on', was furnished with respect, such that most people avoided entering it outside ritual moments. Such a 'sacred space' is designed to effect healing via 'primal drumming'. As Prion says, 'the symbol for the spiral is the snake - and that's working with the kundalini and the primal drumming is working down in the base to get people connected to the earth, in touch with themselves'.

At Moama V the medicine wheel was the location for Wankan Tanka, a Native American Indian ritual play performed by the Rainbow Ritual Theatre, in co-operation with Spiral Connections. Wankan Tanka sketched a warrior's quest for 'self realisation and his journey back home to the body of light'. On his quest, Wankan Tanka met with 'the shaman' who granted him a vision into a state of consciousness which took him to 'the beginning of time and the birthing of creation'. He encountered helpful totem figures (Father Spirit, Mother Earth and the 4 winds) who revealed to him that 'to sustain this consciousness' he must undergo initiation by battling and finally liberating 'the negative elements within himself': being the ego (the shadow), the body (the bison), the emotions (the serpent) and mind (the raven) (quotes are from a poster).

### *Spirituality* (Toc III, Birdlands and Moama IV & V)

A quiet meditative area usually set up on the periphery in the drug and alcohol free zone. There is normally a large marquee, the interior of which is akin to a shrine, with portraits and photographs of the spiritual leaders of different world religions who look out over the large open space within. Sri Param Eswaran, who has co-ordinated *Spirituality* for years, claims the village's purpose is 'to let people understand the environment within themselves - the stars, meditation, chakras within the body ... [but] it goes deeper than that ... Each day here is ruled by a particular planet'. A spiritualist with diverse influences (Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism), Param co-ordinated workshops in WA at the inception of the DTE movement. At Moama IV, he still held purification rites (fire meditation), took tantra, cooking classes (with dahl and halva) and did counselling work. Massage (Reiki) and chanting techniques (eastern and western) were also taught there.

At Moama IV, 800 people gathered in this area on one evening to feast and participate in a ceremony which eventually saw Ananda Marga 'marry' several couples. Participants

arrived holding candles earlier distributed and made a circle around a large earth mandala image which had taken many ConFesters several days to complete.

#### *TAZ-Cyber* (Birdlands)

Named after Hakim Bey's book (1991a), a 'cyber tent' was pitched housing around eight terminals connected to the Internet via a main server. The idea was to provide support and encourage casual use and exploration with one computer set up as an electronic notice board allowing ConFesters and Internet users around the world to obtain information about ConFest. Those supporting the presence of this village are keen to point out the networking and communication transfer potentials precipitated by the distribution of cheap 2nd hand hardware and the free circulation of necessary user skills (like html editing). According to the village proposal:

[t]he Internet is a fundamental paradigm shift in human communication. It marks the transition from the top-down information flow of traditional mass-media to new methods of information flow and exchange which are not mediated by the traditional authorities ... One individual with minimal technology can communicate with millions of people across the globe, and access information with a freedom beyond anything previously possible ... The Internet provides an unparalleled opportunity for individuals and groups who wish to pursue alternatives to our current social and economic structures.

The facilitator Epacris, who has a background in systems administration, and who made an unsuccessful attempt to get a cyber-cafe off the ground in Melbourne, declared 'ConFest validated my choice to drop out'. He regarded *TAZ* as 'a nexus point for ideas to converge, modelled on the Spirit of ConFest ... [It is] a place to link up with others, to form networks'.

#### *Tek Know* (Birdlands, Toc IV, Moama IV)

This event appeared in somewhat clandestine circumstances at Moama III (Easter '95) - at the site's epicentre) and *Tek Know* (or *Techno*) was present at each of the following three events (called *Rainbow Dreaming* at Toc IV) before undergoing later mutations. At Moama IV, *Tek Know* attracted around 2,000 people over New Year's Eve. The music started at nine pm (stopping about nine am the next year) and could be heard from a great distance (as far as the other end of the site, a strong source of indignation and anger). After dark, *habitués* were guided in by the throb, typically around 140 bpm, as well as the fluoro stickers and fabrics lining the ground and trees on the approach. The village had a

main ‘doof’ and two ‘chill’ (or rest) spaces, one with a separate sound system and DJs (but with more, ambient, ‘astral’ ‘fluffy trance’ music), and the other with no immediate music. There were about 10 DJs all together.

Speaking on the techno crew, Krusty - *Tek Know*'s principal architect and ‘Dr of shamanic dance’ (Richard) - remarks ‘we’re just basically artists. And this is our late twentieth expression of art’. In fact, the site featured numerous installations, many good examples of industrial sculpture. Commenting on the most outlandish piece (which members of Futurelic helped construct), Dama remarked:

I think there’s quite a lot of insect consciousness starting to happen. So we built a giant praying mantice on the dance floor with a Volkswagen beetle for the body, trussing legs, and a long, long neck with a big head on the end with feelers and flashing eyes and such like. And ... the lighting on the legs was on a chaser, so that at certain angles it actually looked as if the legs were moving when the lights flashed.

A scaffold tower was positioned nearby, a platform for fire performances around the base of which there were attracted many fire stick and mace twirlers and fluoro club jugglers over New Year’s Eve.

Krusty regards ConFest as ‘a unique entity’ and perceives the *Tek Know* crew to be a ‘fractal’ of that entity. In Krusty’s view, the dance ground is ‘a sacred space, a place to connect with our power’. He is keen to explain the import of this event and the seriousness with which participants regard the global ‘fluoro-rainbow tribe’ Trance Dance.<sup>36</sup> ‘I think they need us’ he reflects. ‘Without any fresh energy, something dies ... it doesn’t evolve, it doesn’t move foreword, it just stagnates’. And when he offers, in reference to *Tek Know*, ‘I think people especially when they come to a festival, do like to have a focus point of celebration’, he is intimating that this event has become a principal node in the ConFest counterscape.

### *Tipi* (Toc III)

This riverbank area provided a site for the erection of several *tipis*, though many others could be found spread over the site. Here one could find serious imitations and interpretations of Native American Indian culture. While there has since been no *Tipi* village as such, these structures (old, new, or mock *tipis* locally fashioned from logs, bark,

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<sup>36</sup> Aspects of *Tek Know* are elaborated upon later. Trance Dance is discussed in Chapter’s 7 and 8. The threat that this music and culture is perceived to hold for ConFest is also discussed in Chapter 8.

scrub and corrugated iron) have taken on a pervasive presence. Many temporary dwellings or bush shelters constructed from local materials of varying shapes and sizes are evident. As Wirilda remarked, 'houses don't have huge mortgages when they're made out of sticks'.

#### *Warrior (Toc IV)*

By the river beach, an imposing tree house was constructed by a ConFester who had encountered the event two years before while competing in the Murray River Marathon.<sup>37</sup> Following that, Cypress discovered a niche at ConFest. Having completed 'inner work' and martial arts training, he is an archetypal warrior of the vigilant and peaceful kind, and therefore his name for this area was fitting. Significantly the 'warrior' theme was a central component of a firewalk which took place in a small clearing nearby.

#### *Where the Wild Things Are (Birdlands, Moama IV)*

Paula, the initiator of this village (being the title of Maurice Sendak's classic children's book), explains:

I have a big thing about staying wild ... If you stay wild you stay in connection with the raw emotions and I think ... the raw emotions are your measure. Staying wild is one of the most important things in life.

At Birdlands, this village became the centre for various community based organisations from around the Dandenong region to congregate, holding a feast on the final night. It was a food kitchen centre at Moama IV.

#### *Wolfgang's Palace (Birdlands)*

Wolfgang's Palace are an interactive theatre troupe, based at an old cheese factory converted into their 'palace' near Colac, where the key points of the pagan calendar are observed with celebrations and dramatisations of original interpretations of Ancient Greek mythological themes. At ConFest, they set up a performance space where they performed a play on one night. They also hosted theatre sports and the Freak Olympics, which involved four teams (membership being determined by each participants' Zodiacal element) competing in a series of games.

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<sup>37</sup> An annual kayak and canoe race.

### *Women's* (Moama II & III)

Also called 'Wimmin's', this was a 'men-free zone' where 'women's drumming', 'meditation and the temple of Delphi' workshops took place. On defending the presence of *Women's* as a separate, women only, area at Moama III, Jenny argues that it is not 'anti-men', but:

a celebration of being a woman. It is anti-patriarchy, but not symbolic of the desire, for women to hold power. All we seek to rule, control, have power over, is ourselves. And so we shall! ... In going back to Australia's sacred bushland, Aboriginal culture is very relevant to ConFest. Think - there has always been men's business and women's business in Aboriginal culture, in fact in most indigenous traditions around the planet. It makes sense that men and women are able to have separate spaces at ConFest. (Jenny J. *DTE* 83 March 1995:16)

As such, a *Men's* village appeared on the map at Moama II. Little appeared to occur there, although a workshop on 'freemasonry' was listed on the blackboard.

### *Yoga* (Birdlands, Moama IV)

Distinguished by the Rainbow Tipi and ochre pit, the village was located in the drug and alcohol free zone at Moama IV. According to its co-ordinator, Marko, *Yoga* is a 'sanctuary'. Marko's first encounter with ConFest at Walwa III was a catalyst: 'I felt "fantastic there's a tribe here", there's a group I can identify with, people who are really open to change'. Inspired, he later elected to co-ordinate *Yoga* so as to create a context for exercise classes where a range of styles, including representations from Iyenga, Hatha and Oki schools, and sharing circles eventually appeared. At Birdlands, a yoga cafe appeared: 'a nice clean white atmosphere. It wasn't a place to go and smoke and bong out. It was very open, very supportive, light, clean'.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that ConFest is an immediate melting pot of alternatives, a vast autonomous cultural heterotopia. It accommodates a multiplicity of spaces (village centres) inhabited by a heterogeneity of neo-tribes, which, due to conflicting and often inimical interpretations of the meaning and purpose of the event, hold inconsistent expectations about what is appropriate within its spatio-temporal parameters. At such an event, that

which defines and signifies 'alternative' is disputed and is undergoing constant revision. This state of affairs is the effect of two interrelated factors: a) the Society's enduring neutrality, coupled with its nascent open and flat organisational structure, renders it responsive to diversity, and; b) ConFest's organicism makes possible the coexistence of competing interpretations and inconsistent behaviours within the event.

Despite their differences, participants are allied in their common desire to *return* to ConFest, collaborating to continue to 'make it happen'. ConFesters seek to return to what has become a desirable 'location' (which is likely to be held at different places). This 'location' harbours familiar faces, landmarks and readily identifiable spatial arrangements. Yet, more than this, participants hold ConFest (which is a time as much as it is a space) desirable because it is *predictably unpredictable*. And it is the *organic* design, favouring a loose open-ended framework, which guarantees innovation. As such, the entire event is protean, inconstant, both its composition and its margins forever shifting.