

# What the AAO has to offer the World

*AAO is a new German movement based on free sexuality and common property, aiming at a global socialist world society and using among other things a group growth technique called Selbstdarstellung - a kind of positive personal assertion.*

The AAO is not perfect, but what it can offer the world is a single and remarkable new practice that can truly overturn our civilization. Never since the beginning of urban civilization have we had such a dramatic opportunity to transform all of our social institutions.

AAO's special creation is the Selbstdarstellung (SD) or "the presentation of self", which sets the stage for each person to fully expose his "existential truth" of that moment.

The SD has a strange simplicity: All members of the group sit in a circle, and each person can take a turn to "spontaneously express himself" in the centre. The only important rule for this "free expression" is that the person **not** talk in a *normal* way, but must *exaggerate* all aspects of his communication: words, gestures, movements and postures. "Don't be so boring", "Stop the blah-blah", or "Now you can really show everything and do it strongly", are some of the stimulations to provoke and guide the SD'ers toward a "presentation" that will finally uncover *what he has hidden from himself, and what he has hidden from others.*

The SD is the creative and dynamic element which can transform both the person and the group at every instant and with each encounter. The method is the Genie in the bottle which encourages each person to strive for the genius within himself. There is no end point, no final predictability, neither for the SD "stars", nor for the SD group. Thus we have a true embodiment of Trotsky's "perennial revolution", because we have opened the doors for a "continuous evolution" of the person and of the group.

The *institutional* significance of the SD is that no institution can rest rigid and unchanging if its participant members reveal their hidden truths in the SD circle. For this reason the SD and its future modifications and improvements rests as the principal dynamic which the AAO can offer the world. Many people have been put off by the AAO because they cannot and perhaps never will be able nor *want* to engage in *all* of the AAO daily life practices: property in common, work in common, free sexuality within the group (or actually, within the subgroups), care of children in common, a common style of hair cut short and the wearing of simple workers' clothes, and so on. But the resistance of the public to AA's positive and revolutionary ideals has been aggravated by the AA tendency to present themselves as a model to be obediently followed rather than as a stimulator, guide and companion for all people and groups who want to realise their revolution right now by means of a new dynamic social process.

There is no reason to repeat at this point the fundamental criticisms of the nuclear family, and how the injustices, sufferings and wars which mar our civilization find their origin in the nuclear family structure. These ideas are well elaborated by the AA literature, by the writings of Wilhelm Reich and by political philosophers of the past two centuries such as Engels in the 19th century, Paul Goodman in our era and the whole of the women's movement.

But until this point only the AAO has been able to *create* a true and *workable* alternative to the nuclear family. This is a landmark in social evolution, and the AA communities merit intensive and serious study by all people interested in a social evolution that can transform our modern and self-destroying world.

### **Who comes to AAO**

The people that I have talked with during my visit of several days at Friedrichshof have all come to the AAO because the normal social world had offered them almost nothing. Some were in an emotional crisis, usually because of the breakup of a couple of relationships, but more often the person had been leading a rather solitary existence, finding friendships too superficial and unsatisfying, or not having time or opportunity to develop new friendships. "I work all day and then I come home to sit alone in the evening. That is no life."

Some AA members come from already existing communities which are failing to work out despite their initial hopes and ideals. The principal problem is emotional tension which is not resolved, sometimes because of sexuality, or else because of personalities conflicts or problems around money. For these groups, where the participants are already committed to living in a collective, more than 60 per cent decide to stay with AA.

The social class and social situation of people who come to AA vary greatly. Most are in their late 20's, several even younger, a few a bit older. One girl was a psychiatric nurse, another dropped out of University, another was doing temporary work. Among the men, two were doing unskilled manual work, one was an auto mechanic, one has a University diploma in philosophy, and another was unemployed. One man of 37 had been an executive in a firm that sells furniture, divorced for three years, a father of two children, when he came to AA. Now he works on the construction team, he is putting up the walls of a new building, and he says - "before, I just didn't know anything. I've learned about myself here, and I've also learned to work with what I really like".

The fact that people come from many different quarters of the social world is a very positive feature of the AA groups. The restriction in terms of age - that is, that most are in their late 20's - probably stems from the need to be old enough to make a radical commitment to the AA world and young enough to be able to adapt to this new life.

## The emotional Climate at Friedrichsohof

Most of the people here have been in AA for a year or less. I imagine that many members with longer AA experience are now living in one of the satellite communes which have just gotten off the ground in most European countries. These new AA members seem to me to be in an important phase of personal evolution. When I asked a number of them how they feel, they often said - "Not very good. I'm beginning to see who I am. I have a lot of hate and aggression to get out." Their attitude reminds me of people



who are in a difficult phase of psychoanalysis or intensive psychotherapy, the moment when you begin to see the shit that's inside. My impression is that they are people of a more introverted than extraverted type, who are meeting up directly with their blockages. The work in common, sexuality in common, living a daily existence together, creates the encounter, and the daily SD provides the "opening" where all the tensions which accumulate can find their free expression.

There is a lot of admiration for the "higher-up's", the AA members who have lived in the community and worked on themselves with Action Analysis for five, six or seven years, and who are regarded as having a higher consciousness, according to my own evaluation of what that means, but there is no doubt that the higher-ups are *livelier*, more expressive, gayer and probably of stronger will than the new members.

It was also interesting to see that the *women* seemed to have more open and expressive personalities than the men. Other people confirmed this observation. AA's explanation is that women are closer to their feelings, and profit more quickly from the SD work, which is based on emotional expression. Men are too deeply caught in their authority roles, which tighten up their bodies as well as their minds, so the evolutionary road is longer and more difficult for a man than for a woman. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons for the difference, a community where women find their proper voice and a role as strong as or stronger than that of the men will open up new possibilities of social living that we have not seen yet in our male-dominated civilization.

### **The AAO with its feet on the ground**

I was especially struck by the industriousness of the Friedrichshof commune, and also, of the small commune in Vienna where I spent my first night. Here at Friedrichshof one can hear the concrete mixer and other machines working all of the day. Everybody wakes up at 8 in the morning, a good breakfast is provided, and then the visitors help the work projects through most of the day until about 5.

### **Sexuality in common**

A visitor can say very little about AA's sexuality in common because it occurs in the rooms of the AA members. What we do know is that people do not make love with the same person on consecutive nights. I asked several members if that was the rule, and they answered - "No, it just happens like that". "Why?" "To stay together with the same person would be too limited. The communication with others doesn't stay open".

I asked if there were occasions when two people wanted to just stay together and therefore had to leave the community. The answer was No, that has never happened.

My opinion is that this form of a "free and changing sexuality" is so radically different from centuries of society's traditions that it would be important to avoid emotional prejudgement as to whether this could be valid for large groups of people. We would need more information as to what goes on, and what happens when other groups attempt the same pattern. For example, what is the nature and intensity of intimacy in these relationships? Is there much tenderness? A growth of trust between two people? Do people talk of love?

About 120 AA members live at the Friedrichshof centre right now (June 1977) and they are divided into groups of about 30 members each according to level of consciousness. The free sexuality only occurs within each group and not between groups. And there is no sexual intercourse with visitors and non-AA members. These restrictions are due to the very real danger of contagious venereal diseases. It is most unfortunate that these maladies of our civilized world must so dramatically hinder the AA experiment with its vision of a free and open sexuality between all people. It is not free

sexual love alone that can change and save the world, but in the minds of many people, it must enter into our relationships if we are seeking for more positive and open communication.

I have been surprised at Friedrichshof to find less open physical tenderness than I would have expected. There are, moments of embrace and sometimes sexual touching, but I have never seen it sustained in the public areas. I don't think this limited touching comes from a type of social prudence, but rather from a communal style of body contact where long and lingering touch contact is not accepted. When I was talking with an AA member and suggested holding arms about the shoulders, the person said - "That's slimy". The gesture was not slimy for me, but only for the other person. This raises the important question of whether people can openly show their individual differences and preferences in a communal setting, such as in AA, or are the lines of acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour too rigidly drawn for this type of flexibility?

### **AA creates the open hierarchy**

Left-wing groups have most frequently criticised AAO for its hierarchical organization. But from my own understanding of this hierarchical organization, it stands as one of the chief "freedom-enhancing" contributions of the AAO.

The AAO hierarchy is not rigid, fixed and closed, but open, flexible and dynamic. I will try to show how the AAO open hierarchy is not authoritarian, but rather, adheres to the need for a role differentiation within the group, and also permits changes to be initiated by the periphery - that is, by all participating members, rather than relegating all decisions to the central members holding responsibility.

One girl worked in the kitchen. But she preferred, after a time, to work with the children. She asked to be changed, and this was accepted. An *extremely* important question, in terms of group functioning, is *who* made the decision to accept her? Was it the *chief* of the children's group workers?

No. It was the total membership of the children's group team. I think the children too had a say in the matter.

There are three groups at AA, each group divided according to level of consciousness. Members within a group share quarters for sleeping, share their sexuality, and do SD's each night together. Those in the higher group will tend to have more responsibilities in the community. Two nights ago a 25-year-old girl stood up in the community SD and said she wanted to move to the higher "second-group" from the lower "third-group". I heard from someone that she had recently become head of the installations work team. Some other AA members made some brief comments, one person saying that there was really no bed space available in the second-group, and that the situation would be worse when some second-group members returned from an AA commune in Germany. Then nothing further was said. I learned from a second-group member that the girl presented herself for an SD with the second-group the following evening. Several higher-up women within the group were against her entering. They also did SD's and the group concluded by voting to accept her.



This example shows some of the fundamentals of the AA process. The initiative for change in role or position is taken by the person himself. The group directly affected by the change make the decision. The most important step, which is the new and creative method offered by AA, is that if there is a conflict, *the SD is used*: to open the hidden aggressions, to discharge the negativity, to communicate with each person's total energies. The SD becomes the basis for resolution of conflicts, and at the same time uses those conflicts as sources of creative expression and increased self-awareness for the individuals and for group. I believe that the implications of this new social process are so vast and far-reaching that we should look forward, during coming generations, to its expansion in all group ventures, and especially, as in AA, to its use in the project of collective living.

### **The AA groups choose their own leader**

In a self-regulating group, all of the participant members can influence the group process by means of suggestions, discussion, and feedback after the action is carried out. The AAO procedure is to use a leader for each group. They claim that resentment against this procedure comes from people projecting their "bad father" on to the group leader. In concrete situations, this will often be the case, because the authoritarian mode of our society - in school, work and the family - produces the "bad father" model.

The alternatives to a single group leader are (1) rotating leadership, (2)

collective leadership among several participants, (3) collective leadership among all group participants, or what might otherwise be termed "a leaderless group". Although my theoretical bias is to prefer leaderless groups, I have found such group situations often too amorphous and inefficient, not only in relation to reaching the group goal, but also in terms of the poignancy and clarity of awareness during the group discussion.

In the community where I live in Nice, we began to practice SD's each evening, aside from the evenings in which we hold our bioenergy sessions. At first we used the method of collective leadership. Several members then suggested that we use a leader. I was against this, but the majority of the group voted for it. We began to use a method of rotating leadership, and I must admit that the result was an improvement in our SD's. Therefore experience is tempering my theoretical inclination toward leaderless groups. In addition, it was surprising how effective most of the group members were when they took the leader role, despite relatively little experience with the method.

### **AAO offers the means for personal evolution on a daily basis**

Perhaps AAO takes as its fundamental goal an evolution on a world-wide basis which can thoroughly transform the world. But AAO can claim with certainty that they are changing people **now**, that each person's potential for a positive and creative development is realised in the present moment within the AA structure. What is the basis for this claim?

Several AAO members that I spoke with had participated in bioenergy, encounter, gestalt and other "new therapy" groups before joining AAO. Their unanimous point of view was that these therapy groups had some value, but to return to the same home life and work situation resulted in the effects wearing off within two or three days. To then return to the therapy group one month later for another weekend of working on oneself, in a framework which is totally separated from daily reality, is almost like starting again from point zero. Although my own professional work is in leading such monthly groups of bioenergy, and I would hope, as does every group leader, that my group members profit more from the work than did the AAO members that I talked with, I must admit that the criticism is well-founded. In fact, I am currently re-evaluating my own directions in working as a group leader. Because of several different experiences, including living and doing bioenergy in a small commune, and now visiting the AAO, I am more convinced than ever that a therapy process for an isolated individual who is not also engaged in bringing that therapeutic process into actual functioning in a group living, or at least a group work situation, is too close to pouring water into a bucket with holes.

What is the conclusion? That people must live and work in situation where their relationships can be positively transformed by a therapeutic or evolutionary-educational process. And what is the ideal set-up for this goal? Collectively living in a commune.

In addition, the social structure is sick and deteriorating - pollution, war

(or just the H-bomb menace), overpopulation and dangers of famine, and the destruction of nature. This is all too evident. And we cannot realistically expect any dramatic shift of position by national governments in our present social structure which can alter this process. Therefore the movement toward collective living is part of a new (and yet very old social consciousness which hopes to transform the social structure by means of direct and indirect influences of communal existence. I share this hope and belief with the AAO.

If we return to the point of asking - "How can we satisfy people's need for personal evolution?" - the answer remains the same: through collective action.

### **AAO and the world commune movement**

Many communes are begun each year, but their lifespan is usually limited to two or three years before "falling apart" or "dissolving". The usual reasons are lack of emotional solidarity, financial failing, tension because of sexual rivalry, lack of a project in common which can unite members in a positive and creative effort, or problems related to the care of children. What these communes do not know is that AAO can help them without their joining the AAO organization.

The primary help for most communes, as I see it, is to learn to do SD's. This article can say little about the SD technique, because its emotional atmosphere and energy can only be learned on a direct experience basis. And even its uses are too varied and subtle to be dealt with in this article. But I have tried to show, in general terms, that the SD can serve as the basic practice to advance a group's evolution on all matters: personal development, emotional sharing, creative thinking, role differentiation, action proposals, feedback from action, conflict resolution, and so on. Of perhaps greater importance, the SD serves as the basis for the "Fete" or group celebration. In the SD people become musically creative, they sing, they dance, the group members very often play spontaneous music to a person's SD, and the SD ends in a grand celebration for everyone. If joy does not become the most powerful and positive link in a commune's life, then the commune has lost its direction, even if it continues to survive.

The AAO can provide trained leaders to help communes develop their SD's. A group in Metz, France, has already taken advantage of this help offered, and many others may soon follow suit. But even better, the commune members can come to Friedrichshof to learn directly the AAO practices and retain for themselves what they like.

Although the AAO suggests that other communes enter their organization and follow their practice of common work, money, property, sexuality, care of infants and so on, it is possible for a commune to ask for help, especially in terms of information and guidance, in any one of these areas. For example, if a commune produces cheese or other essential produce and would like to make an exchange for AAO clothing or other products of the AAO economy, an economic liaison between the two groups could be negotiated on this basis.



My point is not to advertise AAO, but to show that certain ideals for free communes, and cooperative association among free communes may be more feasible today than ever before. The growing size of the AAO movement is one factor. But more important, to my mind, is the creative growth and group cohesion which come about from the practice of Selbstdarstellung and Action Analysis.

We do not know where the future pathway of AAO and commune movement can take us, but at least, in the very present, those people following its course are finding more joy and consciousness in their everyday lives than they have ever known before.

The AAO publish a great deal of literature in English, which is obtainable from the addresses below.

AAO Centre, Friedrichshof, Postfach 3, A-7100 Neusiedl/see, Austria.

AAO Paris, 5-7 Rue du 14 juillet, F-94700 Maison-Alfort, France.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**George Weinberg** *Know Yourself, Help Yourself.*

'How do you change an inner state?' is the fundamental question asked by George Weinberg. His book *Know Yourself, Help Yourself* provides a respectable, if occasionally simplistic, answer.

His discussion of the connection between feelings and action informs us of the possibility of avoiding trauma by learning to identify feelings which have in the past heralded self-damaging situations. A directional approach then evolves where the therapist helps his client to react differently to feelings which have previously resulted in trauma. This very straightforward method is helpful when dealing with people whose professional orientation is technical or practical and who are perhaps unaccustomed to the indulgence of examining feelings in depth.

This approach may be compatible with the more client-centred view that an individual changes by first becoming more completely what he is and then developing in response to what is happening around him. Certainly Weinberg demonstrates that change is possible and he reinforces the belief that people can in fact change and are responsible for what happens to them. If people are helped to change even a small area of their lives through using this method they are assuring themselves of their potential for further change. A book which leaves one thinking this way seems worth our attention.

**Mary Charleton**