

FEMO: UTOPIA OF THE STRONG AND THE GENTLE

First Day:

The camp is there on the other side of the car ferry, a separate rented area on a rural rather conservative island. Women sort us out and move our gear to the camp. Soon it is pouring rain. I grab some process food and try to find a two foot slot in an overcrowded tent. They say that we shouldn't drink the water and that we should piss in the bushes at night because the toilets fill up.

We meet in the big tent only it isn't bigger, just tight and overcrowded. It is the first night and women are searching for their personal space. The meeting establishes minimal order, discoteque party-time as the nightly ritual, and lesbian unity and majority. Something is happening and nobody knows exactly what it is. I run into all the complainers but I will get away from them. Tomorrow will be better. I dream that someone is giving me another blanket.

Yes, it is now weeks later and I remember being discontented. The sense of pressure I felt is rapidly falling away and I read through my journal thinking I'll find something . . . that I'll find the ANSWER. But the journal only contains descriptions. There is no record of the energy. And it is the energy that I must get to. It was the energy you see that was so different, so unlike the organized outside world.

Second Day:

The routines are planned. Each tent has about 25 women and one light bulb. Each tent takes care of cleaning the toilets and doing the meals for that day for the entire camp. There are no instructions, no American manual of operations. So each group does it for the first time each time. Just find out how to do it. Ask the last person where she put the toilet brush. It works. We all survive. See, you don't need an American manual of operations.

Meetings are scheduled. Tent meetings at 10 o'clock. Get to know the 25 people that you have been sleeping with. Have in depth discussions each day on a committed basis. We introduce ourselves only by first name and talk about what we do for the movement. Outside jobs and professions are mentioned.

Now there are to be topic meetings at 1:00 and 3:00. Discussion goes on as to whether these groups should last 12 or 5 days. We are an optimistic and enthusiastic crowd. We are frustrated because we can't attend all groups. Topics are either personal relationships and sexuality or socialist politics.

Third and future days:

The meetings start to disintegrate. Our tent meeting is late and we talk about our private sex lives. Interesting. A few tents will continue these meetings. Our tent is a disaster for continuum. Are we too many private individuals?

And also the topic meetings disperse as they begin. We are immediately transitory. Nothing starts on time. There is no time. The same women are never there two days in a row. Never do you continue where you left off. By the fourth day, the list posted on the bulletin board has blown away and the newly arrived women say that they can't find out what is going on. **THEY CAN'T???????**

There are 40 women at the Feminist-Marxist meeting. "Why did you come to this meeting?" We all answer and that takes 2 hours. The next day there are about 20 women. There are some incredibly fine minds here. I wish they would continue their dialogue so that I can listen. **WHERE ARE THEY??**

Now I am beginning to see what my frustrations were about . . . So many women all on the move . . . all unique and no time to ease into knowing each other. Pieces of ideas, meetings that are always just getting someplace. We will all meet here again tomorrow at one o'clock. Do we mean it? Yes of course we do . . . and god knows where we will be mentally and physically tomorrow.

I wonder what we all really do? Others don't care. They aren't concerned with last names. There is no hierarchy here. Outside jobs are non-operative and there is no need for money amongst us. And there is no age hierarchy here and age can't be identified. (I felt old when I left the island a friend said.) And I am afraid because this is impermanent . . . a dream utopia that will end the moment that we leave Shangri-la and feel old. But this is a cold and primitive tension ridden utopia and I want to see reality again. Let me out of this acid trip!

The nightly common-tent altogether meetings: the real tensions and pressure . . . the smokers and non-smokers . . . the rude and the outraged. It doesn't matter because when you get shoved in that tight you demand out . . . And there are a lot of fucking strong people here that are damned if they are going to be part of any herd.

There are facilities for about 150 people and at one point there are 240 but those who stay the full 13 days number about 40 or 50.

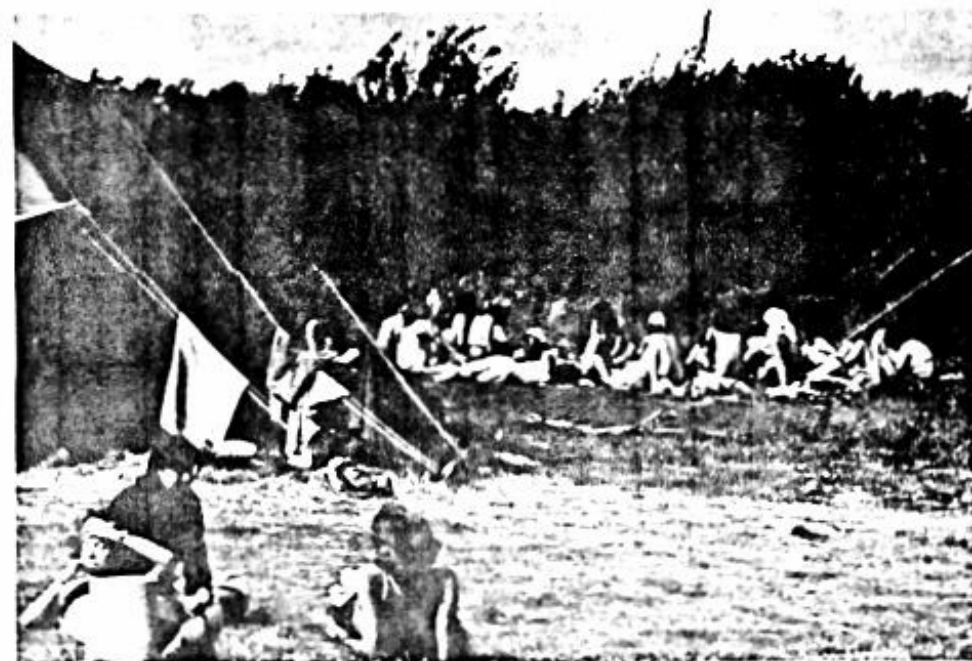
Each night a different country is supposed to present their movement. Presentations get more ragged as the camp progresses because so many women leave.

On the second night the Danes put on a beautiful piece of drama but the lesbian-heterosexual undercurrent breaks into the open. One woman says that she feels sort of provoked. Another woman, trembling, stands up and admits that she is heterosexual and that she feels good getting the shock of being a minority and feeling the strength of the majority . . . heavy applause. But this tension will stay with us until the end, mitigated and diversified perhaps, but still riding back on the ferry with the rest of the baggage.

I am confused. I can't decide what this group pressure is that I feel. How does it come about? Nobody is doing it. We are all out of our environment. We all feel some kind of pressure of exclusion, pressure to conform. If I knew what it was I would react against it. But individuals separate themselves from the group and come toward me . . . in time and space we will all care about each other. . . We will survive. But who is the group? I must be part of the group too but I don't know how . . . I can't see how I fit in. I distill input and reactions afterward and I sense that I don't trust my feelings here. I must wait to think, but then it may be too late.

The strain on the civility burst on the Italian night. The Italian women presented their grievances instead of a performance. They felt left out, isolated, particularly during the social activities.





all photos by Sue Williams

"Why do you feel this? Is it because there is a particular language barrier?"

"When we came the first night, we went to the dancing tent and took women by the hand and tried to dance in a circle, but they went right back to their private couples."

Wild applause. . . You can feel every hair in the room stand on end.

"Well, did you feel left out last night during the singing?" (Oh yes, there were no barriers when singing. The Italian women know what collective energy REALLY is.)

"No." They start their song. The 200 dissenters are immediately immersed in the momentum of the song. We all hold on in one large concentric circle with the Italians at the center emanating "Bella Ciao."

Love again.

"Please," says one person, "the Italian women have brought up a very real problem and we must discuss it."

And the brawl begins in earnest. . .

"We all love each other!" "No! We are divided!" "I refuse to discuss this now!" "On with the party!" "But we must discuss this!" "You always talk too much!" "I came here to have fun with women."

"We are fighting." "It is a vacation." "I don't want to fight." "I will kiss my Italian sisters for their honesty!" announces one woman as she climbs into the Italian circle.

"I refuse that kiss! That's how men shut me up!" answers an Italian.

Bedlam now in chorus, in various languages. . . "How dare you call me a man!" shouts an outraged voice from the background. The chaos grows. The meeting breaks up. The party starts. And others move to another tent to try to discuss further why we can't discuss.

And the talk goes round and round and comes back again. English, the official language, is only the native language of about 30 people and yet we all assume that we have the same connotations of words because everyone is so articulate. A faulty assumption I suspect. I mean I don't trust words anyhow. The words are only the performance of the total experience behind them. And it is goddamned hard to perform spontaneously in your own language let alone someone else's. Send ten people out to bring back something simple like a sample of the color red and you will get ten shades of red. And we all agree that they are all red. And then you send ten people out to bring back examples of love and see what you get. I mean it is amazing that we eventually communicated at all. . . And I for one will swear it wasn't in words.

And we were healing well but then we had another rupture the night of the German presentation; a more intellectual one though, more words and less emotion. The Germans chose to make a point. . . that heterosexuality was untenable. . . perverse was the word I believe they used on the occasion. And it seemed cruel and unsympathetic to womankind for it was towards women that they were directing their ultimatum. But then half of the large group didn't see it as cruel and that was the rupture. They just thought that it was logical. Well yes, it certainly was absolutely logical. So maybe the disagreement was over the use of the word perverse?

And we eventually got our system of communication down. We'd scream insults and/or disagreements at each other at night and then call for a meeting the next day at 4:00, and little by little, as we became less and less, we took this seriously, and eventually we all came to these next day meetings, and LISTENED to each other. And we became a group. In Copenhagen we were the Femo group, a mixed bag of about 30 or 40 international women who seemed to stick together and treat each other with the same warmth and/or greeting as a group that had been locked in a space capsule orbiting the earth for two weeks. And we were the ones starting the long lines of group dancing at the first opportunity. . . Oh yes, the Italian women made their point.

And other pieces float together.

The strategy group did stick with it until the end. And they planned an international conference that will be held in Frankfurt.

"What is all this socialism stuff anyway?" asks an American. I'm glad she asked it. I think like a socialist but in the USA I vote Democratic anyhow. It starts a heated discussion, in French of course. The end line is, "But all the Feminists always come from the middle-class. You must have socialist economics first!" She is right you know. She is Italian.

What is this separatism? That's what I want to know. I have a disagreement with those who believe in cultural separatism. . . that is if anyone does believe in cultural separatism. That question isn't relevant here. The discussions are about individual separatism. To those who can live their lives without dealing with men. . . more power to you. I just can't figure out where everybody stands on civilization. I mean I fully believe in ripping off the past centuries of culture. I don't want to start from the beginning. I apologize if Mozart was a man.

The undercurrent of romanticism is getting more obvious and less sexual. "I came here thinking that I would have a great love affair," said one person. "Didn't we all?" answers another. It seems like relationships of all sorts are now forming all around. There is tremendous pressure because of the time limitation of this place. . . the great dramas, and/or the great decisions, and/or the great heartbreaks.

No, it isn't sentimental here, it is romantic. Because, if romantic means to be unrealistic, fanciful, and imaginative; then sentimental means to be superficially romantic. (Yes friends, I have checked my connotations with the English language dictionaries.) And nobody here is being superficial.

And I have lost my grudge against the couple who ended up caressing each other in the middle of one of our painful, overcharged-group arguments. That couple didn't know each other, they weren't from the same countries, but they did know what isolation was. And as we reach the end of our time here, the romanticism is penetrating us all. The romanticism is the thing that is breaking down the isolation.

Yes it is a utopia of strong individuals, self-made women; made in pain and made in bravery in outside alien worlds, and they are DAMNED if they are going to compromise here! And it is a utopia of gentle lovers who flow toward each other without demands. Ah but it takes the full two weeks for the strong to grow gentle in safety and the gentle to grow strong. Yes we are beginning to really like each other, to hear each other, to respect each other and to give each other space. . . It is the last day.

Sue Williams