

## Quinto Sesto: a chronology 1975-1976

- Jun 1975. The kernel of the pacifist group, soon to be known as '*Quinto Sesto*', is formed. Its founders are Quinto Santo and Warren aka. 'Sesto' Mitchell. The men meet at the University of Wollongong. They are both committed activists. Dismayed with what they see as the University's 'anti-progressivism', Santo and Mitchell quit and move to Sydney believing that here they will meet kindred spirits willing to perpetrate anti-state actions.
- Jul 1975. With no money and no work, Santo and Mitchell establish a squat in inner-city Newtown. Self-appointed leader, Quinto Santo marries long-term partner and fellow activist Jeannie Morcombe who henceforth adopts the moniker 'Mad Dog'.
- Aug 1975. A fourth member of the group joins. Little is known of her background or specific activities. She is known only as 'Head Girl'. This title already suggested a level of internal competition within the group. 'Head Girl' is the least visible of *Quinto Sesto's* members. She spends most of her time seemingly engaged in nocturnal 'raids' on local institutions and businesses defacing property usually with the organisation's initials Q.S. Such branding is also a concerted effort to get the group noticed.
- Sep 1975. Santo begins writing *Quinto Sesto's* manifesto stating their pacifist and anti-state aims. The manifesto remains unfinished due to Santo's conflicted desire to produce both a local equivalent of the Communist Manifesto and a work of serious literature. While the tract is ultimately abandoned it provides the group with its enduring slogan 'Fighting for Peace': the structural paradoxes of *Quinto Sesto* are, even now, fully evident.

*Quinto Sesto's* first recorded action takes place in Sydney's Hyde Park. Its overall aim is to ritualise protest in a manner that, although militant, would appear symbolically positive. The action,

'CORPSE' is quite scripted and centres around an image of the rebirth of Western Culture. Each core member of the group is assigned specific tasks. The action commencing appropriately at the rising of the sun, involves symbolic bondage, group nudity, the ingestion of hallucinogens, sound and the lighting of a ceremonial fire, the 'flame of a new world'. It is not entirely clear how, but the action is interrupted and its completion abruptly curtailed. *Quinto Sesto's* next action would be of a much different, darker nature, a sign of mounting frustration.

Nov 1975.

After the November 11 sacking of Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, Santo stages a lone protest in Sydney's CBD pushing a pram up and down the city's main thoroughfare, George St. The pram contains the decaying carcass of a pig bearing Governor General Sir John Kerr's name surrounded by swastikas. Santo berates crowds of lunchtime shoppers and office workers for their passivity. He is arrested and detained for 24 hours. He is eventually charged with causing a 'public nuisance'. Already of interest to the NSW state police, *Quinto Sesto's* actions will henceforth be followed closely.

Dec 1975.

'Sesto' Mitchell introduces lover Tracey Cox to the group. Cox is never formally admitted to the organisation. Santo in particular views her as a disruptive element especially once her taste for drugs becomes apparent. Growing tension between Mitchell and Santo means the former and Cox spend more time aestheticising the group's aims than engaging in thoughts of public protest.

Mitchell and Cox embark on the production of a series of 'happenings'. These are highly derivative. In particular, the bed-in the couple stage in the window of a disused Laundromat is basically a verbatim recreation of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's highly publicised 1969 action. Another work, a video mysteriously entitled 'EVENT VII' consisted of footage of airports

filmed from the couple's moving car. Accompanied by an ominous free-jazz soundtrack the video was posted 'as a warning' to the offices of an established local newspaper for their pro US stance. Another video made slightly after and titled 'I Can't Stand It' shares the spirit of the earlier work.

Frustrated by the group's lack of political cohesion and inability to gain serious media attention, and angered by the conservatism of the new Australian Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser, *Quinto Sesto*, at Santo's insistent urging, draft plans to kidnap a prominent local politician and hold them for ransom. The plan is never carried out.

Also around this time, the group begin searching abandoned industrial sites for viable headquarters. They consider disused factories in particular perfect sites that might encompass a number of functions providing possible training areas, an arsenal, meditation rooms and means for pirate broadcasting (and later rehearsal rooms and art rooms)

Inspired by the violent student and farmer protests against the construction of Narita Airport in the countryside outside Tokyo, *Quinto Sesto* also start investigating local infra-structure developments that might offer a similar context for action against 'corporate/state vandalism'. They locate one such site in the enormous port development in Botany, NSW. The group organised a number of student protests at this site. They have some success disrupting construction activity by subversively offering free beer to workers.

Jan 1976.

Realistically though, Mitchell and Cox are indecisive and effectively drug dependant by this stage. Supported by Santo's wife 'Mad Dog', they urge the group turn to art instead as the most effective means of delivering their political message. This is basically Mitchell's way of avoiding

the increasing prospect of violence and arrest he sees inevitable if the group follows Santo's plans. Fittingly, Santo is infuriated by this 'aesthetic turn' – as is the increasingly unpredictable 'Head Girl' – but fears the disintegration of his marriage, so reluctantly agrees. In so doing he concedes the partial loss of his leadership role.

Feb 1976.

*Quinto Sesto* on Mitchell's initiative, begin a series of rehearsals for a proposed 'rock opera' *Fighting For Peace*, loosely inspired by The Who's contemporaneous *Tommy*. Mitchell and Cox outline a scenario concerning the kidnap and murder of a politician for 'the greater public good'. It incorporates fragments of Santo's unfinished manifesto set to music. Again, the material is highly derivative blatantly stealing whole phrases from popular musicians like David Bowie while attempting to meld them with various political tracts by disparate 'renegade' Marxists. Tempered by this alternative 'political' outlet, 'Mad Dog' designs rudimentary sets and costumes.

Mar 1976.

Rehearsals for *Quinto Sesto's* political rock opera are a disaster. Mitchell and Cox deeply ensconced in an addict's relationship are initially enthusiastic but are also essentially bereft of musical ability. Efforts to entice 'socially aware' session musicians fail. Santo is enraged and humiliated and returns to his militant ideals. Out of frustration, and what appears to have been sexual jealousy, and in an effort to reassert his leadership, Santo kidnaps Mitchell's lover Cox and holds her in an empty warehouse in Port Botany for eight days. He believes he has made his point.

Apr 1976.

Realising the extent of Santo's radical commitment, Mitchell retaliates threatening Santo in broad daylight outside a local pub seriously threatening the individual anonymity of the group's members.

After these dual traumatic incidents, *Quinto Sesto* collectively realise that if they are to regain their original political and social ideals, they will need to dramatically rethink their direction.

Following what was by all accounts a tense and lengthy meeting, *Quinto Sesto* reemerge cathartically, its members agreeing to a number of mutual concessions. Santo, undoubtedly still reeling from the farce of 'Fighting for Peace' nonetheless agrees to support Mitchell and Cox's claimed interest in further pursuing their artistic activities. However, Santo demands more control over creative outcomes. Thus, to make up for past 'lapses', he proposes an avant-garde 'anti-musical' with an incisively critical edge based on mounting contemporary interest in alternative religions, most notably, the Church of Satan. Viewing Satan symbolically as the ultimate outcast, and therefore in a similar guise to that imagined by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantics, Santo urges Mitchell and Cox to write music and lyrics for a 'political cabaret' focused on the figure of Satan as the ultimate 'rebel activist'. Santo also demands that both Mitchell and Cox cleanup their drug use. Although most likely partially reluctant, the couple agree to all Santo's demands. In return they seek that Santo curb his apparently accelerating interest in violent confrontation.

May 1976.

At first *Quinto Sesto's* new direction appears promising. In fact the group had never acted quite so harmoniously than at this time. Fittingly, Mitchell and Cox's less conventional musical efforts begin to suggest actual musical promise. A number of pieces are rehearsed successfully.

Before too long however, additional tensions arise when Santo's interest in Satanism starts to assume a less than wholly 'political-academic' dimension. Santo, clearly sensing his regaining control of the group, initiates a series

of Satanic rites that he describes to the others as 'experimental', couching them in parapsychology terminology. A number of surviving photos portray these rites which in retrospect, seem bathed in a familiar hippie light. Still, it is difficult to deduce from these images the degree to which *Quinto Sesto's* members believed they were enacting a series of group 'performances'. Certainly, as far as contemporary images of Santo are concerned, they betray the fervor of a genuine acolyte. Such an attitude was further qualified by Santo increasingly behaving as a dominating high priest. It is also evident in the fact that these 'performances' increasingly took on an overtly disciplinary aura.

Jun 1976.

This disciplinary edge is apparent in the actual rites themselves which frequently involved blood-letting and chants directed kneeling at an image of Satan as a shabby goat-headed deity. It is not surprising then that as Santo's dedication to Satanism rapidly grew (perhaps as an internalisation of his by now frustrated and concessional militant politics) *Quinto Sesto's* 'artistic' members became more and more alienated.

Betraying this mood, 'Mad Dog' was especially quiet during this time. We know she turned her creative attentions to what she described as 'incendiary pottery' (she was actually already a talented potter who had studied with Michael Cardew, a major figure in the British studio pottery movement, when he lived in Australia in the early 1970s). While initially sympathetic to the British movement's egalitarian aims, Morcombe regarded much contemporary studio pottery as over-aestheticised and advocated a more rigorous approach with an unequivocal political agenda. She favoured utilitarian forms with rudimentary decoration which could be produced quickly and cheaply and described her pots as 'incendiary devices for the mantelpiece'.

Morcombe's pots were intended to feature as props in Santo's 'Satanic cabaret'. Overall though, she perceived them as symbolic containers of a radical potential, as vessels mitigating external (political) and internal (spiritual) demands. She saw them as 'bombs', containers of an explosive communicative potential. Only a few of these pots are known to have survived. A couple, 'the Lies of El Libro Blanco' and 'Pot for Laszlo Lajtha' (a Hungarian dissident Communist) suggest the loaded political content 'Mad Dog' associated with her work. Seeking other 'communicating vessels' Morcombe, with Mitchell and Cox, also begins scouring industrial sites again, this time looking for other suitable artistic material. Only one effort is known to have come out of these endeavours. This was a series of stolen barrels ironically hand numbered from 1 - 250 as 'an edition'.

Meanwhile Santo's fixation with Satanism, provides the last straw for the other members when Santo, fresh from reading Bataille's essays on religion in *Acephalé*, offered himself as a human sacrifice to the rest of the group. And with a commitment rivaling the French author's. A storm-out ensued despite the fact that 'Head Girl', most likely in a power play sensing the ultimate disintegration of the group, agrees at first to carry out the action.

Jul 1976.

Completely disillusioned by the dysfunctionality of *Quinto Sesto*, Cox leaves the group and Mitchell. The woman known only as 'Head Girl' also vanishes but not before setting fire to some of the groups belongings including its stolen musical equipment.

In a desperate last ditch effort to reassert his leadership and the continued viability of *Quinto Sesto*, Santo holds Mitchell captive for 36 hours in the same warehouse he had held his lover Cox. The stunt inadvertently attracts police attention and fails. The organisation is

finished. Santo, taking Morcombe with him, flees to Thailand to escape police prosecution. Eventually after a period of hiding, Mitchell in the absence of Cox and recovered from his drug addiction, reappears as something of an early 'street artist' leaving cryptic graphics messages scrawled at various remote and urban sites around Australia.