



UNDER THE DOME: ARCHITECTURES OF ENGAGEMENT FROM DROP CITY TO ROCKAWAY BEACH

Eva Díaz

Associate Professor at Pratt Institute

“This dome feels goood!” So proclaimed the mellow, avuncular Clark Richert on a breezy early summer evening at the MoMA PS1 Dome in Rockaway Beach, Queens. Richert is one of the world’s experts on dome vibes: he was co-founder of the Drop City community in southeastern Colorado that constructed fanciful geodesic structures out of improvised materials in the mid-to-late 1960s. He and Richard Kallweit, another Drop City founder, were on site to discuss the eponymous film about the collective, which had its NYC premiere in Rockaway on June 21, 2013 (the PS1 dome opened in March and was dismantled in late June). Directed by Joan Grossman, the feature-length documentary probed the history and legacy of the seven-year experiment in communal living in which members, in pioneering proto-environmentalist fashion, lived on their neighbor’s castoffs while hunting for car tops and construction materials in dumps and scrapyards from which to build domes of various kinds around their communally-owned property.

The documentary charts Drop City’s origins in the Lawrence, Kansas friendship of Richert and Gene and Jo Ann Bernofsky, who began an Ab Ex-inspired form of splatter art they termed “droppings.” Even in its early moments, drop art had public dimensions—at times, they threw paint and other objects out the window of their loft to startle passersby. After pranking around Kansas, the group joined forces with Kallweit to establish the community outside of rural Trinidad, Colorado, which was pretty square at the time, but (as the local sheriff notes) is now the transgender surgery capital of the world.

Dome constructed from scrap metal, Drop City, Colorado.

The impetus to create Drop City stemmed in large part from a speech by Buckminster Fuller that members attended at the Conference on World Affairs in Boulder. In the film, Droppers recollect the galvanic nature of Fuller's call for college students to remake the world in their interests, and they were struck by the potential of the geodesic dome as an easy-to-erect habitation. Combining these two elements, they decamped to the country and erected a eighteen-foot diameter dome out of donated and scavenged lumber and nails, and lived in the structure collectively as an artistic community exploring new relationships with work, family, and creativity.

More domes followed, and new members joined in the coming years. Yet poverty and deprivation nipped at their heels, and they were never as totally committed to egalitarianism as they hoped. As the film points out, the division of labor in the community left the women to laundry, childrearing, and kitchen work; they also had to do the psychically dirty work of filing for welfare and dealing with the negativity food stamps got them in town. The way the Droppers saw it, collecting government services diverted pennies from the Vietnam War. (An interesting comparison can be made to fundamentalist Mormon communities in the same region that "bleed the beast" of the U.S. government by drawing welfare for "single" moms—in reality the ancillary wives of polygamist relationships. The shared anti-governmental hostility of these micro-cultures aside, unlike the libertarian fundamentalists, Droppers were dedicated to challenging social hierarchies and creating an alternative democratic community to the United States, in spite of their somewhat unquestioning acceptance of traditional gender roles.)

In focusing on Drop City's origins on an urban college campus in the thick of anti-Vietnam war protests, the film probes what was perhaps one of the greatest pressures facing 1960s utopian communities: that young boomers' disgust with the excesses of the U.S. consumption-based economy, which they felt masked America's virulently anti-communist and jingoistic foreign policy, spawned idealistic, microcosmic communities in which a great deal of stress was put on members to function as exemplars of a new society detached from violence, greed, and discrimination. Yet in spite of the back-to-the-land, drop-out impulses that led to the founding of not only Drop City but the entire network of dome communes in the west and southwest (including Red Rockers, Libre, Hog Farm, and others), such experiments were subject to a paradox of geographical isolation and media over-exposure, as they saw themselves commended in counter-cultural journals and condescended to in mass-media publications.

The film's interviews don't stray far from the talking head format, but charming hand

drawn animations illustrate the major events the film describes. The radicality of the Droppers' quest to leave all number of traditions behind—the necessity to perform uninspiring labor in a capitalistic society, the cultural imperative to consume more, and the fixation with private property, among many—makes the film a jolting report from a region of imagination seldom explored in practice.

Projecting the story of an historic dome community in the Rockaway dome may just be such an exploration. In recent years, a sense of the dome as exemplar of a new art of utopian public sculpture has taken root, and many contemporary artists make use of domes as elements or even defining characteristics of their practices. Just to give a few recent examples: Raumlabor Berlin, Minsuk Cho/Mass Studies, Fritz Haeg, and Plastique Fantastique, and N55, and Mary Mattingly in the Waterpod, among others, use the dome as an architecture of gathering places. The geodesic dome was prevalent too in Occupy Wall Street encampments. And the geodesic dome continues to be a popular, one could say the predictable, choice for temporary outdoor exhibitions. The past several years have seen a boom in dome construction in specifically art display contexts; for example, the use of a geodesic dome as a hub in the 8 Mercosul Biennial in Porto



Aerial view of the MoMA PS1 VW Dome 2 at Rockaway Beach, New York, 2013.

Alegre, Brazil in 2011; a dome in Hyde Park, London at the Serpentine in 2012; as well as the large-scale “performance dome” sponsored by Volkswagen in MoMA-PS1’s garden and of course the one in Rockaway. It seems that every art institution is getting in on it these days.

Why can’t you go far without hitting a geodesic dome in art contexts? Many use domes as sculptural structures, as temporary interventions in urban sites, as kiosk production, and as shelter/information display hybrids. Domes continue to be important to artists as a form of improvised construction using cheap or recycled materials, and in rethinking domes as multifarious structures, these urban kiosks can be seen as part of an argument against eroding the public functions of the city street in the face of neoliberalism’s tendency to privatize and limit public exchange. In these cases, the kind of information housed by the dome connects various struggles concerning the distribution of global resources, an argument that also buoyed the first wave of geodesic domes as exhibition structures in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

This emphasis on redistribution returns to Fuller’s argument that architecture can be a key element in understanding and representing the management of networked resources, and that the dome in particular could be a networked building—a site connected to real-time information feeds updated in various media. One can see this encapsulated in Fuller’s 1962 Geoscope proposal, a precursor to today’s “digital globes”. The Geoscope was envisioned as a 200-foot diameter spherical display covered with colored lights. Fuller planned to have the dome updated with networked information, data that would allow spectators to visualize, study, and possibly redesign the total human environment, including shelter, infrastructure, communication, and other interconnected systems—in order to quickly and efficiently allocate those resources globally. The enveloping space—literally, the environment—of the Geoscope was part of Fuller’s argument that architectural forms were embedded in systems that demanded to be understood holistically and as functions of society’s total needs.

It’s this idea of the dome as evocative of a networked Earth—or of networks in orbit around Earth—that helps us understand why the dome acquired its special purchase in post-war exhibition design and in political activist ventures, and why the viewing subject’s processing of complex media in such a space was deemed, and continues to be understood as, a crucial aesthetic confrontation with the psychic and physical demands of modernity. Dome venues did in the past, and continue to today, intensify the sense of human subjectivity as both enthralled and overwhelmed by the technologically-me-

diated networks that make advanced communication and the rapid mobility of goods and information possible.

These networks have played a significant role in the recent history of the Rockaway area. Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century, the community was in steady decline. Its geographical isolation from New York made it a convenient hiding place for social ills of various kinds. Unscrupulous landlords rented shoddily winterized houses to the city’s welfare department at extortionate rates, giving rise to terrible slums. As recreation options dwindled, the summer crowds went elsewhere.

Fast forward to the Summer of 2012. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, 3.6 million people went to the beach at Rockaway. Rockaway’s geographical isolation became less important as its Internet presence grew. #Rockawaybeach appears in thousands of Instagram photos, Facebook updates, or YouTube videos of surfers. Last summer



The line at Rockaway Taco, Summer 2012.

The New York Times published nearly an article per week on “Bushwick at the beach”—Rockaway fashion, Rockaway eats, Rockaway surf camp. Unsurprisingly, a cell phone company placed ads at bus stops around the city depicting a surfer on his way to Rockaway via subway, of course using his phone to tell everyone about it. It was all made even more surreal by whispers about Klaus Biesenbach sightings around town (he’s the director of PS1 and Chief Curator at Large of MoMA)—Klaus was at Rippers on the boardwalk, Klaus was at the Rockaway Beach Surf Club on 87th—all confirmed when it was publicized that Biesenbach bought a second home in Rockaway.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, one of the unsettling aspects of the situation facing Rockaway residents was the inability to access communications networks. A cone of data silence descended on the peninsula, hampering relief efforts and efforts to contact loved ones. One friend describes writing an SMS message consisting only of the word “safe” after her harrowing night, transmitting it to her parents during a flickering moment of reception. When relief made it to Rockaway, it was not the Red Cross or FEMA who could be seen canvassing residents to assess their needs, but loosely



Volunteers gather at the Rockaway Beach Surf Club in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

organized knots of volunteers. Biesenbach sent out impassioned tweets calling for help, and drafted an open letter to Mayor Bloomberg for help that was signed by Lady Gaga, Madonna, James Franco, Gwyneth Paltrow and Patti Smith, among others. Social media hubs such as the Rockaway Beach Surf Club Facebook page became places where resources were pooled and efforts coordinated. In many cases, the same networks that had contributed to Rockaway’s unsettling trendiness contributed to its recovery, and this did not go unnoticed. A recent article in *The New York Times* on Rockaway ended with this quote from a local resident: “There has been a lot of localism here, which is good in some ways, only in that keeps the down for the day—what we call the D.F.D.’s—in line. But we had so much help from the hipsters and all people that now everyone is friends with each other. It doesn’t matter if they’re not from Rockaway now. Because they’re here. There’s a whole new level of social camaraderie that never existed. We’re all in it together. It’s a real positive thing.”

Still, when Biesenbach pitched the idea of erecting a geodesic dome in Rockaway, as much as I admired his commitment to the area, I admit I was suspicious of the idea—and I wasn’t the only one. The website ArtFCity (formerly Art Fag City) questioned the motives behind the project earlier this year: “The museum will treat the area as a ‘test spot,’ according to one resident in their web video, where they will model the infrastructure that is necessary for the next generation of seaside towns. MoMA’s top curators Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich-Obrist, and Peter Eleey and its squad of architecture curators will select twenty-five proposals to be presented in the Rockaways this April. It’s moderately unsettling to see museum behemoths curating proposals for people’s towns, but, given how fucked things are in the Rockaways, who cares.”

Yet in my visits to the dome, I was struck by how the site became a hub for locals and visitors alike, and how it created a space of gathering with public programming attuned to the community. At the dome I saw a friend’s film that was shot on our block in Rockaway, stopped in on a hacker workshop where issues of access to technology and the mobilization of communities through the Web were highlighted, and sat in on an artist talk in which a heuristic project to create barrier islands around the peninsula was proposed (and roundly criticized). In their questions, the dome audiences were keen to connect concerns of aesthetics with an engagement in the stakes of local planning and reconstruction. In this manner, in the Rockaway project, as in many dome-derived architectural works, the dome is not merely a stand-alone shelter, kiosk, or gathering space, but becomes a unique but hybrid object: a sculptural artwork-cum-pedagogical tool that foregrounds its connectedness to networks of various kinds: material resource-

es, communities, and communication.

In the documentary screened that June 2013 night, the founders of Drop City discussed how their remote location in Colorado soon became an obligatory pit stop for migratory hippies. Geographical remoteness mattered less and less, as their project was covered in countercultural publications and even *Art in America*. The social ills that Droppers tried to flee ended up following them, yet, as one admits, they still “somehow managed to have a good time.” In Rockaway, as in Drop City, the dome was less a stand-alone building than a node in a network with both positive and negative effects.

Thanks to the Internet, Rockaway Beach is no longer in the city’s blind spot. What new blind spots—places isolated not by geography, but by their lack of visibility on the Internet—have emerged in its stead?