

## How to Build A Commune: Drop City's Influence on the Southwestern Commune Movement *By Erin Elder*

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Just north of Trinidad, Colorado, near the exit for El Moro, is a long flat expanse of tumbleweeds and dirt, leftover snow patches and barbed wire tangles. Between the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and a chain of flat-topped mesas is an emptiness, a deep breath of silence on the Colorado - New Mexico border. Every trace of Drop City has been swept clean. The total lack of ruins, signage or lingering communards make it difficult to locate exactly where, from 1965 to 1973, there stood a vibrant community experiment invested in applying art to every aspect of daily life and that sparked a movement of commune building that came to define the American counterculture.

Drop City was founded on dreams of “building a civilization from scratch,” and a shared desire to “do something more than hang a painting, to create a kind of input.”<sup>1</sup> Over the course of eight years and on an arid six-acre goat pasture, Drop City produced a miscellany of structures, sculptures, paintings, experimental films, performances, and a type of art called “Droppings.” Built by hand with scrounged materials, Drop City was not only a place to make art, but – through a creative reinvestment in daily activities – it was a place to *be* art. As it became a counterculture way station, thousands of young people flocked to southern Colorado to learn about new architectural forms, to spin out on psychedelics in an otherworldly setting, to leave their jobs and families in exchange for proverbial free love, free drugs, and free rent. Drop City was the pioneering front of the hip commune movement of the Sixties and through shared technology, space, and praxis, “turned on” a new generation of commune builders.

Communalism is an essential component of American rural life, a tradition that has seen a variety of cycles, styles, and core values since the seventeenth century. Although communes have never been part of the dominant paradigm, it's nothing new to the United States. Drop City was simply at the forefront of the most explosive manifestation of communitarian idealism that, between 1965 and 1975, produced “at least 2,000” rural communes<sup>2</sup> and attracted upwards of a million young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Bernofsky, phone interview with the author, October 17, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999) xviii-xix. Miller cites a 1970 New York Times article as the widely quoted authority on this number. He goes on to outline other speculations (ranging from 1,000 to 50,000 communes), arguing the difficulty of quantifying this sudden phenomenon comprised of oftentimes short-lived communal experiments.

American communal history turned a major corner with the establishment of Drop City. Commune scholar Tim Miller writes,

Drop City brought together most of the themes that had been developing in other recent communities – anarchy, pacifism, sexual freedom, rural isolation, interest in drugs, art – and wrapped them flamboyantly into a commune not quite like any that had gone before. Drop City thus represents the point at which a new type of commune building had definitively arrived.<sup>3</sup>

Not only was Drop City one of the first open-land, anarchic communes, but also it was the first to stake a claim on the American Southwest as an outpost for a burgeoning counterculture. Drop City established a way of life that combined colorful dissent with Do-It-Yourself technology, shared physical labor, and outrageous homes built from trash and this set of enacted principles, in many ways, became the vernacular for the Southwestern commune movement. When Timothy Leary toured the Southwest in 1967, he referred to the communes collectively as “drop cities;” others have described Drop City as “the first capital of the outlaw nation.”<sup>4</sup> Drop City was clearly the precedent for hundreds of thousands of disgruntled youth who aimed to create a new communal existence beyond the margins of straight society.

In the end Drop City was host to a methamphetamine factory, a vicious round of hepatitis, and a murder. Drop City was shut down in 1973 by the local Health Department; the remaining inhabitants were evicted and the county auctioned the land. This brand of kaleidoscopic ruin was not an uncommon ending for the rash of communes that broke out across the Southwest and may account for the ways in which their legacy has been ignored or oversimplified.

As one commune-builder has said, “the counterculture occupies a historical niche somewhere between a pernicious social virus and an amusing Halloween costume.”<sup>5</sup> While several recent attempts have been made to redress these generalizing trends by unpacking the Sixties’ contributions to civil rights, the environmental movement, sexual and religious freedoms, health food and agrarian practices, and the cultivation of the American Left, there remains a void in scholarship around the communes of the Southwest. I aim to address some small corner of this void by looking at Drop City as the vanguard of a significant commune-building movement. With special interest in temporary spaces for alternative cultural production, this paper examines how notions of consciousness-expansion, the network, and the Southwestern landscape came

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 31-32.

<sup>4</sup> Alastair Gordon, *Spaced Out: Radical Environments of the Psychedelic Sixties* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2008) 145 – 153.

<sup>5</sup> Roberta Price, email with the author, November 5, 2009.

to bear on the conceptual and physical manifestation of Drop City and its neighbor communes.

What interests me most about Drop City is how an expansive perspective on art, trash, and everyday life created a particular kind of space that in turn influenced a burgeoning of cultural alternatives. Drop City was both intentional and experimental; grounded by the realities of human survival, it was wildly improvisational in its address of those basic needs. As half-baked as it may have been, the notion of the Droppings gave this artists' collective a reason and a context to create a vibrant alternative to the society they sought to resist. Unlike some other communes *art* was the impetus and the frame that allowed the Droppers to risk everything they had in a long-term, communal experiment. As Dropper Bill Voyd said in 1969, "The only thing that will allow each of us to create his or her Utopia is praxis."<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I will analyze the Droppings as a particular frame of reference that motivated the Droppers in what I call an expanded practice. I will touch upon various aspects of scrounging as it pertained to Dropper architecture, lifestyle, and their patchwork of ideological underpinnings. Later, I will introduce notions of expansive building exemplified by the Droppers' relationship to development, the network, and the American Southwest. Clark Richert, one of Drop City's founding members has said, "We really saw ourselves as artists and we saw Drop City as an on-going work of art."<sup>7</sup> Statements such as this invite a deeper consideration of commune building as art practice and the commune as a cultural form. Although there is not space here for an in-depth argument, I would like to suggest that, given the number of Southwestern communes built between 1965 and 1975, this might be regarded as a legitimate art movement with significant influence on contemporary art practice.

## **DROPPING ART**

Clark Richert, JoAnn and Gene Bernofsky were close friends in Lawrence, Kansas in the early 1960s. Richert and JoAnn met in art class at the University of Kansas and when she left for a nine-month trip to San Francisco, Gene moved into Richert's second-story loft over-looking what they called a "bourgeois" thoroughfare - Massachusetts Street – in downtown Lawrence.<sup>8</sup> Here is where Droppings, or Drop Art, was born.

During their studies and on return trips to New York, Richert and the Bernofskys encountered the avant-garde practices of such artists as Allan Kaprow, John

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Voyd, "Funk Architecture," in Paul Oliver, ed., *Shelter and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1969) 156.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *Spaced Out*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

Cage, and others who taught at Black Mountain College. Through such encounters, they understood Happenings as spontaneous, bizarre, interactive, open-outcome events that were affecting audiences not only in New York and Europe, but also in Lawrence. They shared Kaprow's conviction that the "Happening," as a new art form, "couldn't be confused with paintings, poetry, architecture, music, dance or plays. As residues of a European past, these old forms of art had lost their artness [...] by overexposure and empty worship. Happenings are fresh."<sup>9</sup> In support of this desire for fresh forms, Richert and Bernofsky created their own mutation of Happenings called "Droppings."

One time they dropped painted pebbles out of their loft window onto passersby below, watching the reaction from their second story vantage. Another time, they connected an iron and ironing board to a downtown parking meter. On the sidewalk in front of a "bourgeois" hotel, they left an immense breakfast on an elaborately set table, free for anyone to sit and eat.<sup>10</sup> They "dropped" art into an unwitting situation, intending to reframe reality through sudden disruption. Droppings were a form of playful entertainment, but were also grounded in a formal art intention to actively disregard distinctions between art, perception and daily activity.

It seems that early Droppings were little events, largely unpublicized, and often unnoticed. They were primarily a means of testing the artists' working methods and also the abilities of the public to respond to a given situation. The situations were part intentional construction, part volatile investigation. They were at once uncertain and assertive, pointless and poignant. The Droppers sought to create sudden opportunities for momentary changes in perception but often their work went unobserved and was unwittingly woven into the banal fabric of everyday life. Given their disgust with a complacent and privileged mainstream, Droppings were a humorous way to play off of the "shittiness" of this offensive population. Sometimes audiences "got it," and other times the Dropping fell flat in a puny splatter. Those who interacted with or reacted to the Droppings transformed the work. For those who embraced these bizarre experiments with equally unpredictable responses, the Dropping became something else – it became a medium, a kind fertilizer transformed by the creation of a momentary community.

The Droppers had a love-hate relationship with the New York art world and despised the object-driven market that dominated it in the early 1960s. Yet New York was erupting with new art strategies that evoked participation, chaos, and a general breakdown of the assumed order of things. Exposed to concepts of "unarting," the Droppers joined a movement to dematerialize art by "taking the art out of art, which in practical terms meant discarding art's characteristics...

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<sup>9</sup> Allan Kaprow, Jeff Kelley, ed., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) xxviii.

<sup>10</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

leaving art *is* the art. But you must have it to leave it.”<sup>11</sup> This notion of “leaving art” in order to expand its potential for engaging daily life is key to understanding the shift from Droppings to Drop City.

## **BECOMING THE DROPPING**

While developing a context for their art-and-living project, the Droppers played with ideas of how to expand their experience of Drop Art, how to literally inhabit it. Based on everything they knew to be true of Droppings, it was possible to *become* the Dropping through a collective commitment to living with alternative and undefined situations. Like a Dropping, Drop City would be intentional but unscripted - a spontaneous experiment with open-ended outcomes. In retrospect Gene Bernofsky recalls, “We wanted to enter into the Dropping, *become* the Dropping. We were dropping ourselves onto this land to see what we would do with it.”<sup>12</sup>

At Drop City art making would certainly make up a large part of everyday life, but the making of a *place*, and the *habitation* of that place – that would comprise this expanded Dropping. The place would be a refuge from suburban life and a studio for art production. It would be a situation around which to create community but most importantly it would be an intentional experiment with the unknown.

The Droppers approached every bit of life as if it could be art. Work could be art. Food could be art. Trash could be art. Becoming the Dropping threw everything into question and as a result everything could be viewed, critiqued, created, destroyed, or remade. In his seminal work, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre discusses how the ambiguous realms of art bring everyday life into view as “a question of discovering what must and can change and be transformed in people’s lives... It is a question of stating critically how people live or how badly they live, or how they do not live at all.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Droppers believed that art could be the ends and means for a reconsideration of the daily life that mainstream culture had all but taken for granted.

In “becoming the Dropping” a certain totality was levied on the lifestyle, architecture and atmosphere at Drop City. Like others of twentieth century utopian art movements, the Droppers “aim not just at the integration of art and life, but of all human activities. They have a critique of social separation and a concept of totality.”<sup>14</sup> The Droppers would override specialization, transcending

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<sup>11</sup> Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, xxix.

<sup>12</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Henri Lefebvre; trans. John Moore, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2: *Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* (London and New York: Verso, 2002.)

<sup>14</sup> Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Sterling: AK Press, 1991) 5 - 6.

the boundaries of an oppressive, compartmentalizing dominant paradigm by learning to build and participate on every level of their new society. Nothing escaped the realm of art practice. Diet, fashion, relationships, decisions, and time: all were on the drawing board. As Dropper Bill Voyd wrote, “The works of art we envisage are total, vast.”<sup>15</sup>

The Dropping was a context for thinking about a total artwork that encompassed every element of daily life. Through this expansive notion of the Dropping, they were able, as Kaprow advocated, to “unart” art – yet they were able to take it much farther than Kaprow would have imagined possible. At Drop City lifestyle was cultivated as art; acting out an alternative reality was in fact the project at hand. But why not simply create a new way of living; why frame it as a Dropping? In building a civilization from scratch, did it matter if distinctions relating to art and performance got lost along the way and how did this art frame give meaning to what the Droppers were doing?

The Droppers were not alone in their framing or naming of such expansive practice; they had contemporaries who, likewise, aimed to remake society through similar types of discursive lenses. As an extension of their theater background, the San Francisco Diggers served free food in public parks, opened a number of free stores, and created numerous happenings, parades, and performances. Their work was contextualized by The Free Frame of Reference, often symbolized by empty yellow wooden frames and the declaration “It’s Free Because It’s Yours.” During many Digger events, the public was asked to step through a large golden frame, a gesture that invited a “free perspective; a point of view one could assemble oneself.”<sup>16</sup> While the Free Frame of Reference was unnecessary to the project of revolutionizing urban life in San Francisco, it was a tool that invited art-like intentionality and criticality from both the Diggers and their community.

Less of a public construction, Bonnie Sherk employed the Life Frame as a way of positioning her performances and the Crossroads Community Farm as something between art and life, something both avant-garde and perplexing. For Sherk, the Life Frame was a means of “expand[ing] the concept of art to include, and even be life” but also of using real situations to push the limits of established art conventions.<sup>17</sup> The point is not whether the notion of the Dropping makes Drop City art. Rather, it’s remarkable how the Dropping (as well as the Free Frame of Reference and the Life Frame) was a discursive mechanism that launched this collective of artists into critically and aesthetically-engaged countercultural activities.

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon, *Spaced Out*, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Ted Purves, *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005) 34 – 35.

<sup>17</sup> Will Bradley, “Let It Grow,” *Frieze*, October 2005, 189-90.

## VISUAL THINKING

The image of the lens is also illustrative of how film technology was changing notions of consciousness at Drop City and far beyond. Gene Bernofsky was a filmmaker and his 16mm Kodak Ciné camera was constantly rolling. He talks about the camera as a tool, comparing its function to that of a hammer or saw; the camera was used to “build a film.”<sup>18</sup> The camera was part of communal property; anyone could use it. Filmmaking was a spontaneous activity, something to do in the moment, something to do every day. Through the cinematic practices of focusing, cropping, and editing, film was another way that art became a means to look, imagine, and construct differently.<sup>19</sup> The films were not documentaries or dramas; they were not necessarily made to be viewed and oftentimes were combined with lights, music, motion and other elements in which the film was just one small part of a multi-sensory experience. These expanded Droppings were part of the mid-Sixties movement that amplified the legacy of Happenings on a festival scale, creating what were known as Be-Ins or Love-Ins.

Drop City was one of the many places where film was produced collectively for wholly new and expansive means. Media was becoming more accessible to amateurs; for instance, the Sony Portapak was introduced in 1967 and was the first individually operated video camera. As a result of such emergent film technologies, miles and miles of footage were being shot in the Sixties. The camera kept rolling, capturing and framing every moment as art, paving the way towards what experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage has described as “moving visual thinking.”<sup>20</sup> In his 1970 book *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood discusses the impact of the electronic media age on this new generation:

When we say expanded cinema, we actually mean expanded consciousness...[It] isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes.<sup>21</sup>

This link between consciousness expansion and technology was fueled, in part, by widespread LSD experiments. As curator Will Bradley states, in describing the filmmaking practices of the Sixties, “acid was seen by artists as a technology in itself” and film technologies were oftentimes developed to “manipulate the cinematic image space in response to their drug experiences.”<sup>22</sup> LSD stimulated

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<sup>18</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> David E. James, *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (New York: Temple University Press, 2005.)

<sup>21</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970) 41.

<sup>22</sup> Will Bradley, *Radical Software or, The Post-Competitive, Comparative Game of a Free Culture* (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute, 2006.)

a temporary synaesthesia during which “shape becomes color, which becomes vibration, which becomes sound, which becomes smell, which becomes taste, and then touch, and then again shape.”<sup>23</sup> Across the country, cameras and drugs (often combined with music, lights, mirrors, objects and other contraptions) were perception tools that helped create consumable media that evidenced this new mystic mindscape. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan’s claims that “the medium is the message,”<sup>24</sup> these artists aimed to produce media that communicated, not so much via content but through the characteristics of the media themselves.

## **DOMES HOMES**

The way that founders of Drop City critiqued the mid-Sixties status quo built on McLuhan’s notion of the medium; to put it simply, their concerns were more about society’s form than about its particular issues. While the international political climate was certainly unsettling, the Droppers were more troubled by the suburban communities exploding across America in rigid configurations of tract homes and strip malls, and by young people yielding to the pressure of mundane jobs, families, and a routine existence. The collective had little interest in gridded neighborhoods, urban plans, standardization, and uniformity; they sought to restore a raw and immediate relationship to materials, space, their bodies, and the environment through the act of building. The Bernofskys’ main objective was to work, to create, but they wanted to do it without being employed. Therefore, they made a commitment to reject the commodifying “American ideal” that sought to enclose them. To enact this rejection, it was important that they “stop using sidewalks, stop using buildings, and create a new life.”<sup>25</sup> This revulsion against American conventions, therefore, had to be expressed through the very practices and forms that made Drop City.

Ground broke at Drop City in the summer of 1965 and dome-building was the order of the day. After attending Buckminster Fuller’s recent lecture in Boulder, CO the Droppers were inspired; they saw domes as the medium with which to create their new civilization and immediately set out to duplicate his geodesics using scrap materials. In describing their interest in domes, Dropper Bill Voyd has written, “we were held together by a common feeling that the whole structure of American society was rigid and oppressive, that the only way to physical and spiritual freedom lay outside the established system.”<sup>26</sup> Domes presented an alternative to the planned, mass-manufactured, and unoriginal housing developments spreading across America.

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<sup>23</sup> Gordon, *Spaced Out*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.)

<sup>25</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Oliver, *Shelter and Society*, 160.



Without constricting corners or load-bearing columns, domes were inhabitable sculptures made of multitudinous triangles and crystalline forms. The many parts of a dome were equally essential; every stage of construction was important and handcrafted, yet domes didn't require bulldozers, trucks, or heavy machinery and could be completed with simple hammers, saws, drills, and nails. Drop City was one of the first collections of amateur-built domes and gained much attention; especially after receiving Fuller's Dymaxion award in 1966, visitors came from far and wide to learn about domes and dome-building. After an extended stay at Drop City, one dome builder imagined that "soon domed cities will spread across the world."<sup>27</sup> With its experimental buildings and open door policy, Drop City tested a new technology that soon became the architectural vernacular of the counterculture.

## **BUILDING A CIVILIZATION FROM SCRAPS**

Trinidad, Colorado was founded as a railhead and mining town but by the time the Droppers entered onto the scene, labor had moved elsewhere leaving the region in a constant state of economic depression. Then home to 11,000 people, the town was a harbor for low-income and immigrant laborers who were collectively some of the poorest in the state. When the Droppers moved onto their six-acre plot of land no one blinked an eye, as Trinidadians were accustomed to seeing scrapped-together shelters and rag-tag attempts at creating a new life.<sup>28</sup>

With very little money and a commitment to voluntary poverty, the Droppers were faced with the creative challenge of building homes with found materials. The Droppers found that Trinidad was home to many demolition experts from Mexico and learned to scrounge by watching these professional demolitions, recovering what the Mexican crews didn't take. They were proud to use "the junk that the junkers junked"<sup>29</sup> and found immense possibility in living off the garbage of a consumer economy. A 1967 Dropper manifesto-like contribution in Boston's underground *Avatar*, recalls this early moment:

We have discovered a new art form: creative scrounging. We dismantle abandoned bridges by moonlight. We are sort of advanced junkmen taking advantage of advanced obsolescence. Drop City was begun without money, built on practically nothing. None of us is employed or has a steady income. Somehow we have not gone hungry...things come to us.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Spaced Out*, 190.

<sup>28</sup> *Colorado Heritage*, "Values in Conflict 'No Right to Be Poor' Colorado's Drop City," (date unknown) 16.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Rabbit, *Drop City* (New York: Olympia Press, Inc., 1971) 20.

<sup>30</sup> Albin Wagner (Peter Rabbit), *Boston Avatar* (August 4-18, 1967) 7.

Resourcefulness was as much a learned practice as it was embedded in each of the founding Droppers' upbringing. In fact, a working class background might distinguish the Droppers from other commune builders in their generation. While many Sixties-era communes were created by disaffected suburban youths who were fueled by private trust funds,<sup>31</sup> Droppers started with \$1,000. They had no cushion, no back-up, no privileged life to return to after a foray into the wilds of the counterculture. A lack of financial backing fostered the kind of commune that was created at Drop City, allowing them little choice but to build their new life – not necessarily from *scratch*, but in fact, from *scraps*.

*The Great Pumpkin Dome* (1965) was the first structure to appear on the dusty plot of land. It was made with salvaged two-by-four timbers, the measurements of which proved to be slightly inaccurate, thus lending the structure an immediate idiosyncrasy. The eighteen-foot-diameter wooden skeleton was covered with chicken wire and tarpaper, which were held in place by painstakingly applied layers of donated bottle caps and stolen cement.

Before winter hit, the Droppers built *The Kitchen Block* (1965), a slightly larger dome in the Fuller style, augmented by a quasi-A-frame entrance. The timber frame and plywood skin were eccentrically warped when unexpected rain fell before the dome was sealed with tar. Adding to the gritty funk of *The Kitchen Block* was the inventive insertion of car windshields as windows. With the completion of the second Drop City building, a peculiar aesthetic stood testament to the Droppers' scrounging practice and their laissez-faire approach to architecture. Neither building cost the Droppers more than \$10.

Within the first year, Drop City's population swelled to 15 - 20 adults. Housing became a pressing need and depended on everyone pitching in with daily building, not unlike the barn-raising of agricultural communities. Work was not mandatory but was very much a part of the place. According to one Dropper, "The greatest impact of communal life upon the artist is the realization that all community activity is equal, that digging a ditch carries no less status than erecting a sculpture; in fact the individual often discovers he is happier digging a ditch, *sculpting* a ditch."<sup>32</sup> Cooperative labor, resource sharing and scrounging shifted from necessity to lived manifesto, and became central to Drop City's identity.

During that first year at Drop City, word of the commune began to spread and soon drew the attention of Steve Baer, who was teaching in the architecture department at University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Baer was fascinated with polyhedral structures and needed space and a workforce to experiment with

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<sup>31</sup> Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790 – 1975* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1976) 321.

<sup>32</sup> Oliver, *Shelter and Society*, 158.

his latest inventions so he approached the Droppers, offering his designs in exchange for Dropper labor. At Drop City Baer introduced “zomes,” six of which were eventually constructed. The zome is a dome-like system that involves fewer parts and is more forgiving than Fuller’s geodesics. Fuller domes require total accuracy, whereas zomes allow for spontaneity and additions, alterations and mistakes. Zomes encourage experimentation and chance and are always unique in their final manifestation. The geometrics of the Fuller domes were freed up by Baer’s new mathematics and authenticated by the Droppers’ amateurism and low budget building practice.

Baer’s mutant constructions introduced new materials, and therefore, a new form of scrounging. His 1968 *Dome Cookbook* gives instructions for building a zome with car tops, readily available and acquired for twenty cents apiece.<sup>33</sup> Harvesting car tops required an intense and dangerous form of physical labor yet Droppers traveled to junkyards all over Colorado and New Mexico, chopping car tops in the blazing sun. One Dropper recalls:

It was dangerous; razor-sharp axes skittering off the steel, slicing at legs. When you hit one of the roof supports an incredible jolt travels up the axes handle and paralyzes your wrists and hands. Jagged steel edges catching clothing, tearing flesh, hands stiff, clenching, clenching. After chopping for an hour if you try to open your hands the fingers insist on closing into fists again. Blisters, blisters on top of blisters, bone weary... And the thumb smashes.... .. It hurt so bad, so bad. But the next day we were at it again. We measured progress on the Complex in thumb smashes.<sup>34</sup>

Droppers made no distinction between scrounging, stealing, or receiving gifts from the “cosmic forces.” In his 1971 memoir, Peter Rabbit describes the “Great Work” of building Drop City, “It’s all free, it all flows from the Cosmic Forces, all energy comes from the same place and it’s free.”<sup>35</sup> Dropper mysticism expanded the notion of *communal* into a much larger realm – that of spirit and time – and in doing so, enacted an anti-capitalist agenda of truly free exchange.

At moments this concept of the Cosmic Forces explained serendipitous good fortune (like encountering a pile of bricks at an abandoned warehouse), and other times it resulted in Robin Hood-style thievery. A favorite story of cosmic favor involves scoring the final shingle for *The Complex* (1967), a triad of adjoining domes; it was stealthily chopped in the dark of night from a brand-new golden Cadillac parked outside a roadside motel. As Peter Rabbit likes to say, “the shitmobile turned convertible overnight.”<sup>36</sup> More than spontaneous mischief,

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<sup>33</sup> Steve Baer, *Dome Cookbook* (Corrales, NM: Lama Foundation, 1968.)

<sup>34</sup> Rabbit, *Drop City*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

this and other Dropper acts of material reclamation demonstrate the truly radical program underway throughout America in what has been called the “Free Movement.”

In her book, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*, Julie Stephens compares the tactics employed by various Sixties countercultural groups in rethinking economic exchange, money and the distribution of wealth. She quotes a Digger who declares, “Money, like God, is dead” and references Jerry Rubin urging people to burn their money. She makes a distinction between the traditionally Left demonstrations in which resources are reallocated and those acts of Sixties counterculturalists – by dubbing everything free or a provision of the Cosmic Forces, money was essentially destroyed, its value undermined entirely.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, this was not about Socialist economic rearrangement, but about a different economy of value and exchange altogether. Abbie Hoffman once claimed that “the free thing is perhaps the most revolutionary thing in America,” as an attack on foundational capitalist notions of ownership, property, and value.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the Cosmic Forces were as much part of this radical “free” movement as well as a justification for Droppers in building a civilization from scratch.

### **Post-scarcity Riches**

In his 1971 study, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, political philosopher and ecologist Murray Bookchin claimed that,

in the very act of refusing to live by bourgeois strictures, the first seeds of the utopian lifestyle are planted. Negation passes into affirmation within the rotting guts of capitalism itself. “Dropping out” becomes a mode of dropping in – into the tentative, experimental, and as yet highly ambiguous, social relations of utopia.<sup>39</sup>

Drop City was one of the first communal efforts to enact this refusal and was a living display of utopian self-sufficiency. Like hunter-gatherers, Droppers collected what they imagined was provided for them and brought it back to the community to be dispersed as needed – this was true not only of building supplies, but also of food, fiscal income, and clothing. Any money – earned from occasional outside work, from the sale of artworks, from child support, even alimony – was collected in a communal fund. A single closet housed all clothing; books were passed around; drugs were shared. Even cars at Drop City became part of the public domain. Sexual relations and sleeping quarters were some of

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<sup>37</sup> Julie Stephens, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 42 – 47.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2004) viii.

the very few things that Droppers attempted to keep private. The Droppers survived primarily on government commodities and oftentimes ate the same stuff sold to pig farmers for slop. Supplemental food was scrounged from the local Safeway dumpster; eggs were stolen from neighboring chicken farms. The Droppers made statewide news with their initial enlistment and also their later dismissal from the Los Animas County food stamp program.<sup>40</sup> In 1967 one Dropper told a reporter from the *Denver Post* that Droppers “won’t seek meaningless employment just to feed themselves.”<sup>41</sup>

Drop City perched on the edge of parasitic dependence and self-sufficiency, relying on the production of waste and therefore, on consumer society’s continued surplus. Although they considered themselves free of capitalism and hierarchy, the Droppers depended on prosperous mainstream America’s bountiful trash pile and government welfare in order to survive.

While often stereotyped as dropouts and leeches, the communes required some form of money and made innovative stabs at fiscal self-sufficiency. The Anonymous Artists of America played rock and roll in the bars of nearby towns like Walsenburg, CO, the Reality Construction Company set up an adobe brick cottage industry; many others had gardens or small farming operations, published newsletters and books. In the early years, Droppers subsidized their existence through commodity exchange; they sold art objects and actually solicited financial support. Their first monthly newsletter was called “Send Us All Your Money” and listed reasons that readers should do just that.<sup>42</sup> Their underground comic *The Being Bag* (1966)—the first of its kind—was created with the intent of selling subscriptions nationwide. Even Drop City’s collective work of art, *The Ultimate Painting* (1966), a giant, spinning circular painting, was shown at the Brooklyn Museum with a price tag of \$60,000.<sup>43</sup> The Dropper bulletin that appeared in a 1967 issue of the *Boston Avatar* stated, with an address to which donations could be sent:

We want to use everything, new, junk, good, bad, we want to be able to make limitless things. We want TV videotape recorders and cameras. We want computers and miles of color film and elaborate cine cameras and tape decks and amps and echo-chambers and everywhere. We want millionaire patrons. We want the most up-to-date equipment in the world to make our things. We want an atomic reactor.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Morgan Lawhon, “Drop City Places Art Over Hunger.” *Denver Post*, August 6, 1967.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Rabbit, *Drop City*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> Bernofsky, interview, October 17, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Albin Wagner, “Drop City: A Total Living Environment,” *Boston Avatar*, August 4, 1967.

Over the years, the collective took their Droppings on the road in hopes of making money. Visiting community colleges and other youth enclaves, they attempted to “turn on” audiences and make a bit of cash. With the completion of *The Theater Dome* in 1967, Droppers began organizing Droppings on site that were open to the public. Inspired by the Be-Ins in San Francisco and Central Park, Drop City began marketing itself in alternative newspapers as a stop-over between coasts and for their 1967 Joy Festival, promised 96 hours of “mind-blowing freak out.”<sup>45</sup>

During Drop City’s middle years hundreds of young people flocked to the commune for a night, a weekend, or a year at a time. By 1967 their open-door policy was irreversible, thanks in part to a *Time* magazine cover story,<sup>46</sup> and the Droppers were forced to shift their focus from art making to the provision of care and entertainment for accumulating dropouts. This stream of visitors bankrupted Drop City’s delicate subsistence and led to the community’s eventual demise. The Droppers’ parasitic practice could not support itself *and* the onslaught of hippie pests; the trash pile was not that plentiful. And so Drop City was abandoned to the dropouts and it subsequently crumbled.

## NEW FRONTIERS

After the Summer of Love, many of the urban countercultural centers had deteriorated into a squalorly haven of drugs and depression. As The Beatles’ George Harrison remarked, “you know, I went to Haight-Ashbury, expecting it to be this brilliant place, and it was just full of horrible, spotty, dropout kids on drugs.”<sup>47</sup> With the escalation of race riots and violent protests across the country, cities lost their appeal for many counterculture seekers. As one rural commune-dweller said, “A lot of us used to live in the Haight-Ashbury. You had to shoot speed just to survive in a scene like that... The city is doomed. Those who can get it together on the land will be the survivors.”<sup>48</sup>

“The key issue... is LAND,”<sup>49</sup> proclaimed Timothy Leary, and for the thousands of hippies and counterculturalists that relocated to the Southwest, this was certainly true. Not only was land inexpensive, but it also resembled a kind of nowhere, a place to explore and experiment outside of rules, institutions, and watchful eyes. The Southwest was and still is home to the most advanced yet secretive experiments by the US military industrial complex; indeed, it is a proving ground for a variety of large-scale experiments. Many believed that the “Outlaw Area” envisioned by Stewart Brand was to be found in southern Colorado or northern

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<sup>45</sup> *The Burning World Review*, “Drop City Joy Festival,” June 1967, page 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Time*, “The Hippies,” July 3, 1967.

<sup>47</sup> *The Beatles Anthology*, DVD, directed by Bob Smeaton (Los Angeles: Capital, 2003)

<sup>48</sup> Fairfield, *Communes USA*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, *The Hippies*, 92.

New Mexico where Native Americans, Latinos, Hispanics, cowboys, and spiritual mystics lived close to the earth and with 50-mile vistas. It was widely believed that there were no more frontiers, and that open space must claimed in the hinterlands for the “Underground States of America.”<sup>50</sup> As new-age pioneers, commune builders carved out what they believed to be a better reality through homesteading acts that brought them together as community and also back to the land.

Returning to the essentials of daily life was seen as revolutionary to many Sixties-era communards. One could change the world by making her own candles or growing her own food. Scrapping the system, dropping out, or “starting from scratch” was – although often mundane, quiet, slow, even naïve in its manifestation – seen as fundamental to a new world order. These were not necessarily the same Sixties radicals who were marching in the streets or bombing police and prison buildings. As one commune builder asks:

How many people here could build a car? How many could refine gas? Could you take care of yourself on the lowest, simplest level? Before we go solving the world’s problems I think it’s important to know right where we are on this ground.<sup>51</sup>

For this brand of radical, the revolution started at home on a very micro level. By starting with a primitive goat pasture and by building Drop City themselves (there were no contractors or subcontractors), the Droppers implemented basic, Do-It-Yourself building technologies. By revisiting the nuts and bolts of everyday life, Droppers learned to survive via improvisation. If nothing else, they learned how to drive a nail, how to stretch a can of beans, how to provide shelter for oneself, how to make decisions without a leader. While these small initiatives do not necessarily constitute a new society, they are foundational activities and therefore, a place to start. As the philosophy of the Situationists illuminated, “the modern world must learn what it already knows, become what it already is, by means of a great work of exorcism, by conscious practice. One can escape from the commonplace only by manhandling it, mastering it, steeping it in dreams.”<sup>52</sup> Drop City evidenced an imaginative reinvention of daily life and was a testing ground for the technologies and ideologies that influenced back-to-the-land practices that proliferated in hundreds of hip communes in the late Sixties.

## **OFF THE GRID AND ON THE NET**

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<sup>50</sup> Gordon, *Spaced Out*, 139-146.

<sup>51</sup> Stewart Brand, ed., *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, (Menlo Park, California: Portola Institute, Inc., Spring 1971) 111-117.

<sup>52</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. 1967, [http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub\\_contents/5](http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/5).

With the formation of Libre, New Buffalo, The Lower Farm, Five Star, Morning Star East, The Hog Farm, The Lama Foundation and up to twenty-some other communes, the Southwest became a set of tourist destinations for the comparative witness of hippies in action.<sup>53</sup> As the number of communes grew, a sense of an emergent counterculture gained momentum. The circulation of ideas – especially about construction technologies and tips for newcomers living in the desert – was paramount to creating a somewhat united “civilization.”

Information exchange was aided by the development of the nation’s interstate network (which was completed in the late-1960s), encouraging road trips and cross-country travel. Richard Fairfield, publisher of the *Modern Utopian*, a journal founded to report on the commune movement, was one of many onlookers who visited Drop City and the Southwestern communes as a first-hand witness, creating a literature and a living network of people and practices.

Ideas were shared via extended visits, newsletters, video collectives, public events, and traveling sideshows. There was a certain nonchalant but earnest approach to information sharing among the Sixties’ counterculture. For instance, when Drop City neighbors Linda and Dean Fleming left the area with commune member, Peter Rabbit, to found Libre in 1968, Richert gifted them with dome-building plans scrawled on a piece of scrap paper. With little more than an equation and a map of interlocking triangles, the Libreans established their new communal site with a geodesic dome on their land.<sup>54</sup> In many such cases a notion or philosophy, even an architectural design, was half-communicated, half-understood, and half-implemented yet this partial transmission often proved to be just enough with personal innovation filling in the gaps.

Underground magazines and newsletters like *The Whole Earth Catalog* and *The Modern Utopian* aimed to encourage grassroots connectivity by linking people, ideas, products, and places. Publications like Baer’s *Dome Cookbook*, the infamous *Anarchist Cookbook*, and Antfarm’s *Inflatable Cookbook*, introduced new technologies and articulated in aesthetic terms the counterculture’s foundational worldview. Providing “access to tools” through Do-It-Yourself instruction manuals – often with hand-drawn diagrams and personal insights – these grassroots information networks were as dedicated to style and methodology as they were to content. As is stated in the first issue of *Radical Software*, the voice of the video collective Raindance, “Our species will survive neither by totally rejecting nor unconditionally embracing technology – but by humanizing it; by allowing people access to the informational tools they need to shape and reassert control over their lives.” Through collaborative zome building, latrine digging, and the creation of multi-media artwork, the Droppers tested a variety of technologies and modified or humanized them to suit their needs. As

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Fairfield, *Communes USA: A Personal Tour*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972.)

<sup>54</sup> Linda Fleming, interview with the author, San Francisco, CA: February 21, 2007.



an experimental art center and counterculture refuge, Drop City did not have the most sophisticated equipment, but gave open access to a steadily growing toolbox of situations, techniques, collaborators and perspectives, which, in turn, cultivated other temporary nodes in a growing web of possibility.

One event that sought to share this toolbox of people and ideas was the ALLOY conference, organized by Steve Baer with Barry Hickman, March 20-23, 1970. It was a weekend event conducted at an abandoned tile factory near La Luz, NM between the Trinity bombsite and the Mescalero Apache reservation and was framed as a conference on new building technologies. Participants were welcomed from a variety of local and national communes and the *Whole Earth Catalog* was invited to report on the weekend's events. Discussion at ALLOY ranged from concrete to cardboard to 3M-tape to dope to evolution to magic. It entertained questions like "What sort of research do we do to use the technology in order to improve our minds?" Interestingly, the article that appeared in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*<sup>55</sup> evidences the complexity of this media moment, the various ways that information was reported and received, and the vagaries associated with building a new society. The seven-page spread is a smattering of photographs and unattributed quotes. Very little of the information in the article is useful or cited, and the piece functions more as testament to the fact that something happened, that people attended, and that a particular spirit was in the air. This manner of stylistically relaying incomplete information is perhaps exemplary of the moment's priorities. Although inspired by the idea of an information network, the connections being made were primarily social, ideological, aesthetic. Baer and Fuller may have imagined the Droppers as leaders of a design science revolution but in the end, their major contribution was not scientific or mathematic, it was cultural.

## **ART OF THE OUTLAW AREA**

Since the 1960s, the art world has seen a proliferation of practices, institutions, spaces, and participants who have taken the rhetoric of the counterculture into the microcosm of art and then back out into the realm of daily life. Today artists plant gardens, produce newspapers, operate free universities, organize protests, design shelters and alternative economies and they call it art practice. This wave of art that curator Nato Thompson has described as "participatory, embodied, tactical, interventionist, community-based, didactic, relational, social, and dialogical"<sup>56</sup> is interdisciplinary in nature and baffling in its analysis, as it is often process-oriented and does not necessarily produce an object. Continuing the project of merging art and life, recent art and artists attempt to activate passive spectatorship through the physical and collaborative participation of audiences

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<sup>55</sup> Brand, *Whole Earth Catalog*, 111-117.

<sup>56</sup> Nato Thompson, *The Creative Time Summit: Revolutions in Public Practice* program brochure, (New York: October 23-24, 2009) 3.

and through the construction of situations that produce new social relationships and thus new social realities.

Nicolas Bourriard, contemporary art curator and critic, claims that "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist."<sup>57</sup> He describes this living model as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."<sup>58</sup> I would argue that this notion of expansive, interdisciplinary and collectively produced art was exactly the project underway at Drop City and its neighboring Southwestern communes. The influence of the counterculture on contemporary art practice is deserving of a closer look, yet it is clear that the work of a vanguard of artists associated with participatory or relational aesthetics closely resembles the DIY, self-determined, open-ended, utopian and expanded practices developed during the 1960s at places like Drop City.

Drop City lasted seven years – a short time by society's standards, but long-lasting as an artwork. It was a collaborative open-ended experiment initiated by artists who aimed to revolutionize everyday life and through both its successes and failures, cultivated a vernacular for the communal counterculture. While Drop City may not be a model for future societies or even in terms of communal living, it was a proving ground for forms of architecture, for scrounging practices, and for expanded notions of art. With its open-door policy and connection to emergent networks, Drop City was essential in developing the relationships and information that, in turn, built the Southwestern communes that came to define an essential element of the American Left.

It is projects like Drop City that effectively blur the boundaries between art practice and lived experience, that create interstitial, momentary testing grounds for new possibilities. The creation of these "temporary autonomous zones"<sup>59</sup> is essential if art is to remain vibrant and culture wild and free. As art and life continue to merge in fascinating ways, it is worthwhile to recall Drop City as a provocative social and physical experiment that proved that life in America can be lived differently.

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<sup>57</sup> Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: la presses du réel, 2002) 13.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, (Brooklyn: Autonomedia Anti-copyright, 1985).