

WHITNEY

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Press Release

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WHITNEY PRESENTS LANDMARK EXHIBITION ON BUCKMINSTER FULLER

Explores the legacy of visionary American inventor, designer, environmentalist, and humanitarian

"Now there is one outstandingly important fact regarding Spaceship Earth, and that is that no instruction book came with it."
-- R. Buckminster Fuller, "Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth" (1969)

New York, September 9, 2008 -- The Whitney Museum of American Art's *Buckminster Fuller: Starting with the Universe* is the first major American exhibition in decades devoted to the visionary mind and work of Buckminster Fuller, and the most inclusive show to date of Fuller's work. On view from June 26 to September 21, 2008, the show is co-curated by Michael Hays, Adjunct Curator of Architecture, and Dana Miller, Associate Curator at the Whitney; the curators worked in association with the Department of Special Collections of the Stanford University Libraries and with the cooperation of the Fuller family. The exhibition travels next spring to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where it will be seen from March 14 through June 21, 2009.

R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) was one of the great American creative thinkers of the 20th century. Philosopher, forecaster, designer, poet, inventor, and advocate of alternative energy, Fuller is probably best known as the originator of the geodesic dome, but his theories and innovations engaged fields ranging from mathematics, engineering, and environmental science to literature, architecture, and visual art. Fuller was one of the great transdisciplinary thinkers and made no distinction between these spheres as discrete areas of investigation. He devoted much of his life to closing the gap between the sciences and the humanities, a schism he felt prevented a comprehensive view of the world. He believed in the significant interconnectedness of all things and concluded that certain basic

structures and systems underlie everything in our world. Today his prophetic concepts are a touchstone for discussions of issues including environmental conservation, the manufacture and distribution of housing, and global organization of information.

As curators Hays and Miller write, "Fuller sought to produce comprehensive anticipatory design solutions that would benefit the largest segment of humanity while consuming the fewest resources...Starting as he did from the universe and ending up with visual-spatial models with which to ponder universal philosophical problems in the here and now, it is not surprising that Fuller has had a tremendous impact on the visual arts and architecture. His sensibilities and modes of working were deeply aesthetic and many of his closest friends and supporters were artists. The results of more than five decades of Fuller's integrated approach toward the design and technology of housing, transportation, cartography, and communication are displayed in the exhibition, much of it for the first time. Fuller's concepts are ripe for reexamination by artists, architects, designers, scientists, and poets. The exhibition and catalogue offer a fresh look at Fuller's life's work for everyone who shares his sense of urgency about homelessness, poverty, diminishing natural resources, and the future of our planet."

This exhibition offers an opportunity to study the pioneering thinking of an intensely passionate, prolific, and idiosyncratic individual. It includes original examples of Fuller's important works from both private and public collections, among them the sole extant Dymaxion car; models of the Wichita House; the Tetrascroll portfolio; dozens of geodesic study models; as well as numerous sketches, notebooks, and other artifacts. Many of the artifacts and documents in the show are held in the R. Buckminster Fuller Archive at the Stanford University Libraries.

About Buckminster Fuller

Richard Buckminster Fuller Jr. was born on July 12, 1895, in Milton, Massachusetts, to an old New England family. His great-aunt was the transcendentalist feminist writer Margaret Fuller, co-founder, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, of the magazine *The Dial*. Spending summers on Bear Island, off the coast of Maine, Fuller showed an early propensity for design and invention. At a young age, he experimented with designing a new apparatus for human propulsion of small boats. He attended Milton Academy, in Massachusetts, and entered Harvard in 1913, but was expelled, returned to the university the following year, and left again, without ever graduating.

Between periods at Harvard, he was sent to Canada by his family to work as a mechanic in a cousin's textile mill, and later as a laborer in the meat-packing industry. He married Anne Hewlett in 1917. Fuller served in the U.S. Naval Reserves and the U.S. Navy in World War I as a shipboard radio operator, an editor for a Navy publication, and a crash-boat commander. After discharge, he again worked in meat-packing, where he acquired management experience. In the early 1920s he and his father-in-law developed the Stockade Building System for producing lightweight, weatherproof, and fireproof housing.

In 1922, Fuller lost his first child, Alexandra, shortly before her fourth birthday, to complications from polio and spinal meningitis. A few years later, he was ousted as president of the Stockade Midwest Corporation by new owners and took a job as a flooring salesman. In 1927, jobless and destitute, Fuller considered taking his own life, but later said that he decided at the last moment to embark instead on "an experiment, to find what a single individual can contribute to changing the world and benefiting all humanity."

During the 1930s, Fuller worked on his designs for a Dymaxion house as well as a Dymaxion car. ("Dymaxion" was a trademark he used for numerous inventions; it was a contraction of the words "dynamic," "maximum," and "ion.") He collaborated with the copper company Phelps Dodge Corporation on prototypes of the Dymaxion Bathroom, an easily installed, lightweight, four-part unit Fuller envisioned incorporating into Dymaxion Houses. In 1939, his Dymaxion House model and Dymaxion Bathroom were included in *Art in Our Time*, an exhibition celebrating the opening of the new building of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. In the early 1940s, he joined *Fortune* magazine's editorial staff as a technical consultant and it was during this time that he developed his Dymaxion Map.

Fuller's exposure to artists increased considerably when he took a teaching position at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he taught for two summers, in 1948 and 1949, encountering Josef and Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Richard Lippold, and Kenneth Snelson. The first summer, Fuller played the lead in Erik Satie's play *The Ruse of Medusa*, organized by Cage and directed by Arthur Penn; it featured Cunningham and Elaine de Kooning, and employed props and sets by Ruth Asawa and the de Koonings. It was there, at Black Mountain College, with the support of a group of professors and students, that Fuller began work on the project that would make him famous, the geodesic dome. In 1949, he erected the

world's first geodesic dome building that could sustain its own weight with no practical limits. The U.S. government recognized the importance of the discovery and employed him to make small domes for the army. Within a few years, there were thousands of domes around the world.

In 1959 Fuller accepted a research professorship at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he taught for more than a decade. The growing recognition that Fuller enjoyed in the 1950s reached a crescendo in the mid-1960s. Throughout this period and for the rest of his life, he contributed a wide range of ideas, designs, and inventions to the world, particularly in the areas of practical, inexpensive shelter and transportation. Fuller wrote several books in short succession and was the subject of extensive press coverage, including a 1964 *Time* cover story and a profile by Calvin Tomkins in *The New Yorker*, in 1966.

In terms of professional architectural accomplishments, Fuller's masterwork was the U.S. Pavilion for the 1967 World's Fair in Montreal. Fuller was awarded the commission to build this pavilion after representing the United States with dome structures in several international fairs in the 1950s. (Domes were especially attractive for pavilion use because they required no internal supports.) He collaborated on the dome's design with his architectural partner Shoji Sadao. The resulting translucent 3/4 dome structure spanned 250 feet in diameter and was constructed from steel pipe and a transparent acrylic skin. Like Fuller's earliest housing proposals, the dome was based on the proposition of creating a stable and useful structure using the fewest materials. In 1968, the United States gave the dome to the city of Montreal; later that year, it was awarded the Architectural Design Award from the American Institute of Architects.

Over the course of the next two decades, Fuller continued to lecture at hundreds of universities, contributed writings to numerous publications, and had his work exhibited at museums and galleries throughout the world. He was awarded 28 U.S. patents and many honorary doctorates. Fuller died on July 1, 1983, at the age of 87.

Publication

A comprehensive, fully illustrated publication accompanies the exhibition. The curators, Michael Hays and Dana Miller, in addition to writing the introduction together, have each contributed an essay. Antoine Picon and Elizabeth Smith offer two essays on Fuller's

impact, the former placing him within the history of utopian thought and the emergence of a society of information and communication, and the latter illuminating several of the important ways in which Fuller's impact is manifested in today's contemporary art. Calvin Tomkins's seminal 1966 *New Yorker* profile of Fuller is reprinted, which perhaps more than any other article from Fuller's lifetime captures the international figure at the height of his creative powers, while also drawing an intimate portrait. The catalogue is rounded out by a contextual chronology by Jennie Goldstein, which reminds us that although Fuller was a singular individual, he was always part of the historical fabric of his time. The catalogue is co-published and distributed by Yale University Press.

Tour

The exhibition travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where it will be on view from March 14 through June 21, 2009. This is a fitting venue for the show, as co-curator Dana Miller explains: "Several key periods in Fuller's life took place in Illinois, so we are especially pleased to see the show travel to Chicago for this reason. We're also grateful to the Illinois institutions which so generously lent to the exhibition, in particular the Special Collection Research Center, Morris Library, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, which generously lent 26 geometric models to the show." One of the first public presentations of Fuller's Dymaxion House took place at the iconic Marshall Field's department store in 1929, and the Dymaxion Car was featured in 1933 in the Century of Progress International Exposition, both in Chicago. Fuller taught at Southern Illinois University Carbondale from 1959 to 1971 and built his own geodesic home there. He returned as a visiting professor at the Edwardsville Campus from 1972 to 1974.

Symposium

The Whitney is partnering with The Cooper Union and The Architectural League of New York to present a symposium on Buckminster Fuller, to coincide with the exhibition. Taking place at Cooper Union's Great Hall, the keynote will be held on Friday, September 12, followed by a day-long symposium on Saturday, September 13.

Friday, September 12

7 pm

Keynote Roundtable

Moderated by Anthony Vidler, The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of The Cooper Union
Introduction to the symposium by Allegra Fuller Synder

Saturday, September 13

10 am

On Architecture, Design, and Science

Peter Galison, Harvard University

Chuck Hoberman, Designer, Artist, Engineer, and Inventor

Felicity Scott, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University

Anthony Vidler, The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of The Cooper Union

Moderated by K. Michael Hays, Whitney Museum of American Art; Harvard University Graduate School of Design

1 pm

On Influence and Contemporary Art

Carol Bove, artist

Pedro Reyes, artist

Elizabeth A. T. Smith, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Victoria Vesna, artist

Moderated by Dana Miller, Whitney Museum of American Art

The symposium is co-sponsored by The Architectural League of New York and The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of The Cooper Union

Admission:

FREE for Whitney Museum of American Art members, Architectural League members, and Cooper Union students, faculty, and staff; \$6 for students of other institutions and senior citizens; \$8 for general admission. For more information and to purchase a ticket, please visit whitney.org.

This exhibition is organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art in association with the Department of Special Collections of the Stanford University Libraries.

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Media partner Thirteen/WNET

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper and the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate,

the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:

Polaroids: Mapplethorpe	Through September 14, 2008
Buckminster Fuller: Starting with the Universe	June 26-September 21, 2008
Paul McCarthy: Three Installations, Two Films	Through October 12, 2008
"Progress"	Through November 30, 2008
Signs of the Time	Opens September 19, 2008
Between the Still and Moving Image	October 1-November 30, 2008
Corin Hewitt: Seed Stage	October 3, 2008-January 4, 2009
Alexander Calder: The Paris Years	October 16, 2008-February 15, 2009
William Eggleston	November 7, 2008-January 25, 2009

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission is \$15 for adults; Members, children (ages 11 and under), and New York City public high school students are admitted free. Senior citizens (62 and over) and students with valid ID: \$10. There is a \$6 admission fee for a pass to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6-9 pm. For information, please call 212-570-3600 or visit whitney.org.