

THE ULTIMATE PAINTING

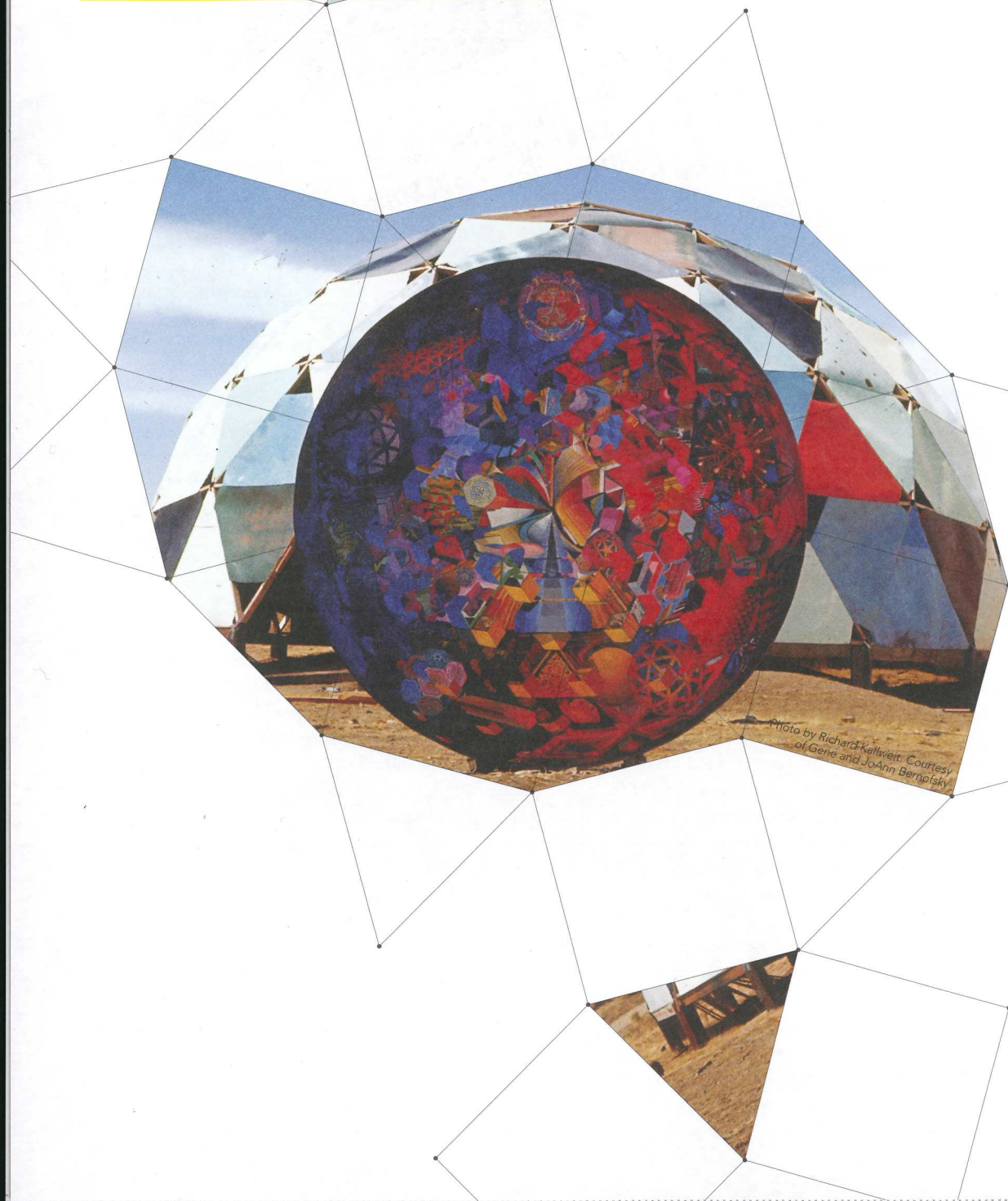


Photo by Richard Kallweit. Courtesy of Gene and JoAnn Bernofsky.

— JOAN GROSSMAN

Drop City was an experimental artists community on the plains of Southern Colorado that is often cited as the first rural commune of the 1960s. The artists' visually arresting domes were influenced by Buckminster Fuller, and made from cartops, bottle caps and a range of materials they accumulated for nearly nothing, all in the service of a modest goal: to create a new civilization. Drop City's anti-dogmatic philosophy was drenched in self-stylized hyperbole. "The Ultimate Painting" is a case in point.

Now part of Drop City's pranksterish mythology, the Ultimate Painting disappeared sometime in 1968 after it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum's landmark exhibition, EAT—Experiments in Art and Technology. Painted in 1966 by the four original Droppers—Gene Bernofsky, Joann Bernofsky, Clark Richert, and Richard Kallweit—the painting was a circular work measuring a formidable 60 inches in diameter. As was typical of the Drop City ethos, each contributor worked on the painting in spontaneous sessions. No one owned the work. It was a collaborative and performative creation that was made when psychedelic light and audio shows were just emerging as experimental and experiential fusions of music, painting, film, and animation. Designed to spin under a strobe light, with the help of a discarded washing machine motor, the painting would produce optical effects with remarkable precision.

The Ultimate Painting was housed in Drop City's Theater Dome, where Clark Richert had envisioned a 360-degree projection system. That never materialized, but Drop City's filmmakers, artists, and writers created lectures and performances that they occasionally took on the road to galleries and universities to generate income. The Ultimate Painting reputedly accompanied some of these excursions. Its final showing at the Brooklyn Museum was spearheaded by the renegade engineer Billy Klüver and the artist Robert Rauschenberg, whose Black Mountain College pedigree, mixed media "Combines" made of trash and found objects, and the

desire to fill the gap between life and art were all part of a trajectory that resonated deeply at Drop City.

Prior to its disappearance, the Droppers offered to sell The Ultimate Painting for \$50,000, a sum that was inordinately and impossibly large. The Ultimate price tag was something of a prescient wink to the stratospheric prices that Pop Art was destined to bring to the American art market. The \$50,000 offer was also a "Dropping," a practice that Gene Bernofsky and Clark Richert had conceived on the rooftop of their shared loft space in Lawrence, Kansas, when they were students. Dropping everything from painted rocks to a boot swinging on a rope, Bernofsky and Richert were emphatically repositioning "art" away from the confines of galleries and museums and dropping it into everyday life. A Dropping was inevitably absurd and could be anything that deconstructed or confronted conventional assumptions. According to Bernofsky, the excremental associations one might have with "droppings" were no accident. Much like the Situationist International, the largely French association of avant-garde artists and writers that emerged in the shadow of WWII, the Droppers expressed their opposition to a war-mongering and materialistic culture through disarming creative practice. As the prolific Situationist Guy Debord wrote in 1963, "The coherence of this society cannot be understood without an all-encompassing critique, illuminated by the inverse project of a liberated creativity, the project of everyone's control of all levels of their own history." If Drop City was anything, it was an exuberant experiment in "liberated creativity" as a way of life.

Hence "The Ultimate Painting," blurring authorship and authority, unmoored from a frame, in motion and alive, its intricate, sometimes exquisite, designs reflecting and refracting Drop City's geometric architecture and fractal sensibility (almost a decade before the word fractal was coined). The Ultimate Painting declares itself fearlessly and defiantly, asserting its place in Drop City's self-made history. Its "ultimatum" endures as part of Drop City's singular legacy—an uncompromising demand that is just that, a demand to be uncompromising in regard to whimsical and creative impulses. □