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In Brooklyn, Painting a Fuller Picture of 'the Dome Guy'

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This week in Chelsea, the simple black-box environs of the Kitchen will host the making of a new documentary, with superstructural domes, three-wheeled automobiles and a proposal for a sky-high bubble to protect Manhattan from unpleasant weather. Of course, none of them will be real, as is often the case on a film set.

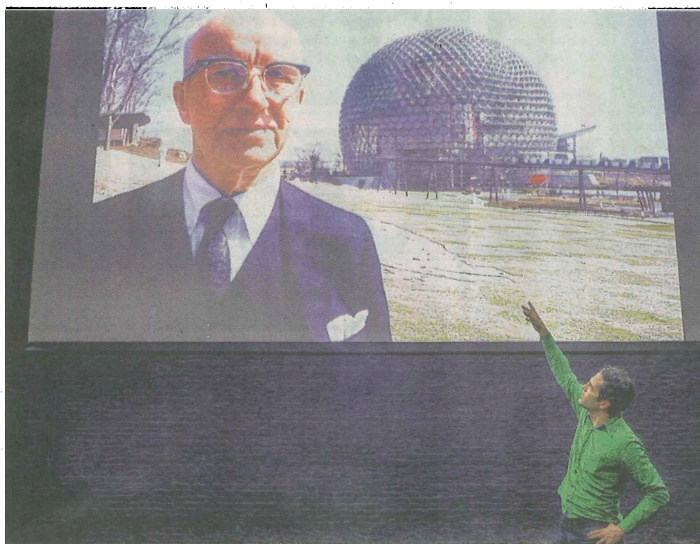
But then, even the film set itself won't be real—existing, instead, as the setting for a curious compound art form known as the "live documentary." The subject for this living, breathing "film" is the visionary futurist and eccentric thinker R. Buckminster Fuller, who died 30 years ago after designing architectural breakthroughs like the geodesic dome and championing a sustainable utopian society attainable to all. On Tuesday and Wednesday, "The Love Song of R. Buckminster Fuller" will star local filmmaker Sam Green in the lead role, with local indie-rock mainstays Yo La Tengo playing a real-time soundtrack by his side.

"I don't see myself as a performer who goes out there and slays the crowd," said Mr. Green, a 46-year-old Brooklynite who spends most of his time behind real cameras as a documentarian. "But it's an interesting challenge to learn."

For this new project, Mr. Green will address his audience directly in the role of an onstage narrator, a steward of a mix of archival images and edited footage from Fuller's life. It's not unlike a lecture, he said, though the presentation benefits from a construct that is both straightforward and cinematic.

"Now, when you make films, you have to assume people are going to watch it here," Mr. Green said, pointing at the tiny screen on his phone. "It's terrible, especially when it's a film about utopian ideas. Utopianism is all about collective experience and collectivity, and this form I thought was cool because you could hang onto it as a theatrical experience."

Mr. Green started performing "live documentaries" after enduring a professional flop. Having found wide-scale success with his film "The Weather Underground,"—a historical survey of the radical '70s dissident group that earned an Oscar nomination in 2003—he set out to make a film about utopia. The concept



Above, Sam Green at the Kitchen with a projected image of Buckminster Fuller, in a rehearsal for his new 'live documentary.' Below, Yo La Tengo rehearses the music. Right, Fuller's proposed weather dome over Midtown.



was ambitious, with four component parts drafted to "resonate and create a sort of larger 'poem' or set of ideas about utopia." It was a failure. "I shot the different pieces, put them together, showed it to people as a rough cut, and they all said, 'This doesn't make any sense at all,'" Mr. Green laughed, less than dismayed by the memory.

At one point while making the

film, he was invited to give a talk about his problematic work-in-progress. He showed segments of the film and explained the passions and connections linking them. So went the birth of the "live documentary."

Cut to: Buckminster Fuller, the late-20th-century luminary well acquainted with propositions best appreciated at the "idea stage." Many of Fuller's concepts

and projects were enigmatic—futuristic cars and sustainable bubble-like homes, new maps and philosophies to further global cooperation—rendering the man himself something of an enigma in the popular mind.

"One of the things that comes up in the piece is people [who] react to Fuller as 'that dome guy,' and that's definitely what I was," said Ira Kaplan, the guitar-



ist and singer in Yo La Tengo, which composed original music to perform as Mr. Green guides the show with monologue and images to constitute the sense of a documentary.

The filmmaker found his way to the band by way of a friend: Emily Hubley, an animator whose sister, Georgia, plays drums in the group. Having worked on a few films before, Yo La Tengo wrote instrumental pieces to slot into cinematic cues. About a year ago, Mr. Green joined the band at its practice space in Hoboken to "direct" its progress. "He came out and gave us instantaneous responses, which put him on the spot and put ourselves on the spot," Mr. Kaplan said. "It came together more collaboratively than I think anybody envisioned."

Mr. Green imagined the music as being fit for Fuller. "There's an emotional palate to it—a lot of yearning and beauty and melancholy, a slight heart-breakiness over the fact that the world hasn't turned out his way," he said.

Mr. Green's own work, meanwhile, drew largely from research he had undertaken at Stanford University, home to an extravagantly large Buckminster Fuller archive. The materials are said to weigh 45 tons, some of them indexed sequentially in the Fuller-designed Dymaxion Chronofile system. There Mr. Green discovered: telegrams, receipts and laundry tickets belonging to one of America's most probing and prescient thinkers. "It's such a weird expression of who he was, and such a telling articulation,"

he said. "I'm a sucker for the mundane parts of people's lives. I got his glasses and his passports to look at."

With no shortage of curios, Mr. Green set about assembling the story of Fuller and his work, which included proselytizing for favored architectural forms (foremost among them the geodesic dome) and drafting futuristic designs of all kinds, including a three-wheeled Dymaxion car that made U-turns on a dime and a vast bubble over Midtown to regulate the weather and reduce pollution. "One of [Fuller's] main messages was that we have the resources so that everybody in the world can have, at least materially, a decent life. That to me is a marvelously exciting idea, utopian in the best sense."

From geodesic domes to Dymaxion cars, Buckminster Fuller's utopian ideas inspire an inventive staging.

Fuller's idiosyncrasies and intellectual sense of adventure also lent themselves to the "live documentary," a playful format conceived to be dynamic and free. "Sometimes people ask, 'Are you ever going to turn this into—pause—a real movie? But I think the live form is more giving in a way,'" Mr. Green said. "People have to go into it, turn their phones off and be subsumed."