The Last Whole Earth Catalog

Domebook 2
Both distributed by Random House, New York.

By HUGH KENNER

"The Last Whole Earth Catalog," one million copies with national distribution by a New York publishing house, is going to distress true believers by winding up on a lot of Connecticut coffee tables. Actually, true believers are as extraneous to its spirit as are suburban voyeurs. The spirit isn't divisive. A sign back at headquarters (The Whole Earth Truck Store, Menlo Park, Calif.) proclaims it: "DIG WHOLESES." And the back cover displays a NASA photograph of the whole earth, captioned "We can't put it together. It is together." Inside the 468-page book.

Hugh Kenner, author of "The Counterfeeters: An Historical Comedy," is building his own geodesic dome.

one-liners abound: "Trust is the reality of the road being cleared, the trash being emptied." "The consumer has more power for good or ill than the voter." "Money makes the transfer so easy that the transfer itself becomes an obsession." "If you want to try a new way, you've got to build something."

That tone is familiar; here it is in a different book: "For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false position." "In sane moments we regard only the facts." "The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage." Thoreau, of course, the apostle of drop-out culture.

This stylistic convergence is arresting: from the Whole Earth's communities, as from beside Walden Pond, fly ships of portable wisdom, in what has been, from Ben Franklin to Ezra Pound, one of the most persistent of American genres, the aphoristic: what a man working with his hands might generate, concentrating his reflections in the course of some practical task. It's not a "literary" form, though Thoreau used it as a literary base, polishing aphorisms till they sometimes resemble souvenirs. The Whole Earth apothecary is less finished; you can watch them crystallizing, spontaneously, out of the practical information that's the Catalog's business. Here's a man called Mark Brandel, one of the dozen of contributors, telling you how to build with stone:

"Stone walls and buildings. These are actually weaker than they look. It was the wood frame houses that survived the Alaskan earthquake." That's the stuff of a parable, and just at this point he could swerve, if he wanted, into Thoreauvian musings. But his mind is on conveying information, and he's soon explaining how "Strong beautiful wall is laid up rock by rock. No other way....knowing which rock to choose from your pile. Like a puzzle with no two parts the same. Choosing the wrong rock means that your work comes down on your feet. (So don't be hardboiled...). An old Maine stone-mason told me that 'Even a round rock has a flat side if you can find it.'

You can see this exposition weaving in and out of the zone where aphorisms are generated. You can also sense an implicit morality, prescribing an attitude to living as well as a technique. All of which I think helps account for the immense success of the "Whole Earth Catalog": far from being simply a bizarre shopping-list of glassblower's torches, Swedish looms, $50 funerals, wind-driven pumps and books about Polyhedra, Organic Gardening, Beekeeping, it's a subtly multifaceted many-voiced meditation on what we might be doing with our lives. In short, reading matter; a kind of space-age "Walden."

But a "Walden" with jeeps and computers as well as hiking-boots, to promote access to which the compilers have verified addresses and prices, and gisted the reports of volunteer comparison shoppers. Wasting little space on the substandard, their pages are sweet with good news; not the acid outrage that steams up from "Consumer Reports" as inevitably as ammonia from a diaper pail, but a brisk openness sparkling with strange insights. "Reasonable laws made by reasonable men in reasonable times prescribe trying everything. For a good reason: people get hurt trying stuff. If you're bound to try stuff anyway, then either you're working directly for City Hall, or you're an outlaw, or both... One thing we need is better laws."

One subgroup of outlaws started building geodesic domes at an experimental high-school community in the California hills. A year ago they gathered the how-to they'd acquired into "Domebook 1." This summer Random House is distributing "Domebook 2" which also has clear affinities with "Walden." Thoreau, after all, began by building his cabin, and his acquaintance Margaret Fuller's great-nephew Buckminsterboth inspired the "Whole Earth Catalog" and devised the geodesic structures. I'm not putting all this together, it is together.

Dwelling on one theme as the Catalog perforce doesn't, the "Domebook" may be the most coherent fantasy of outlawry since De foe dreamed of being Crusoe. Not content with dreaming, the dome freaks have been building timbers. In among the fine diagrams of Platonic Solids, the (Continued on Page 34)
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"Shop Yoga" for cutting 300 identical struts, and the meditations on Building as expansion vs. Writing as ingathering, on Domes as 3-D spiderwebs, and on Trash as “the only growing resource,” we find hundreds of photos of clean or roughewn or glistening but always fantastic structures, nesting amid pines or asparks on hillsides, with round them denizens of the dropout culture wearing shy smiles.

I remember thinking Domebook I covered some of the best expository prose of our time, taut with the attention that underlies good writing. This one isn’t quite up to that standard. Haste and overcondensation have left marks, and I sense between the lines a year’s removal from the early dream of geodesics as the key to a functioning lifestyle. (By last winter the highschool gurus were getting on each other’s nerves.) Nevertheless the demand mounts, deservedly. A first printing of 25,000 was followed within two months by a second of 25,000 and orders flowed in. It’s not the market for expository prose that’s sucking these Domebooks out into America, or even the appetite for help with one’s doebuilding. No one expects 50,000 domes—one per copy—to spring up in the next twelvemonth. It’s the appetite for pragmatic fantasy.

Part of the domes’ appeal is their status as metaphor. They are Whole Systems. They draw together functional shelter, elusively simple laws of nature’s structuring, symmetry, mandalas, medium-high math, multicultural community (or solitude, as you wish), Eskimo simplicity, and utter up-to-dateness. None of the freaks is so unwashed as to forget his dependence on computer printouts of chord factors, subsidized by a NASA study on “Advanced Structural Design for Future Space Missions.” (Those tables, the scoop of the first Domebook and much augmented in the second, spell exactly the difference between the precision fit that gives geodesics their incredible strength, and the chickencoop funk of every boy’s backyard playhouse.) On the other hand they suggest the women bake bread while the men build (an angry splinter group calls this “sexist”) and fret about what the plastics they use for windows are doing to the ecology.

In fact, they’re struggling, like the parent Whole Earth folk, to define ways we might use one of our principal resources, which is technological knowledge, without getting plasticized. The Catalog has sensible words on “the blanket rejection of technology that is trapping many people in an alternate lifestyle of shabby creativity,” and it’s time some sensible words were spoken on Thoreau’s fundamental error, which was supposing that invention is just a way to complicate the simple. Invention makes available resources of knowledge the entire human community has accumulated. The domebuilder taps Fuller’s insights, and NASA’s tables (spewed from IBM computers; the math on the first dome, in the precomputer forties, took Fuller two years), and the electric company (via a radial saw) . . . wooling simplicity only in zones of his choice.

It’s an odd compromise, since Fuller conceived his structures for mass production. They depend, each specimen, on hundreds of elements being exactly alike, which makes most sense if you tool up for thousands. Handcrafting one dome is a little like handicrafting one Volkswagen, using wood where possible.

So the handmade dome is a metaphor, not a general solution. As such it has Fuller’s blessing; he has even contributed to “Domebook 2” a page on what you can do with just bamboo, string and knowledge. It would also have the blessing of Thoreau, who was quite clear about the status of his own famous gesture: not a panacea, that retreat to that hand-built cabin by the pond, but, exactly, a metaphor. (His term was “experiment.”) Move the whole population to the shores of ponds . . . no need to finish that sentence. But because one man did it, out of his deepest private need, and wrote a book, the whole population has been freed a little.

These books are metaphors too: metaphors disguised as how-to-do-it and where-to-find-it manuals. The deepest need they satisfy is the need for such metaphors: a need that propelling across bookstore counters, by the hundred thousand, what only two years ago was the information exchange of a nearly invisible subgroup. As the Domebook’s lore ages, and as the last “Whole Earth Catalog” (now that the enterprise has self-destructed grows slowly, irrevocably obsolete, they will continue, till their paper covers wear out, the slow irradiation of minds with heuristic images; points of departure, not solutions; encouragements to dig wholes.