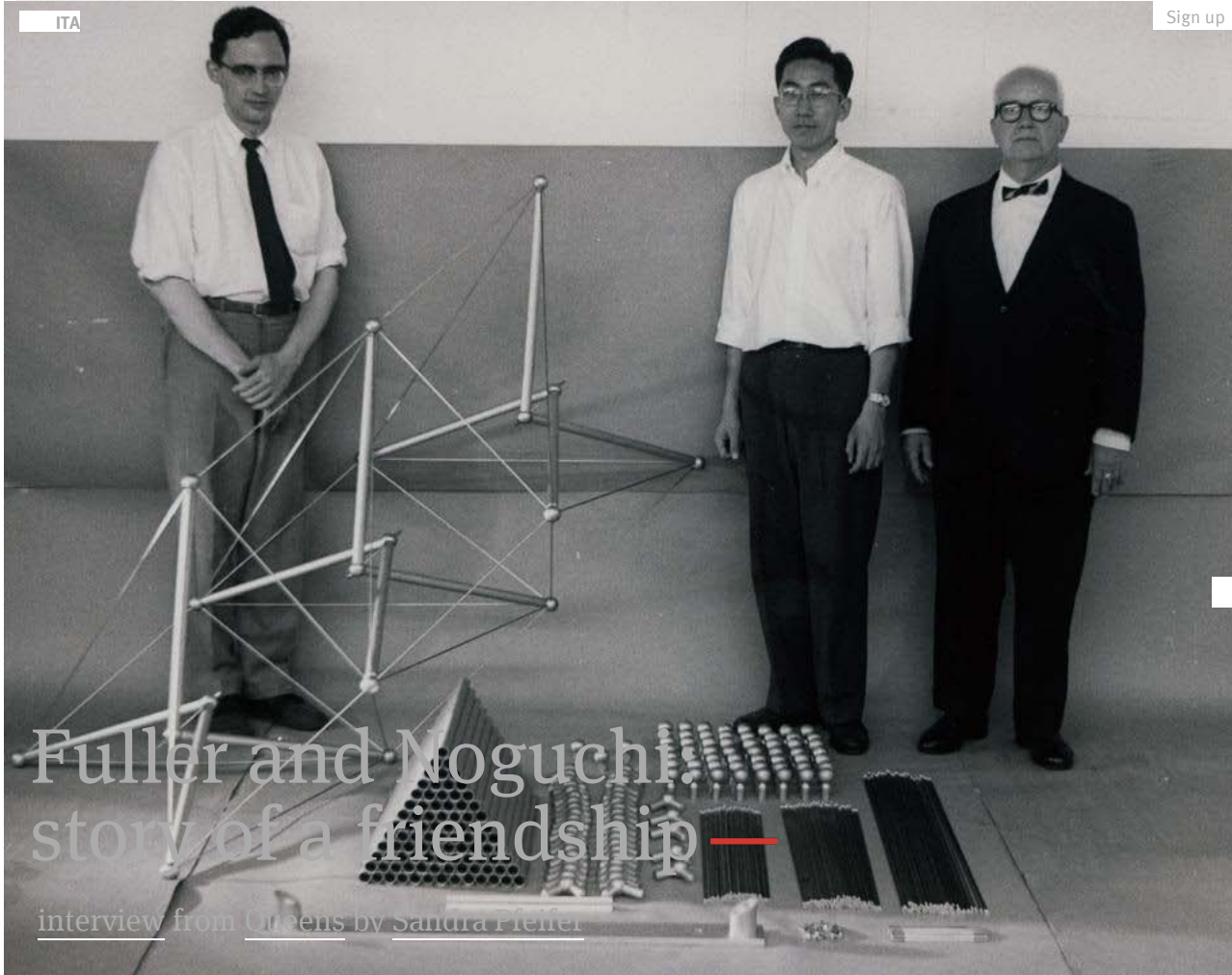


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Fuller and Noguchi: story of a friendship —

interview from Queens by Sandra Pfeiffer

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Shoji Sadao, former director of the Noguchi Museum, relates the dynamics of a friendship based on a shared fascination with technology and the possibility of a utopian world

The life-long friendship between Buckminster Fuller and the artist Isamu Noguchi was based on their shared fascination with technology as the key to a utopian world. While each was following his own path their many projects were assisted by an architect who earned their trust with his unfailing dedication in helping to realize their grand ideas. Over 30 years, Shoji Sadao developed a close working relationship with both men. He later served as Executive Director for the [Noguchi Museum](#) in New York. In *Buckminster Fuller and Isamu Noguchi: Best of Friends*, he gives insight about the dynamics between this unusual duo.

How did you meet Buckminster Fuller?

He was a visiting critic at Cornell University in 1952, where I was studying. He made our class build a miniature earth where I got to lay out the landmasses on the spherical surface as I knew about cartography. Bucky then needed help for his Dymaxion Air Ocean World Map. That was the beginning of our ad-hoc association. I naturally gravitated towards him and he responded to my enthusiasm. We developed a very close working relationship.

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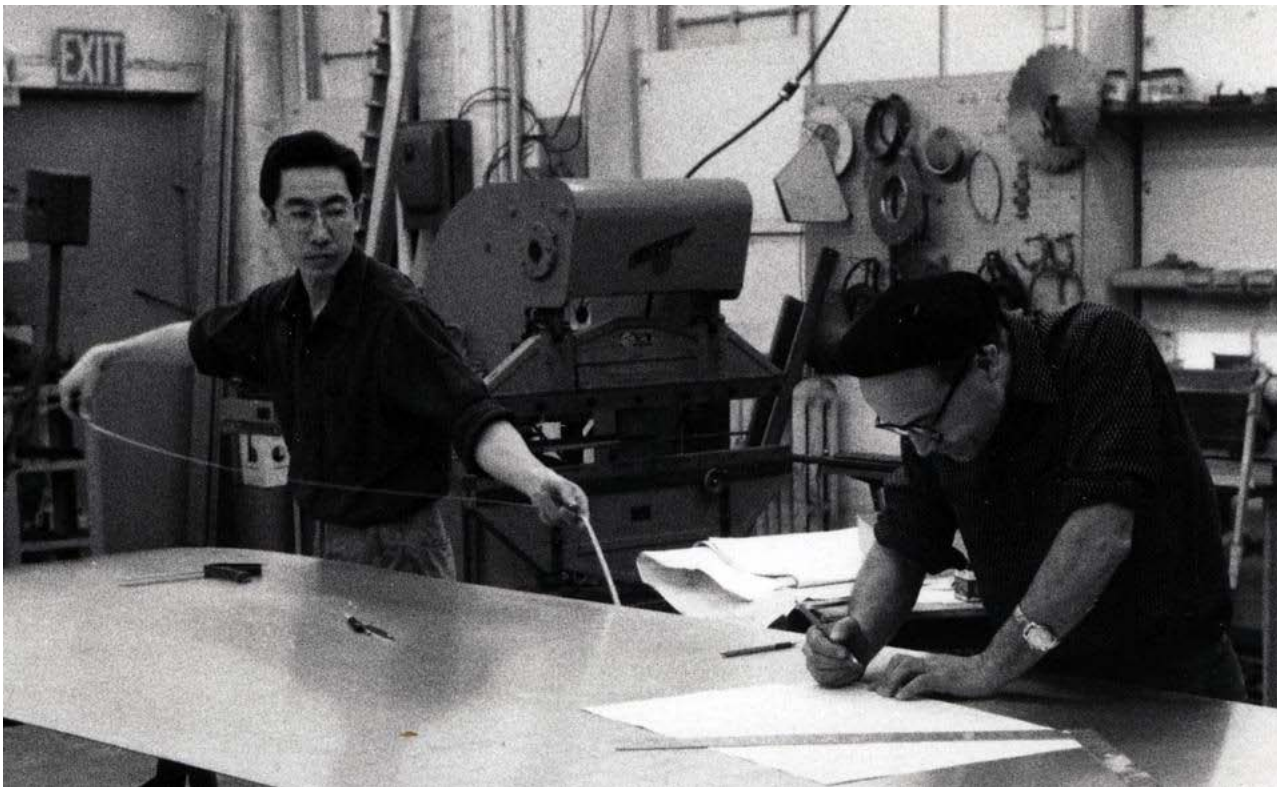
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The perfect travel companions



↑ Top: Edison Price, Shoji Sadao, and Buckminster Fuller with parts for MoMA Tensegrity mast, 1959. Courtesy of Fuller and Sadao PC.
Above: Isamu Noguchi and Shoji Sadao working on aluminum sculptures at Edison Price's shop, 1958. Photo Courtesy The Noguchi Museum, New York.

Why did you approach Fuller for a more formalised work relationship later on?

Working with Bucky seemed like an interesting option although he received more inquiries than commissions. Shortly after he was asked to compete for the Expo 67' US Pavilion. So we quickly formed an office, Fuller & Sadao Inc, and got a team together. I thought that we would get all kinds of projects after that but only a small religious center at Southern Illinois University materialised. In the meantime Isamu contacted me because he had to turn work away.

You also helped producing Isamu Noguchi's Akari lights. Could you have imagined them to become such a classic?

For Isamu there were no boundaries between fine and applied arts. Akari manifests his exploration of materials and quest to influence how people lived. His original idea was to set up a foundation with the royalties he earned. Akari meant so much to him that he ignored friends' advise not to show them at the Venice Biennale 1968 as they were perceived too commercial. And so he missed out on the Gran Premio.



←

Shoji Sadao today. Photograph by Sarah Nankin.

Can you tell us about the Fuller/Noguchi dynamic?

Both together were quite a sight: Bucky, this New Englander from Boston with his connections and Isamu, just being back from Paris having worked for Brancusi. They became more personal than intellectual friends. When Isamu met Bucky in 1929 he was, like myself, mesmerized by the way he presented his grand ideas. He was so thrilled by Bucky talking about aluminum and light that he painted his complete studio with silver paint.

"I think Isamu influenced the artist in Bucky who in return represented America for him by constantly talking about how technology and new materials

would change the world"

Who influenced whom more?

Bucky (nine years older) was like a mentor to Isamu, who called him Mr. Fuller for the first three years. I think Isamu influenced the artist in Bucky who in return represented America for him by constantly talking about how technology and new materials would change the world. Isamu did not see boundaries in his interpretation of art and space. In that way they made a good combination. Isamu got a lot of inspiration from Bucky but I don't think it went the other way. Bucky with his intellect was quite a commanding person.



↑ Geoscope (‘Mini-Earth’) prototype under construction at Cornell University, 1952. Courtesy of Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller and Stanford University Libraries, Special Collections, R. Buckminster Fuller Collection.

Had they ever worked together?

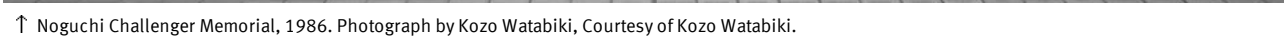
The closest they ever got was for the Martha Graham Theatre. Although unfortunate, I was in a sense glad that a collaboration never came about as they would have certainly not agreed on some things which would have put me in a very difficult situation. The project which integrated Bucky's geometric studies with Isamu's creative re-interpretation of these is the Challenger Memorial in Miami, where I served as the architect on the project.

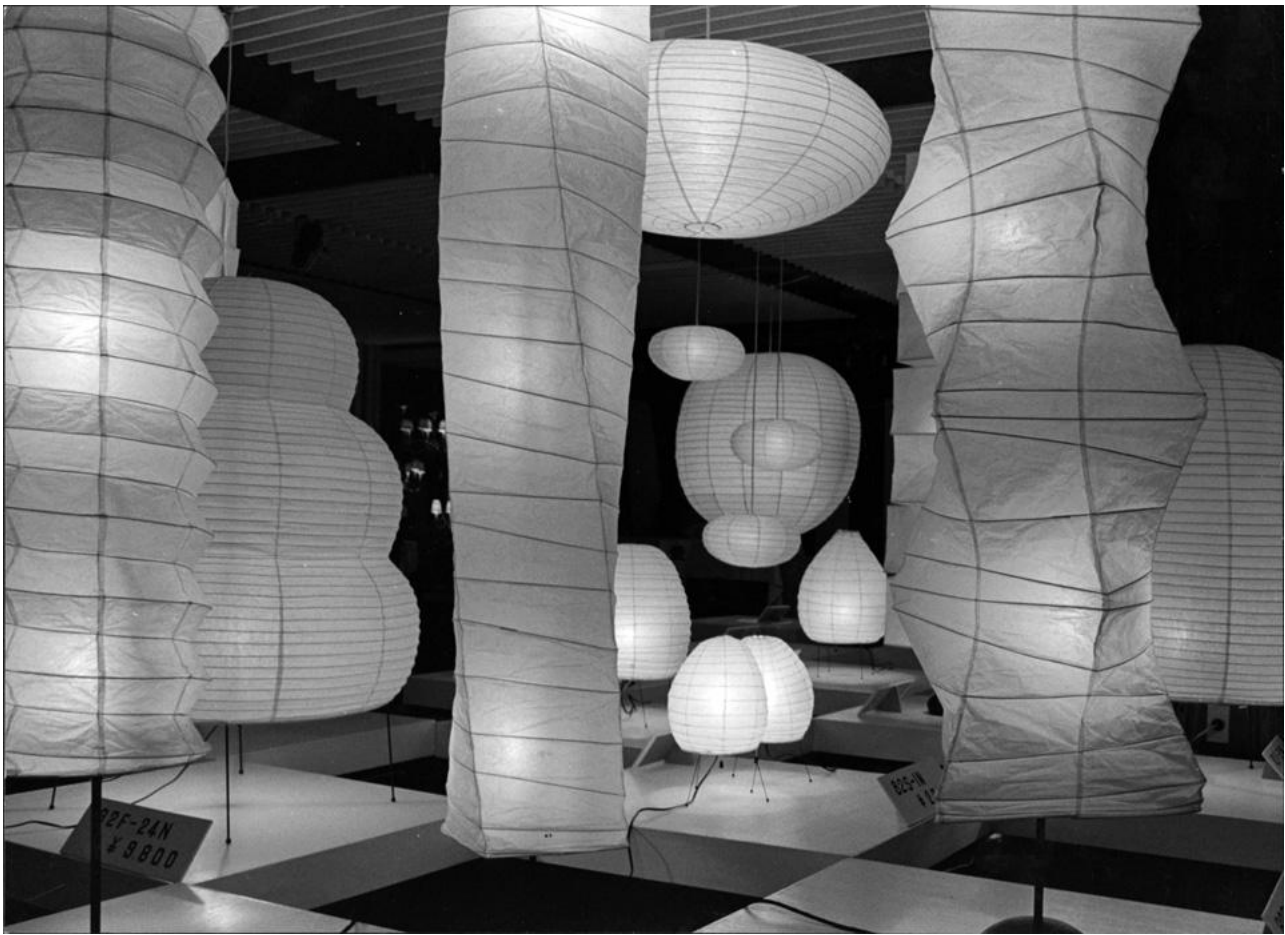


↑ Black Brazilian granite, Seattle Art Museum, 1969. Photo courtesy of The Noguchi Museum, New York. Photograph by Frank Denman.

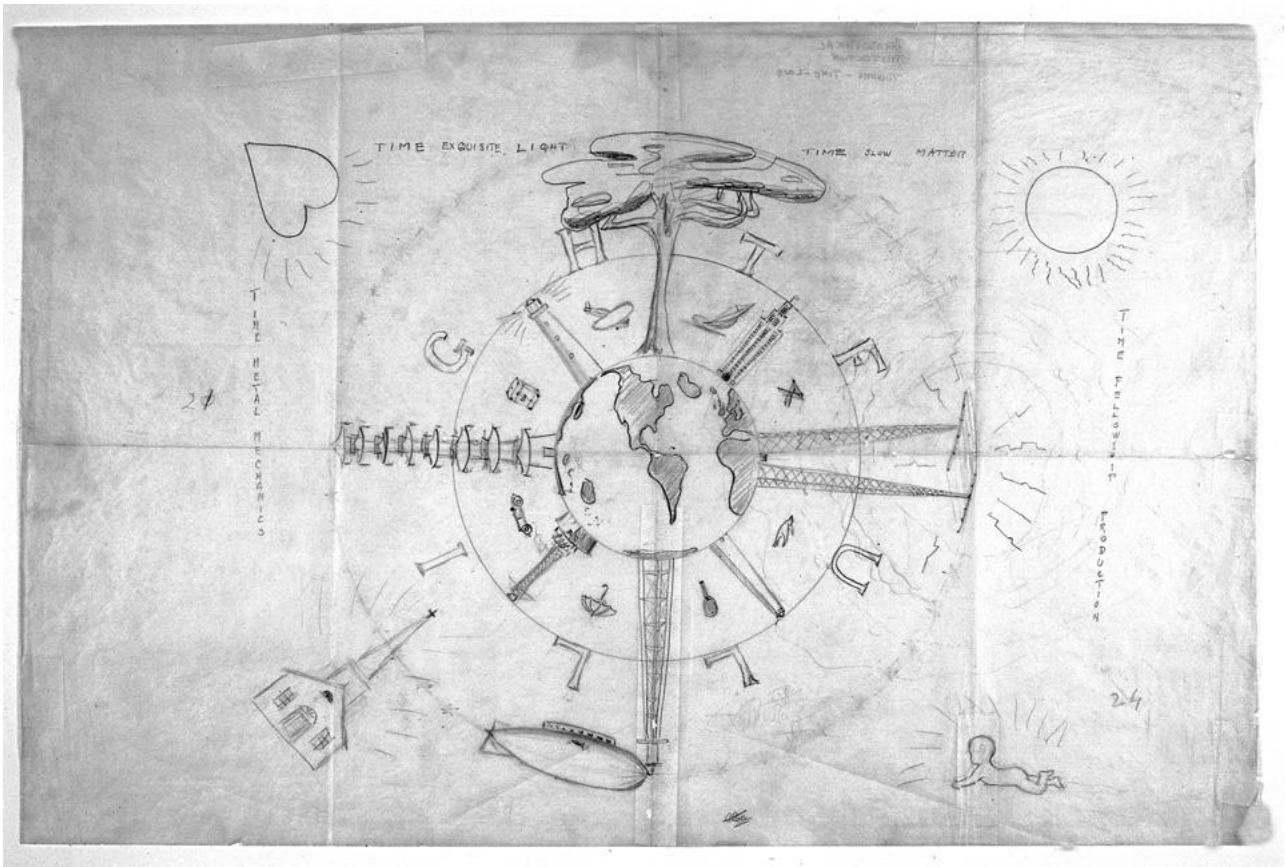
**In your book you said you feel you didn't get to talk enough to them.
Why?**

Isamu in particular was a very private person. We didn't get many opportunities for philosophical discussions about art and his work. Bucky on the other hand wasn't only the straight, rational person. Very early on in his life he drew a mystical interpretation of how man fits into the earth. I would have liked to explore that side of Bucky better. I am self-effacing, as you might say, and preferred to stay in the background.

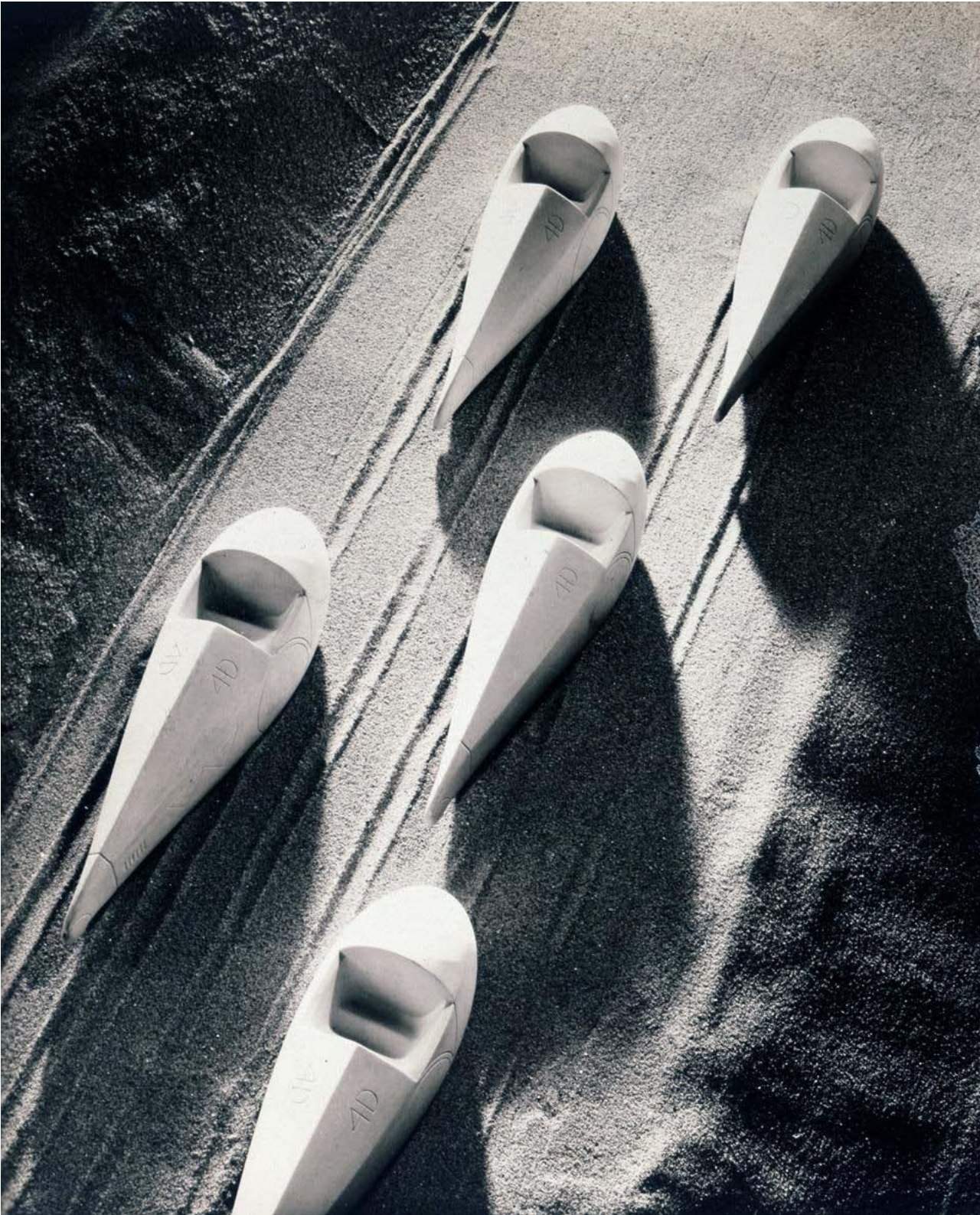




↑ Isamu Noguchi, Akari light sculpture display in Japan, 1970. Photograph by Michio Noguchi, courtesy of Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller and Stanford University Libraries, Special Collections, R. Buckminster Fuller Collection.



↑ Fuller's mystical, mysterious mandala, 1928. Courtesy of Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller and Stanford University Libraries, Special Collections, R. Buckminster Fuller Collection.



↑ Isamu Noguchi, group of plaster models of the Dymaxion Car, 1932. Photograph by F.S. Lincoln.

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