

Introduction

Objectives

Endless Innovations, more than a romantic, eye-stopping title, encapsulates the theoretical and practical aspects of Frederick Kiesler's artistic and theatrical life. History was, to Kiesler, an endless sequence of technological change. Art was a thematic continuity which could be extended and expounded endlessly by the viewer and artist. And life itself was a complex endless co-relation (correlation) of man, both physically and psychologically, to the technology he created and to the natural environment. Innovation, whether technological, artistic or metaphysical, within the framework of Kiesler's thought was also endless and involved not only the invention of new objects or new techniques or thoughts but also the application of those objects, techniques, or thoughts to new spheres of activity.

Kiesler's works, whether in architecture, painting, sculpture, furniture design, commercial and art exhibition display, typography or theatre, demonstrate the application of his concept of endlessness through a series of innovations. Some of these innovations were original creations as, for example, the concept of construction supported by the continuous tension of the building's surface; others were sophisticated applications from one field of interest to another, as with film to theatre. The objective of this research has been to investigate these endless theories and innovations and to articulate them clearly with concern for their manifestations in the theatre generally and in Kiesler's scenic design in particular.

The study, as a reading of chapters 2, 3 and 4 may well indicate, is not a definitive consideration of Frederick Kiesler's art. His architecture, painting, sculpture, furniture design and involvement with filmmaking are given only superficial attention. Theatre architecture, although treated in greater depth, is not fully considered by any means. The study is limited to a consideration of Kiesler's historically significant achievements and the context of their

occurrence, a statement of his fully developed theory and an investigation of his scenic designs in America. Limitations placed on the study by the availability of materials are considered in the discussion of sources.

Justification

Frederick Kiesler's position as a leading figure in the mid-twentieth century art world might be justification enough for a study of his theories and works of art; however, there are two specific reasons which make this research valuable to the theatre. First, the literature concerning scenic designers has been dominated by the examination of professional Broadway design, notably that of Jo Mielziner, Donald Oenslager, Lee Simonson, Robert Edmond Jones, Norman Bel Geddes, and Howard Bay. These studies are limited in their demonstration of the breadth of design work in America. Mr. Kiesler's work adds a dimension in non-commercial and experimental productions executed in an educational environment. Second, the literature concerning artists (i.e., painters, sculptors and architects) who have worked as scenic designers has been restricted to discussions of well-known, historically recognized artists. Discussions of their scenic designs have been treated usually as a minor area of interest in works on individual artists. A singular text, *Art and the Stage in the 20th Century*, edited by Henning Rischbieter, has attempted to treat the subject in a comprehensive manner. The book mentions Kiesler only in passing, although he executed more stage settings than the artists focused on in the study. In fact, Kiesler was the only artist considered who earned a significant portion of his livelihood and fame through the medium of scenic design. No one has made a scholarly study of Frederick Kiesler's work.

Methodology

Endless Innovations is both historical and descriptive, as it presents Kiesler's contributions in an historical context, gives an account of his theories, and catalogues his scenic designs. Evaluations are restricted to suggestions of causal relationships within the historical perspective, demonstrations of how theories from other contexts might be applied to theatre, and discussions of the way Kiesler's scenic designs relate to his theories within his personal design style and within influential art movements.

Customary bibliographical and research methods were used to accumulate information. The research activity began with the exploration of generally available materials and then with investigation of specialized sources in New York City. During the study of newspaper sources concerning Kiesler's work in Vienna, a German-born specialist in the German language and dialects was employed to provide accurate translations.

The selection of material concerning Kiesler's personal history reflects the subject matter's relevance to a study of theatre and scenic design; information on art movements was restricted to direct relationships with Kiesler; his activities outside the theatrical milieu were included in categorical fashion. Clarity of illustration was the controlling criterion for inclusion of theoretical material, although all available information was considered. Similarly, all available sources were used to authenticate and describe the scenic designs which have been attributed to Frederick Kiesler.

Sources

The sources for this research fall into three major categories: bibliographical sources, special archive sources and correspondence and interview sources. The bibliographical search resulted in a large number of periodicals and surprisingly few books; the latter include Kiesler's own publications *Inside the Endless House* and *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display*. The periodical material primarily concerns Kiesler's sculpture and architecture.

During the bibliographical search a number of archival sources were unearthed. The first of these was the Kiesler Scrapbooks at the Archives of American Art. The documents were made available on microfilm from the Detroit Institute of Art. The later items on the films duplicated a great number of articles already found in the bibliographical search. The beginning frames, however, consisted of the newspaper and magazine accounts of Kiesler's work at the International Exposition of New Theatre Technique in Vienna. The material covered the period from March 1924 through the same month of 1925, thus recording the production of Wedekind's *Francesca* which Kiesler designed as well as his construction of a theatre-in-the-round at the Exposition.

The five New York archives visited provided information in varying degrees. The Museum of Modern Art retains a small Kiesler Archive featuring tape recordings of Mrs. Kiesler's interviews with selected friends of Kiesler. The Museum also holds Kiesler's architectural drawings for the early Endless Theatre and the later Endless House. Several pieces of Kiesler's art work are also shown by the Museum. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Library and Archives features a different selection of recordings in which Mrs. Kiesler and others are interviewed. One of the tapes uses a previously recorded excerpt of Frederick Kiesler discussing architecture and acoustics. The Guggenheim Archive also contains information on the artist's sculpture. The New York Public Library has available correspondence between Kiesler and the director of the Living Theatre, Julian Beck; and most significantly, the complete collection of the 1941 exhibition entitled *Ten Years of American Opera Design*. The source was invaluable for original drawings

and photographs of Kiesler's work between 1934 and 1941. The catalogue provides authentication for a number of Kiesler's designs. Reviews, pictures, and the text of *In the Pasha's Garden* were provided by the Archives of the Metropolitan Opera Association. The final formal archive available was less than useful; the library of the Juilliard School of Music destroyed the materials of opera productions of previous years; the opera texts, production books, photographs and stage drawings which Kiesler might have left with the School have been lost.

One private source somewhat counters the loss. Mrs. Elsa Cohen, whose husband was the Stage Director for the Juilliard School during Kiesler's years there, has in his papers a number of programs which indicate Kiesler's role in a number of the productions. The most valuable source for materials pertaining to Kiesler's scenic designs is the personal archive retained by Mrs. Lillian Kiesler, his second wife, and she provided access to his drawings, photographs, and letters and notes. Mrs. Kiesler is also the guardian of three of Kiesler's unpublished manuscripts. One is a study of perception to include dream phenomena; another deals with the application of Kiesler's theories of Correalism and Biotechnique as they may be applied in various industries; and the third is a treatise on Magic Architecture and deals with Kiesler's concern with housing.

A number of individuals and institutions have been contacted for information concerning Kiesler's theatre productions and other theatrical efforts. Ellenville, New York, provided information on Kiesler's tent theatre for the Empire State Music Festival. Mrs. King of the Eighth Street Theatre in Greenwich Village, a building designed by Kiesler for the Film Theatre Guild, provided a tour of the remodeled facilities. Insight into the origins of Kiesler's setting for *The Tempest* was supplied by Mrs. H. Harrison Leathe, former owner of the Rice Playhouse and the *Vineyard Gazette* of Edgartown, Massachusetts. In Vienna, Mrs. Barbara Lesák has researched trial records. The Anthology Film Archives contributed a showing of the Kiesler version of the Fernand Léger film, *Ballet Mécanique*. Mrs. Lillian Kiesler has provided a recorded interview and several hours of informative conversations concerning the various specifics of Kiesler's work. The scenic designs not considered here were either those traveling with the Kiesler retrospective exhibition in Europe or those as yet uncatalogued by Mrs. Kiesler. The amount of material in the latter category is not known, although the quantity of available data and Mrs. Kiesler's comments suggest that most evidence was available.

Organization

The objective of this study, to investigate the theories and innovations of Frederick Kiesler with particular reference to his theatre and scenic design, is

articulated in a three-part organization. The first part consists of chapters 2, 3 and 4. In these pages Kiesler's theories and works are placed in the perspective of the artistic and theatrical milieu of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 is devoted to Kiesler's life in Europe, his claims to several theatrical "firsts," including the erection of a modern theatre-in-the-round. Interlaced with this subject are considerations of Kiesler's relationships with the De Stijl group, the Futurists and the Constructivists. The early activities of the designer in theatre architecture and exhibition display are considered as well as the embryonic formulations of his theories. This array of subjects is given form by the chronological arrangement of Kiesler's scenic designs, The International Exhibition of New Theatre Technique, and the Paris World's Fair.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider Kiesler's activities in the United States. Chapter 3 recounts the first eight years of difficult times, and Chapter 4 considers his work until his death in 1965. The major touchstone of chapter 3 is the International Theatre Exhibition of 1926. Some of Kiesler's significant ventures with an architectural firm, The International Theatre Arts Institute with its unbuilt Brooklyn Theatre, and the Film Theatre Guild spring from the Exhibition. The actorless theatre shown at the exhibitions provides the context for the closing discussion concerning Kiesler's relationship with the Futurist movement and his concern for a theatre to change society.

A secondary center for Kiesler's activities is provided by an exploration of his work in applied arts and display. The sequence is important because it leads to the publication of Kiesler's first book, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display*. The book provides useful insight into the theoretical development of the artist. Chapter 4 offers an overview of Kiesler's activities in the areas of publication, scene design, exhibition display, and architecture for houses, museums and theatres. Tied to the exhibition display is Kiesler's involvement with the Surrealists and his subsequent renewal of interest in painting and sculpture. With differing emphasis, each subject considered is related to Kiesler's general concepts or his theatrical practice.

The completion of these three chapters should provide the reader with a perspective of the breadth and significance of Kiesler's endeavors in the context of the art movements surrounding him, and introduce the reader to some of the terminology and the general concepts of Kiesler's theories.

The second part of this study begins with chapter 5. Starting with a consideration of Kiesler's world view, the chapter comprehensively deals with Kiesler's theories and how they are demonstrated in his concept of the theatre.

The final portion of this research is a consideration of Kiesler's scenic designs, chapter 6. The first portion of the chapter is a catalogue of the settings attributed to Kiesler. Each design is authenticated to insure that the

materials were in fact the work of the artist. Where possible, a reconstruction of the setting is made in accordance with the text of the play, opera, or ballet. The elements present in the setting are described as a means of determining the stylistic conventions typical of the designer. Again where possible, critical comment and an interpretation of the setting in the context of the script is offered. The closing part of the chapter summarizes the stylistic elements which appear to be indicative of the designer's work. Specific examples are identified to indicate the manner in which the settings demonstrate the application of Kiesler's theories.