

The American Context, 1934-1965

Introduction

During the 31 years between his employment by the Juilliard School as Scenic Director and his death in December of 1965, Kiesler's endeavors were many, varied and overlapping. Throughout the period Kiesler produced numerous articles on disparate subjects. He remained a member of the Juilliard staff until 1956. Superimposed on these continuing activities were jobs of shorter duration. He directed the design laboratory of the Columbia University Architecture School from 1936 to 1942. From 1942 through 1947 he designed several modern art exhibitions which showed Surrealist Art and was active in the Surrealist movement in New York. This activity may have reawakened his interest in painting and sculpture, for during 1947-65, he devoted much of his effort to these areas, experimenting with painting and sculpture and combinations of the two forms. During the 1950s his architectural talents were again stressed in a series of exhibitions of his models and, after forming an architectural firm with Armand Bartos in 1957, in the building of several projects. He executed theatre architecture also during this period. Kiesler, as he had been throughout his life, was a warm and inspiring member of the artistic community.

Publications

Early in the thirties Kiesler had published some articles on his own work; in addition a revised translation of his 1924 conclusions on "the peep-hole" stage was issued as "Notes on Improving the Theatre Design" in *Theatre Arts Monthly*.¹ "Murals Without Walls" leveled criticism at the Treasury Department's standards which artists must meet to perform WPA projects in federal buildings; he continued the criticism in his first regular column for the *Architectural Record* but praised the design and production style of the Federal Theatre Project.² In this and the later articles, collectively entitled "The Architect in Search of Design Correlation," Kiesler demonstrated his interest in history by briefly recounting the genesis of the subjects under dis-

cussion. The topics exhausted the alphabet from Ancient Architecture to Glass Construction and Photography and Theatre and Zoos. His continual social concern was demonstrated in almost footnote, but nonetheless dramatic, fashion as he juxtaposed pictures of penguins and starving children under the caption: "Still competitors in substandard shelter."³ The culmination of this series of articles occurred after lengthy delay with an article entitled "On Correalism and Biotechnique."⁴ This was Kiesler's most precise statement of his views and provided, along with his work at the Columbia Design Laboratory, the basis of his unpublished manuscript for a book on his theories and their application. The manuscript is in the possession of Mrs. Lillian Kiesler.

Kiesler's unrevised book on applied design, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display*, was reissued in 1938. Critics considered the book a "pioneering study" and "still useful as a guide to action."⁵ During the forties, Kiesler's published work was confined to reviews and one major article, subtitled, "Notes on the Spiral Theme in Architecture" in the *Partisan Review*.⁶ He also published articles in the Surrealist magazine *VVV* on dream phenomena and physical perception of experiences. During the 1950s his writing was restricted to commentary on his own particular projects. From 1956 on, he collected notes for his book *Inside the Endless House*.

Inside the Endless House was a journal of Kiesler's cherished experiences, exciting moments, painful encounters and poetic pronouncements. Although Jay Jacobs dubbed the book "The Endless Harangue,"⁷ most critics described it as less of a biography than an insight into the human feelings of a working artist. The book allows the reader to come to an understanding of Kiesler but not to contain him in a summary fashion.

Kiesler's activities as a writer contributed little to his sustenance through the years. The remuneration for his articles was certainly a single payment arrangement. In spite of the critics, the 1938 edition of his book on applied design apparently did not realize profits. *Inside the Endless House* was published after his death; the manuscript on his theories remains unpublished. The financial stability in Kiesler's life came from his work as Scenic Director for the Juilliard School of Music.

Scenic Design

Of over 67 productions with which Kiesler is credited in the bibliography which Lillian Kiesler has prepared (see Appendix II), all but a few were produced at the Juilliard School of Music. Of this number, most were operas and four were ballets. Whether Kiesler actually executed all of these designs is debatable because of his practice of bringing students from his architecture classes at Columbia to Juilliard as designers. The authentication of the productions attributed to Kiesler is undertaken in chapter 6.

Kiesler's productions at Juilliard had three major characteristics: They were instructional, inexpensive and innovative.

Instruction

From the time he held positions at both Columbia and Juilliard, Kiesler used the opera productions as instructional vehicles for his students.

Kiesler claims that not only do architects make first-rate stage designers but stage designers make better architects. Reason is that in a few weeks the architect (student) must meet and solve a myriad of problems involving both people and aesthetic considerations. He must create a setting that permits every action of the singers to be properly carried out, take care of all mechanical requirements of lighting and scene-shifting and produce a suitable atmosphere.⁸

Much like his teacher at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Josef Hoffmann, Kiesler allowed his students a great deal of freedom in dealing with their projects. Not only did he allow his students their own artistic style as evidenced by designs like those of Daniel Brenner for the *Abduction From the Seraglio*, but he designed special effects and scene changing devices for their productions. The projection for *Joseph and His Brethren* (1936) is an example. Kiesler made the technical arrangements while Nathalie Swan designed the set. Scrupulously, the master gave full credit to his students, listing himself on the program as production manager when in fact he sometimes designed some of the settings and usually solved involved technical problems.⁹ In December of 1941, Kiesler arranged for an exhibition of the Juilliard Opera designs at the New York Public Library. Entitled *Ten Years of American Opera Design*, the exhibition contained numerous designs by Kiesler and many of his students.

Inexpensive

The second characteristic of Kiesler's designs was their low cost. The figures of \$525 for *Helen Retires*,¹⁰ \$1,500 for *Ariadne on Naxos* and \$4,000 for *Maria Malibran* must have pleased the School as much as the \$1,500 for the Metropolitan Opera production of *In the Pasha's Garden*¹¹ must have pleased its board of directors. The cost factor also caught the attention of the critics who attributed the conservative expenditures to the use of lighting and projection devices as the basic instrument of the design execution.

Kiesler's use of projections as scenic elements was one of his innovations which began with his first production, *Helen Retires*, in 1934. In this production he utilized plywood to form abstract curvilinear shapes for both scenic elements and costumes, forming a strange world through which Helen moved in her adventures.¹² Helen's departure for the Island of the Blest in Act II was made by submarine. "The submerging undersea boat performed its act through the familiar medium of a movie."¹³

Innovative

However, Kiesler's designs did not rest upon innovative techniques but upon their ability to communicate the meaning of the script to the audience in a visual fashion. After the 1940 production of *The Magic Flute*, Virgil Thomson wrote:

Much has been said about the stupidity and useless complexity of "The Magic Flute's" libretto. It certainly never made much sense to this reviewer. Last night's performance at the Juilliard School made it as simple as a Sunday school pageant. And when it is all said and done that is about what "The Magic Flute" is. It is an allegory fairy tale in praise of Freemasonry and the brotherhood of man.

After discussing Kiesler's scenic investiture, he concludes:

As a result we not only know that we are dealing with real people in the chief characters, but that these are living through a series of adventures and trials that take place in various real sites and climatic conditions, rather than merely going through a series of pretexts for singing on a stage a diversified series of songs in fancy dress.¹⁴

Eight years later Kiesler set out to integrate "thematically, acoustically and visually an opera oratorio through a new architectural structure."¹⁵ The production was Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. The setting thrust through the proscenium as a tiered vertical structure covering the orchestra pit.

On the two lowest levels were the brass and woodwinds arranged somewhat geometrically. The next highest level was occupied by the central figure of the tragedy and others who momentarily appeared by his side. . . . Backward and upperward from this level were the ranks of the chorus in four successive tiers, the whole design extended upward against the simple cyclorama . . . which . . . reflected darker and more dramatic colors which shifted with simple movements and groupings of the singers in a way that was psychologically reflective of the drama.¹⁶

The design achieved the desired integration by bringing the musical components into a unique physical arrangement. All of the elements were visible to the audience; the sound seemed to emanate from a single location rather than a separated stage and pit. The formal structure enhanced by the masks of the chorus lent itself well to the classical form of the music and the subject matter. Downes concluded that the "only proper presentation"¹⁷ of the Stravinsky piece was in this stage picture.

Commercial Scene Designs

Although Kiesler's productions produced other than at Juilliard are few, they are not insignificant. The setting for *In the Pasha's Garden* (1935) was the first at the Metropolitan Opera to use projected scenery as the major

interpretive technique of the design. The garden was visualized by three leaves projected stage right which increased or decreased in size as the play progressed.¹⁸ When the garden faded, a large moon appeared over stage left and became the dominating force as the Pasha buries his wife's lover alive.¹⁹

In 1946 Kiesler was retained to design the Broadway production of *No Exit*, the New York premiere.²⁰ Kiesler was apparently very interested in the play for he produced 82 conceptual drawings embodying several different approaches to the play.²¹ This was Kiesler's only design to reach the Great White Way; the remainder of his settings were built outside of New York.

While vacationing on Martha's Vineyard in 1952, Kiesler designed a setting for *The Tempest*. The director of the production was Basil Langton, and the performance²² used the building and name of the Rice Summer Theatre which had closed in the late 1940s.²³ The same combination of Kiesler and Langton produced *The Tempest* again with the Cincinnati orchestra in 1954 and the Ellenville Music Festival in 1955.²⁴

Kiesler's final scene design was executed for the Burgess Meredith production of Pirandello's *Henry IV*. The setting embodied Kiesler's concept of movement in the setting as it changed "at eye blinking speed." Unfortunately for Kiesler, *Henry IV* played one week in Philadelphia and never reached its New York opening.²⁵

In addition to his scenic designs for operas and plays, Kiesler was contracted to provide "eight eye filling sets" for the *New York Times*' review entitled *Fashions of the Times*, pun doubtlessly intended. The performances were given in October of 1944.²⁶ Essentially the settings were used to display exhibits of the latest fashions in clothing art. The creation of environments for the display of art works, whether clothing or painting or sculpture, was a major activity for Kiesler during the 1940s.

Exhibition Design

Kiesler created environments for three exhibitions between 1942 and 1948: Art of This Century, 1942; Bloodflames 1947, and the Exposition Internationale du Surrealism, 1947. The latter exhibits are based on the principles Kiesler established with the Art of This Century Gallery. Miss Peggy Guggenheim, wife of the painter Max Ernst, acquired space for a gallery consisting of four rooms at 30 West 50th Street, to show a permanent collection of 171 works, and engaged Kiesler to design the space.²⁷ Edgar Kaufmann found the gallery to have three characteristics. First, the works were presented in "an atmosphere of energetic confusion and distraction," perhaps reflecting the atmosphere of twentieth-century society as well as art movements. Second, the works were displayed in space. And third, the objects were able to move.²⁸ These characteristics are easily found in Peggy Guggenheim's description of the gallery:

In the Surrealist Gallery he put curved walls made of South American gum wood. The unframed paintings mounted on baseball bats, which could be tilted at any angle, protruded about a foot from the walls. Each had its own spotlight. Because of Kiesler's theatrical ideas, the lights, . . . went off every three seconds. That is, they lit only half the pictures at a time. . . . In the abstract and Cubist gallery . . . I was perpetually flooded in a strong fluorescent light. Two walls, consisting of an ultramarine canvas curtain like a circus tent attached to the ceiling and floor by strings, curved around the room in various sweeps. The floor was painted turquoise. The paintings which were also hung on strings from the ceiling and at right angles to the walls, looked as though they were floating in space. Little triangular shelves supported the sculptures, which also seemed to float in the air. . . . In one corridor he placed a revolving wheel on which to show seven works of Klee. This wheel automatically went into motion when the public stepped across a beam of light. In order to view the entire works of Marcel Duchamp in reproduction you looked through a hole in the wall and turned by hand a very spidery looking wheel.²⁹

It is not within the purview of this study to demonstrate in detail the likeness of the Bloodflames 47 at the Hugo Gallery and The Exposition Internationale du Surrealism at the Gallerie Maeght to Art of this Century; however, from photographic evidence, one can easily observe the similarity of layout and display techniques. Of greater interest here is the similarity of the principles which Kaufmann observed and those which Kiesler used in his early scenic designs for *R.U.R.* and *Emperor Jones*. The concerns for an appropriate atmosphere, space relations and movement demonstrate the consistency with which Kiesler applied his principles across the spectrum of his art.

Surrealism

Involvement in this series of exhibitions brought Kiesler into association with the Surrealist movement, which had been transferred from Paris to New York because of the war, and renewed his interest in painting and sculpture. In fact, Kiesler created his first sculptures for the Surrealist exhibition in 1947. This impetus to paint and sculpt again may be the Surrealists' most significant contribution to Kiesler's life because Kiesler's ideas were greater in perspective than those of the Surrealists, though he understood theirs and felt an affinity for their concerns for society and a liking for individuals as friends.

While Kiesler was returning from the war front to Vienna in 1918, André Breton was a soldier in the Surrealist underground movement within Dada. The Dada movement was an essentially negativist movement seeking to destroy everything. Assuming there is neither good nor evil in anything, only awareness of the chaos and hypocritical truths of the established order, the movement attempted to undermine authority in artistic, literary and political circles. Breton saw Dada as the "monster which would create the necessary void" for the Surrealists who could bring forward a new order to

fill the void. In 1924 Breton seized the initiative and broke with the Dada movement issuing the *Premier manifeste du Surréalisme*. Almost at once, he and his cohorts published a journal and began a series of exhibitions, some of which Kiesler might have seen while staying in Paris during the World's Fair of 1925.³⁰

Surrealism was introduced to America in a series of small exhibitions during the late 1920s and early 1930s, most of which were under the aegis of Julian Levy who wrote the first significant study of the movement in 1936, entitled simply, *Surrealism*.³¹ Also, during the period, the Surrealists were associated with the Communist Party, viewing it as the only available support for the Surrealist revolution. The directives of the Communist Party were only supported by the Surrealists when they did not interfere with Surrealist practices or contradict Surrealist theory.³² When pressured to conform, the artists retired from the Party.

Even before the outbreak of the Second World War Surrealists were having difficult times in Europe. Max Ernst, a German national, was imprisoned twice by the French. The German victory in 1940 was accompanied by a wholesale exodus of artists and intellectuals from the unoccupied zone of France.³³ Among those arriving in New York were the core members of the Surrealist movement. Not later than 1942, Frederick Kiesler came to know and promote the Surrealist artists in the art circles of the city. The Art of This Century exhibition which Kiesler designed had as participants many of the Surrealist artists. André Breton, himself, edited the catalogue for the exhibition.³⁴ The participants, including Kiesler, met at the home of Peggy Guggenheim during the preparations for the exhibitions.³⁵ From these sessions Kiesler is credited by critic Dore Ashton with helping to interrelate the Surrealist with other art circles.

In addition to the mounting of exhibits, Kiesler contributed to other activities of the Surrealists. During October and November of 1942 the Surrealists sponsored an exhibition to raise funds for the war relief of French children and prisoners. Kiesler was listed as one of the contributing artists. On at least two occasions he published articles in the periodical *VVV* and later, with *View*.³⁶ In 1944 Kiesler exhibited a chess set he had designed along with those of several Surrealists.³⁷ As late as 1956-57 Kiesler was occasionally active with the group. The last recorded venture showed Kiesler as an actor in the Hans Richter film *8X8*, which consisted of eight different segments, each dealing with a chess game.³⁸

In summarizing the Surrealist position, Roger Cardinal and Robert Short wrote:

Surrealism is a movement characterized by intellectual mobility and active commitment to ideals. It is impatient interrogation of reality, an endeavor to change life by disputing all received ideas about the world, by discrediting the so-called "reality" structured by

incomplete consciousness. Surrealism introduces new modes of thought and behavior in the hope that they may lead to an ultimate revolution of consciousness, one that will release the powers within man which Western civilization has held in bondage. Its fundamental aim is the universal recognition of desire.

Desire is the generic term used in Surrealism to denote all those forces within man which personal inhibition and social circumstances prevent from becoming realized. . . . The Surrealists' paramount concern with . . . desire leads them to concentrate on the activities of the unconscious mind as the sphere in which desire may be observed in its original form. . . . Writing and painting . . . can provide the inner mind with the opportunity to express itself unimpeded. . . . When no specific idea is imposed upon language, it seems to take over control and flood, as it were, directly from the unconscious onto the paper, where its configurations escape the determinisms of reasoned expression. In Surrealist poetry, words which normally are never remotely connected are now happy to form pairs: strange and apparently arbitrary liaisons spring up spontaneously to shock the rational mind. . . . Disturbing images of this kind are not only found in Surrealist poetry but also in Surrealist painting, where their visual formulation often makes more powerful a challenge to normal reason. The union of disparate objects or the situating of an object in a totally unfamiliar context is a common feature of Surrealist art. . . . The Surrealist progress from their faith in . . . poetical and pictorial images, to a belief in the meaningfulness of analogy as a guide to the world.

Analogy is in fact an extension of the principle of poetic metaphor. . . . The analogical approach leads to a harmonious vision of the world in which, . . . everything is comparable to everything else. No longer need the world be considered to be a conglomeration of fragments, apprehended by compartmentalized thinking of ordinary consciousness. . . . Here lies Surrealism's appealing alternative to logic as a means of eliciting order in the universe.³⁹

The Surrealist approach to revolution was essentially an internal one. They believed that if the unconscious could be freed in each person, each person would have a harmonious view of the world and, therefore, would take part in changing the world's oppressive economic and social rules. This single-minded approach to a problem is similar to that of the Marxists who thought that by changing external economic factors they would be able to change the rest of man's world. The Surrealist revolution had an end, a harmonious universe, and a means to that end, the freeing of unconscious desires. These are two points which may be contrasted with Kiesler's views.

Kiesler's means were both external and internal. His double attack sought direct social change by working for adequate housing and by fostering individual action against profit-motivated society. Time and again, Kiesler refused to build the project of the Endless House because the potential builders did not want to live in the house but to use it for financial gain.⁴⁰ Kiesler intuitively sought the internal change of the individual in society, unconsciously, through art, in a manner similar to the Surrealists. The different was that the Surrealists presented analogies, dissimilar elements within an art object, while Kiesler created dissimilar objects within a single environment or continuity. Kiesler often opposed more than two

extremes in a single work. Moreover, Kiesler's invasion was twofold, striking not only at his viewers' unconscious, but surrounding them with environments which interreacted on a physical level.

Appropriately, Kiesler's source of ammunition for carrying on his revolution came from two sources. One was his intuitive insight into the nature of a given problem or experience similar to the insight typically avowed by Surrealists. The other was his experimentation with and analysis of (1) human physical functions in relation to the environment, and (2) technological devices created to cope with the problems presented by that environment. Such studies were a significant proportion of Kiesler's work with the design laboratory at Columbia between 1936 and 1942. This almost behaviorist style of experimentation was not attempted by the Surrealists.

The Surrealists desired to have the individual perceive the total unity of the universe as the basis for freeing the individual from the constraints placed upon him by society. For the Surrealists, these constraints and their behavioral evidence was described in the works of Freud.⁴¹ Kiesler's aim was more far-reaching. He desired through art and architecture to bring man into continuity with his environment, physical, technological and psychological, as it existed in the twentieth century, not simply to free him from his psychological problems.⁴²

Kiesler believed that his ideas, which he summed up with the term Correalism, superseded Surrealism.⁴³ If they did not supersede Surrealism, they were at the very least revolutionary and contained more complex ends and means. There are several similarities between Kiesler and the Surrealists: a common interest in dream phenomena, a common concern for the mental health of society, an understanding of human pain and suffering, an interest in love as a theme (though their definitions of the word might differ) and similarities in the treatment of subject matter (reflected in Kiesler's early sculpture and Surrealist works). However, all of the similarities appear minor considerations when the basic concepts of the Surrealists and Kiesler are contrasted.

Although the scope of Kiesler's theories was broader than those of the Surrealists, the man and the movement were mutually benefited by their relationship during and after the war. Kiesler, an accepted member of the artistic community, promoted the integration of the Surrealists into the life of New York, and the Surrealists may have influenced Kiesler to experiment with sculpture and painting.

Painting

That Kiesler had an early interest in painting is demonstrated by his 1918 mural in his apartment in Vienna.⁴⁴ The form for the mural was the same as

one he used when he began painting again in the late 1940s, a form Kiesler called "The Galaxy."

These galaxies, he says, differ from "paintings" in that they are not one painting but a group of several; and their distances are pre-fixed in relation to each other. While painting is an addition to space, a galaxy is an integration with space. Therefore, the intervals between the units of a galaxy are as important as the units themselves, particularly since these intervals flow in and connect with the surrounding area.⁴⁵

His galaxies are displayed on wall spaces or ceiling spaces or a combination of the two and units varied one from another in distance from the surface. The units were differentiated by the use of color, composition, technique of painting and sometimes subject matter. In fact, each unit was intended to stand alone on its own individual merits. Kiesler wanted the spectator to have the freedom to connect all the units within his field of vision or to choose particular parts as focal points.

The first galaxies were shown at the exhibition entitled *Fifteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952. Two years later Kiesler provided paintings for a one-man show of galaxies at the Janis Gallery. Except for one critic who decided "Kiesler just doesn't like pictures,"⁴⁶ the works were hailed as a truly new direction in painting, although most reviews found Kiesler's painting technique less than acceptable.⁴⁷ By 1961 Kiesler felt he had arrived at his desired result in galaxies.⁴⁸ Galaxies subsequently appeared in later exhibitions, and he continued to work on the series of galactic portraits of his friends, but his attention was directed increasingly toward his sculpture.

Sculpture

Kiesler's first sculptures were shown at the 1947 Surrealist exhibition in Paris. Although Kiesler executed two pieces, a large plaster arm and *The Totem of Religions*, the latter is better remembered and is held in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.⁴⁹ Upon his return to the United States, Kiesler designed the setting for *Le Pauvre Matelot (The Poor Sailor)* at the Juilliard School. One unit of the setting was the first version of a galaxy. The piece was changed slightly and shown at the exhibition *Fifteen Americans*. The sculpture was placed on the Nelson Rockefeller estate.⁵⁰ Kiesler's friends christened the piece an environmental sculpture;⁵¹ a name Kiesler was to assume for his sculptural works. The term derives from his own comments:

My sculpture is a practical sculpture. It is both to be lived with and within. . . . To separate sculpture and painting from the flow of our daily environment is to put them on pedestals, to shut them up in frames thus destroying their integrative potentials and arresting their continuity with our total mode of life.⁵²

The second major exhibition of Kiesler's work was entitled Environmental Sculpture and was shown at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Critical opinion was not concerned with the sculpture so much as the ideas behind them. Although varying in their interpretation of the works from the last flame of utopia to the endlessness of the birth-death-rebirth ritual sequence, the critics agreed on two points. First, the space within the museum could not hold the sculptures, and second, that Kiesler's sculptures were not to be understood wholly in an intellectual sense. Both attitudes are certainly what Kiesler wanted. As mentioned above, Kiesler thought art was to be lived "with and within," not to be placed upon a pedestal. The sculptures at the Guggenheim seem to be contained by the space. In an interview Kiesler commented,

People say my work is hard to understand. The curators at the Guggenheim tell me that when visitors come to the area where my pieces are exhibited they all become silent. I say that you don't have to understand my pieces. You have to feel them. And that is what is happening.⁵³

The intuitive understanding Kiesler calls "feeling" is described in the exhibition catalogue where he speaks of the intuitive process of the artist in creating a work of art.⁵⁴ Reasonably, he expects the spectator to understand the work in the same way the artist creates it. According to reports, this mode of understanding was evident in the spectators and critics alike.⁵⁵

Kiesler continued to cast his bronze works until his death. A number of these were assembled for exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in the spring of 1966. In the exhibition were parts of the last large work Kiesler attempted, *Us, you, me*. The sculpture consisted of 37 pieces arranged over a length of 48 feet.⁵⁶ The unfinished pieces were cast posthumously and shown by Howard Wise in 1969.⁵⁷ Included in the catalogue was the essay Kiesler wrote before his death relating his concept of *Us, you, me* and how it was to be arranged. The document provides insight into the sculpture which Kiesler created as a metaphor of civilization. The sculpture is an island on which man is shown in various aspects from his triumph to his rush for success in the nuclear age and the supremacy of money. In the center of the work hangs a gong which Kiesler intended to have the spectator strike. The ring from which the gong is supported is inscribed with a poem Kiesler wrote to express "... the guiding spirit of the total coordinate of these sculptures. ..."

Us, You, Me

so swift
to roar from rift to rift
a prey of

nature's gift
to man
for self-destruction

resist, sweet madman
the drive to wound and kill
have the guts
to live your depth

security is
you, me, us⁵⁸

Architecture

Sculpture seemed to be Kiesler's ultimate form. With it he was able to communicate his thoughts more precisely than with other forms. Sculpture, however, was architecture to Kiesler. His own architecture during the years of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, which was directed into three areas of interest—houses, museums and theatres—supports this belief.

Housing

Kiesler's interest in human shelter must have certainly been stirred by his work on the slum clearance project in Vienna. In the late twenties and early thirties in America he served as a consulting architect for the National Public Housing Conference,⁵⁹ and constructed the full scale model of the Space House for the Moderage Company. During the 1940s he worked on a manuscript devoted to shelter called *Magic Architecture*. Generally, this unpublished work recapitulates the history of housing from the perspective of developing housing that is in harmony with the continuity of nature and the universe. The title apparently takes its cue from the magic practiced by primitives to bring their existence into order with the nature around them.⁶⁰ Perhaps contemporarily with this study, Kiesler developed a series of drawings which he called "Tooth Architecture" and an egg-shaped shelter he called "The Endless House." The Tooth drawings are for housing modules and are based on the natural flowing shapes of animal teeth. They are held in Mrs. Kiesler's personal collection. The drawings had been in storage and were discovered during the process of cataloging Kiesler's works. The Endless House was constructed in model form and was first shown at Kootz Gallery in 1950.⁶¹ It was featured along with Buckminster Fuller's dome structures in the Museum of Modern Art Exhibition, *Two Houses*, in 1952.⁶²

Inside the egg-shaped structure of the Endless House changeable spaces are provided for group and individual living, based on the functions to be performed in those spaces. The lighting of the house is to a large degree the means by which Kiesler cares for the "psycho functions" he spoke of in his

book, *Art Applied to the Store and Its Display*. Kiesler manipulated both the electrical and natural lighting within the house to achieve his purpose. The electrical lighting was a combination of direct and indirect sources; a spotlight source might be directed into a soft reflective surface to produce a diffused lighting for a whole area. Special flexible sources were provided in work, study and recreational areas. (See Plate 10).

The intensity of the light could be controlled by dimming units. Another feature was the use of photo-electric cells which would automatically turn the needed lights on as an individual moved into a darkened area; Kiesler foresaw the capability of turning the lights out in a similar fashion.

Natural sunlight entered the structure from several large windows and skylights. These cutouts from the surface of the house were shaped to allow light to enter from a high angle; therefore, more natural light illuminated the space than is possible with conventional vertical openings. The aim of the manipulation is best demonstrated by Kiesler's color clock:

Daylight is transmitted through a prismatic glass crystal of three basic colors, gradually shifting to each in turn from dawn to dusk. The rays are filtered into the interior through a convex mirror, and the dweller can gauge the hour by the color of the tinted light around him. Instead of depending solely on a mechanical clock, splintering his life into minute particles of time, he can become aware of the continuity of time and of his own dynamic integration with natural forces.⁶³

In 1958 the D. S. and R. H. Gottesman Foundation provided \$12,000 as a grant for the development of the Endless House from its planning to scale-model stage.⁶⁴ The plans went forward and the model of the Endless House was shown by the Museum of Modern Art in a very un-egg-like shape. In this version the living spaces were more evidently defined in the exterior shape of the dwelling. An indoor stream graced the rim of the central stair entrance, and the house was more clearly elevated on stilts.

Despite the efforts of both Kiesler and Arthur Drexler, the Director of Architecture for the Museum of Modern Art, no suitable builder was found to underwrite the construction cost estimated at \$100,000. The Endless House remains unbuilt.

Museum Architecture

Kiesler's efforts in the realm of gallery and museum design were more successful. Of the three galleries Kiesler built, *The World House Galleries*, *The Kramer Gallery* and *the Shrine of the Book*, the first is significant because Kiesler was able to utilize the concepts he formulated for the Endless House; the Shrine is considered by some to be his master work.

The World House Gallery was commissioned by Herbert Mayer in 1957. The project was to convert two stories of the Hotel Carlyle into a

showplace that would be more than a marketplace for art.⁶⁵ The walls of the gallery curved into the floor and ceiling as in the Endless House, providing individually isolated spaces of varying sizes for the display of paintings. An "almost floating staircase supported only at two small points by a white marble slab" led to the second level.⁶⁶ Sculpture was to be exhibited on an island in the center of the gallery.

The World House project was considered unique and refreshing by commentators, but the gallery did not remain a lasting monument to Kiesler's concepts; it has since been remodeled into the offices of a brokerage house. The Shrine of the Book, however, does provide a continuing testimonial to Kiesler.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were found almost coincidentally with the vote of the United Nations declaring the independent state of Israel. Four of the seven scrolls were secured by the D. S. and R. H. Gottesman Foundation which then provided the funds for the construction of a special repository for the manuscript in Israel.⁶⁷ Kiesler and his associate Armand Bartos traveled to the Mideast to discuss the building, and in 1959 they received the commission.⁶⁸ The structure was completed and dedicated in 1965.

The finished structure has three visible parts, the remainder of the facilities being underground. The striking external features are the large concrete dome, a wall of black basalt and a sunken patio. The black basalt, rectangularly shaped wall with flaming gas jets across the top stands erect above the patio and the entrance to The Shrine of the Book. From the level of the wall a stair descends to the patio level. Across the patio from the wall is the entrance to the research library. At the base of the wall is the brass gate which opens into a display corridor. The corridor is abstractly shaped to resemble an underground passage in the earth. At the end of the passage is a short stair leading up into the dome. In the center of the dome is the repository for the Isaiah Scroll which is mounted on a drum so that a visitor can read the entire manuscript. Display facilities are located around the edge of the dome for other writings. The exit from the dome ramps upward first through a short underground passage and then into an open air corridor. At the end of this ramp the visitor can turn around and see the white tiled exterior of the dome rising from a square reflection pool. Water is constantly showered up from the edges of the pool onto the surface of the dome. A jet of water from the top of the container of the Isaiah Scroll inside the Dome escapes through a hole six feet in diameter at the apex of the dome.

The Shrine of the Book embodies both Kiesler's aesthetic and technological concepts. He says:

This is the first ideological building in our time. It is not a symbolic building at all. It is neither a woman's breast, nor an onion nor a jar (all terms used to describe the shape of the dome). The Shrine comes from its inner concept, which has grown into a struc-

ture. . . . The Shrine is dedicated to the concept of rebirth. It's a plastic expression of the idea of rebirth . . . like the state of Israel itself. Also the rebirth of ourselves. . . . The very core of all my planning has always been the principle of continuity, and this vessel (containing the Scrolls) grows like any plant—out of darkness and the ground. A seed cannot be placed directly in sunlight. . . . And so this, too, had to be at least a floor below—and then it rises.⁶⁹

Kiesler brings into his continuity the historical aspect of the rebirth of Israel from the ancient manuscripts found underground. He correlates this with natural growth in plant life from a seed buried in the earth. The various spaces and their interrelation can be interpreted from a Freudian point of view. The visitor passes through the dark corridor of the entrance into the womb-dome which holds the growing spirit of rebirth. The visitor leaves much more quickly into the sunlight of the world. Turning he sees the symbolic water bursting into the world from its phallic shaped source at the top of the vessel containing the Isaiah manuscripts. Thus, in addition to the processes of historical and vegetative rebirth, Kiesler adds human rebirth, forming a complex all-encompassing statement.

Kiesler continues, "This is a new type of architecture; it takes the technology of today for granted." In fact, the technology used in the building did not use technology which is taken for granted by most architects. The dome was constructed from one continuous pouring of concrete without steel reinforcements; a technique long advocated by Kiesler in his "endless" structures but not previously attempted. No special panels or other acoustical devices were used in the structure. The problems of reverberating sound in a circular shaped dome were overcome by the concentric rings into which the concrete was fashioned on the inside of the dome. The reverberation that was present disappeared with the installation of the vessel which contains the Isaiah Scroll. When asked how this was accomplished, Kiesler replied in enigmatic fashion, "Acoustics are like a woman. They can only be conquered by love."⁷⁰ The museum is not air-conditioned. "Because it is sub-terranean, the building shows little variation in temperature and humidity. No part of the building is heated, . . . thus avoiding the contrasts that are customary between night and day temperatures of a heated building."⁷¹ The showering of water on the outside of the Dome also tends to avoid the transmission of daytime heat into the building.

Because of the adherence to aesthetic continuity and use of the proper amount and kind of technology, the building is considered Kiesler's master work. He was awarded the Architectural League's Gold Medal for design and craftsmanship.⁷² Perhaps more to his liking was the realization by some of what Kiesler wanted to see realized in architecture. Sam Hunter of the New York Jewish Museum said of the Shrine: "It is sculpture and architecture at once."⁷³

While associated with Armand Bartos, Kiesler took part in the design of

the Albert Einstein Medical Center and other projects. His final design was for the Grotto of Meditation, commissioned as "Grotto for the New Being," to be built as a memorial to Paul Tillich by the community of New Harmony, Indiana. The structure, like the majority of Kiesler's buildings, has not been realized.⁷⁴ Yet between 1955 and 1965, Kiesler had seen more of his architectural visions realized than at any other time in his life. The first of these visions was appropriately a theatre.

Theatre Architecture

In 1955 Kiesler received the commission to build a tent theatre for the Empire State Music Festival at Ellenville, New York. Three years later he designed a second outdoor theatre, the Caramoor at Katonah, New York. His third commission came from the Ford Foundation: to realize in model form an Ideal Theatre. The theatre at Katonah will be described first.

The Caramoor was a concert platform built on the estate of the same name where the summer concerts of the Walter and Lucie Rosen Foundation were performed. On either side of the stage were displayed four Greek and Roman columns which the Rosens purchased in Venice.⁷⁵ The theatre in the sunken gardens of the estate is conventional in structure leading one to believe, as Kiesler intimates in his journal, *Inside the Endless House*, that the result was in accordance with very specific requests.

The Empire State Musical Theatre is more distinctively Kiesler, tracing its origin to the Woodstock and Brooklyn theatres of 25 and 30 years earlier. The stage was housed in a tent 50 feet high, 180 feet wide and 160 feet long. The 11,000 pound shelter was made in seven sections colored blue, yellow and white and reinforced with nylon rope. The separately attached side walls were also made in sections and could be drawn upwards to provide for audiences located outside the canvas cover. The stage was 75 feet wide and 50 feet deep. Scene shops and dressing rooms were arranged behind the stage. The stage itself could be disassembled to form three different styles of stages.⁷⁶ The basic unit was a proscenium style structure with side stages that could be attached to the front of the proscenium to form an apron stage. The same units could be assembled in the center of the tent to form a theatre-in-the-round.⁷⁷

One of the most praised features of the theatre was its acoustic excellence which was designed to provide not only for the 2,000 listeners under the "big top" but for the 2,000 in the seating areas outside the tent.

Kiesler stretched the wings of the stage over 100 feet across the auditorium and . . . inclined and broke up the resonance wall into different angles in order to throw the sound away from the roof all around into the farthest rows of the audience. The surface of the

wooden sound baffles has been treated with a paint that closes the pores and makes the surface an ideal sounding board. In addition there are two curves of canvas in the back of the orchestra to prevent further escape of sound.⁷⁸

The quality of the sound was not the only aspect of the Tent which impressed reporters. With some tightening of pegs and trenching of free flowing water, the large structure withstood the hurricane winds and rains which "devastated permanent structures all around it."⁷⁹ The tent was utilized for the second season of the Festival as well and continued to demonstrate the practicality of Kiesler's concepts, concepts more completely developed in his project for the Ford Foundation.

Kiesler's Ideal Theatre project was based on the Endless Theatre of 1923-24 in its partially egg-shaped outer surface; the theatre incorporates many of the practical features of the Brooklyn and Woodstock as well as the Ellenville theatres. The auditorium has a capacity of 1,600 seats. Four balcony areas are reached by way of three "communications towers." The front portion of the seating area, containing 300 seats rotates to form an arena. Peripheral stages are located on each side of the proscenium stage. In front of the proscenium is what Kiesler called a Greek-type arena, a thrust which ends in a series of steps at the front of the audience. The interior of the stage is designed for the use of projected and rolling scenery; there is no fly loft. (See Plate 11).

Similar in concept to the Place de la Concorde project of 1925, the Endless Theatre was not only a theatre, but provided space for other activities:

I have designed (Kiesler says) a center, a coordinate group of such units of the performing arts as seemed necessary to balance the changing relationship between art and economy.

I designed the main (theatre) . . . and next to its stage, the foyer of a small theatre (capacity 600 people), which becomes also the main lobby of a skyscraper (thirty stories high) containing a variety of small theatres with capacities for seating 120 to 300 people. Furthermore the skyscraper will contain large television studios, small television studios, and radio stations, rental areas for offices for a variety of publishers, record and motion picture producers and also seven floors of industrial and art exhibition space.

They all have the advantage of having common dining and storage facilities, and workshops. It is a business, entertainment, and art center where each part directly or indirectly supports the other.⁸⁰

With the final version of the Endless Theatre, Kiesler attempted to correlate in a single architectural space, the economic and artistic aspects of American society which he believed were inseparably interrelated. The theatre complex was to achieve for society what Kiesler experienced among his friends in the art world, a sense of community. That this sense of

community was important to Kiesler is demonstrated by his activities to establish and maintain an active role in the artistic life of New York City.

Kiesler's Community

Within the artistic community Kiesler's activities can be seen in three definable areas. Throughout his career in America he was a promoter of young and new artists; he participated in the formal activities of lectures, reviews, symposiums and conventions, and he had a leading role in the informal circles formed in Greenwich village and the summer art colonies. Dore Ashton credits Kiesler with the promotion of Arshile Gorky during the thirties and the Surrealists during the forties. She comments also on Kiesler's ready ear for what was new in Europe and his ready voice for dispersing the news in America.⁸¹

Notably, Kiesler encouraged Andy Warhol to make films instead of painting,⁸² and told Leontyne Price, his student at Juilliard, to give up her schooling if the school denied her the opportunity of singing with the Metropolitan Opera.⁸³

One of Kiesler's endeavors for the promotion of theatre during the 1950s was his support of the Living Theatre. A member of the Living Theatre almost from its inception,⁸⁴ Kiesler attended their performances,⁸⁵ delivered lectures as a guest and aided with the planning of their theatres.⁸⁶ Although a friend of the Living Theatre, Kiesler did not hesitate to offer strong, yet constructive criticism. Being a precise and organized person, he was aware of the value of publicity and was irritated by the Theatre's lack of forethought and organization. In a letter to Julian Beck, he recommends that if the Living Theatre is going to operate a lecture series, then they should publicize the fact at least in their own programs. He continued that if the lectures were to be printed later they should be recorded during their presentation.⁸⁷

In addition to lecturing whenever possible, both at New York civic clubs and art schools⁸⁸ and at distant points about the country,⁸⁹ Kiesler wrote book and exhibition reviews for the *Saturday Review*⁹⁰ and *Partisan Review*⁹¹ and attended numerous conventions. During the ANTA meeting in Philadelphia on theatre architecture, both Louis Kahn and George Izenour, who were members of the panel, credit Kiesler as the source of many of their ideas for flexible stages. Even though they suggested that Kiesler be allowed to speak to the group, the chairman adhered to his agenda and an embarrassed Kiesler made a quiet exit.⁹² More often, Kiesler took an active part in the proceedings, having just the right words for the moment. At a theatre architecture conference held at the University of Michigan, where the theatre practitioners were complaining that the architects were not designing theatres that were adequate for production, Kiesler commented that:

It's not the mechanics, in the end, that really make a show but the spirit and feeling of it. If you feel confined by your physical theatre plans, you will never produce exciting shows. Get the best you can, then make the most of it. Never be caught saying it's a poor show because our facilities are inadequate. In reality it's your own imagination which is lacking.⁹³

Kiesler moved freely among artists, architects, critics, theatre personalities and musicians who formed various informal groups. One such circle was dubbed "The Club" and was regarded as one of the most highbrow in the New York area. The regulars of the group were: William Barrett, who expounded existentialism; Harold Rosenberg; Father Lynch from Fordham; John Meyers, who performed with his puppets; Max Ernst; Hans Arp; "Sandy" Calder; Alfred Barr from the Museum of Modern Art; and Frederick Kiesler. Music from classical selections to the contemporary work of John Cage was provided by the Juilliard String Quartet.⁹⁴ Dore Ashton considers "The Club" an important ingredient in the development of the New York School. Kiesler's inclusion demonstrates his closeness to the center of the artistic community of New York.

The community spirit Kiesler enjoyed so greatly suffered a harsh blow in September of 1963 when Kiesler's wife of 45 years died.⁹⁵ The following spring Kiesler himself suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized. From his hospital bed, he designed the installation of his exhibition *Environmental Sculpture* for the Guggenheim. Kiesler married his long-time close friend of many years, Lillian Olinsey,⁹⁶ painter and art educator. The summer of 1964 found Kiesler vacationing at the Hamptons, a 40-mile stretch of sea and short towns on the eastern end of Long Island. Throughout those months Kiesler worked on the designs for *Us, you, me*, an arrangement of 37 sculptures correlated to movement, architecture, painting, lighting, and sound.⁹⁷ Early in 1965 he developed the large shell construction of *Bucephalus*, the horse of Alexander the Great. In April he attended the dedication of the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, and in June exhibited several major sculptures at the Musée Rodin Exhibition *Etats-Unis Sculpture en XXIème Siècle* in Paris. He continued to work on this sculpture, his architectural projects, and the text and drawings for the journal, *Inside the Endless House*, until stricken again on December 27, 1965.

Kiesler's funeral three days later was more of a community gathering than a funeral; it was carried on in the spirit of the meetings of Kiesler's circle, "The Club."

(Sidney) Kingsley was one of a group of friends—Rene d'Harnoncourt of the Museum of Modern Art and composer Virgil Thomson among them—who delivered eulogies. . . . The service began with the Juilliard String Quartet playing Mozart's Quartet in B-flat, K-428 and the slow movement of Schoenberg's Third Quartet—and then there was a leavening of the impudent that would have pleased the dead artist. His assistant, Leonard

Pitowsky, read two of Kiesler's poems. "I think it only appropriate," he explained, "that Mr. Kiesler be the first speaker and I think he would agree with me!" Later, as the mourners craned their necks to see what was happening, painter Robert Rauschenberg walked to the casket to deliver a silent eulogy. Placing a rubber tire next to the casket, he slowly painted the rim with slabs of color—an endless commemoration, a surrealist wreath. It was all à la Kiesler.⁹⁸

At the end of the service Lillian Kiesler picked up the painted tire and has been carrying the "endless commemoration" ever since. She is the cataloguer of Kiesler's Archives, which she has generously shared, and the organizer of several exhibitions of Kiesler's work, including the retrospective of his drawings and paintings. The exhibition opened in 1975, appropriately in Kiesler's birth place, Vienna. Since then it has traveled the major cities of Europe.

Summary

The 31 years between 1934 and 1965 were increasingly fulfilling for Kiesler. During those years he was able to work again in the theatre, and he was able to formulate and publish the central thrust of his theories and apply them directly in the design of scenery, art exhibitions, housing, museum and theatre architecture. He became interested again in painting and sculpture as evidenced by the forms of galaxial painting and environmental sculpture. And perhaps most rewarding for Kiesler, he shared intimately in the growth of the artistic community in New York by sponsoring the adoption of the orphaned Surrealists. Perhaps most rewarding for the community, his thoughts and works continue to be endless.

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