

Research by Drawing

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Frederick Kiesler was one of the 20th century's most radical exhibition designers. To this day, the concepts he developed over four decades in Vienna, Paris, and New York redefine the relationships between exhibition object, spatial design, and spectator.¹ Most importantly, Kiesler proposed that in every period of art, artists relate to specific aspects of the complex process of perception.²

From his first appearance in the art scenes of Berlin and Vienna in the 1920s until his death in 1965, Kiesler produced both analytical and practical work regarding the perception of art which must be viewed in the light of the two major fields that dominated his artistic and theoretical activity: exhibition design and stage design. With his scenery for Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (1923) in Berlin, with *Space Stage (Raumbühne)* and *The L + T System (Träger- und Legersystem)* of 1924 in Vienna, and with *City in Space (Raumstadt)* of 1925 in Paris, Kiesler gained wide recognition and firmly established himself as member of the

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¹ Kiesler's intensive occupation with the connection between viewers and works of art reached its apogee in 1940 with his *Vision Machine*, an unrealized project for an audiovisual construction that would demonstrate how human observation is based not on a simple mechanical act of vision but is more the result of a creative process of design.

² Dieter Bogner, "Frederick Kiesler a la Vision Machine," in *Vision Machine* (Nantes: Musée des Beaux-Arts/Somogy Editions d'Art, 2000), 136ff.

international avant-garde.³ Both the theater and exhibition architecture offered Kiesler the freedom to realize his visionary ideas. Both practices dealt with temporary constructions that placed fewer restrictions on artistic fantasy than would the planning and construction of functional buildings. Whereas the visualization of artistic utopias proposed by members of the European avant-garde in the early 20th century was largely limited to sketches and drawings, Kiesler actually constructed his ideas within the gallery and on the stage.

Each venue in its own way offered the public an opportunity to experience spatial fantasies, both physically and psychologically. In 1924 Vienna, visitors could move freely through a large Constructivist environment, and the following year in Paris they could experience the “form language” of Dutch Neoplasticism as a monumental spatial construction. The Art of This Century gallery installation, designed in 1942 for Peggy Guggenheim in New York, offered both a Surrealistic and abstract environment. It was followed in 1947 by two Surrealist exhibitions: *Bloodflames* at New York’s Hugo Gallery and *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* at Galerie Maeght in Paris. Although these exhibition projects are formally related to Russian and Dutch avant-garde and Surrealist art, Kiesler also drew upon the Viennese tradition of art as holistic work. One of the leaders of this tradition was the Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann,⁴ to whose circle Kiesler

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³ See Dieter Bogner, “Friedrich Kiesler 1890–1965,” in *Inside the Endless House* (Böhlau, Vienna: Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1997).

⁴ A highlight was Josef Hoffman’s famous *Beethoven Exhibition* in the Vienna Secession of 1902.

belonged. It was Hoffmann who charged the young artist with the task of designing the Austrian theater section at the Paris Exposition, a commission which gave Kiesler the freedom to create his revolutionary *City in Space*.

After a few semesters of architectural studies at the Technical University in Vienna, Kiesler studied at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts and first appeared on the scene as a painter. Only later did he call himself an architect. In a letter of 1926 to Benedikt Fred Dolbin he wrote: “I have switched completely to architecture and hope that perhaps I can soon apply it practically. . .”⁵ The particular artistic milieu of early 20th-century Vienna was responsible for Kiesler’s deep conviction in the unity of the arts, a belief he embraced his entire life, not only in theory, but in practice. In the catalog text for the *Bloodflames* exhibition he wrote: “I have designed every part of the whole—form and content—especially for each artist. There were no misunderstandings whatsoever. If no agreement had been possible, then it would have been completely my fault, for they have strictly followed my correlation plan.”⁶

Almost 20 years later, just a few months before his death, Kiesler wrote a manifesto that defined the relationship between exhibition design and exhibition

object:

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⁵ Friedrich Kiesler to Benedikt Fred Dolbin, 18 June 1926. Estate of Benedikt Fred Dolbin, Dortmunder Zeitschriftenarchiv, Inv. No. 0059.

⁶ Frederick Kiesler, “L’Architecture Magique de la Salle de Superstition,” in *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (Paris: Galerie Maeght, 1947), 134.

The traditional art object, be it a painting, a sculpture, or a piece of architecture is no longer seen as an isolated entity but must be considered within the context of this expanding environment. The environment becomes equally as important as the object, if not more so because the object breathes into the surrounding and also inhales the realities of the environment no matter in what space, close or wide apart, open air or indoor.⁷

This radical claim for the equality of environment and object was not just an idea but something Kiesler realized in his works, including in his monumental installation *The Last Judgment*, carried out from 1955 to 1963. There, bronze objects are presented in a space defined by wall-like painted objects and a ceiling above.⁸ The design of the hanging elements and the objects themselves form a single entity, a whole that is more than the sum of the parts, what Kiesler conceptualized as his theory of Correalism.

A series of small preliminary drawings for the Art of This Century gallery offers insight into Kiesler's understanding of Correalism as the "correlation" between environment and artwork. A close look at one of these drawings reveals a windmill in a flat landscape on a screen, and objects that look like tulips hanging head-down from a ceiling element. The painting in the center of the environment looks like a work by Mondrian, and the object below evokes a certain sculpture

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⁷ Frederick Kiesler, "Second Manifesto of Correalism," *Art International* 9 (March 1965): 27.

⁸ The "staging" of objects, in which the boundaries between artwork and presentation dissolve, is similar to Kiesler's presentation of David Hare and Joan Miró in his *Salle des Superstition* installation for the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*.

by Georges Vantongerloo which was owned by Peggy Guggenheim. From the drawing, one could assume that Kiesler intended to present an installation of Dutch Neoplasticist artworks. But did he really want to integrate a Mondrian and Vantongerloo into a system of presentation that includes typical Dutch symbols like tulips, windmills, and broad horizons? What we come to realize is that these and other similar drawings are not concrete design proposals but are instead Kiesler's efforts to search for a visual expression of the problem to be solved. And this is not merely a technical or purely functional problem. The "Mondrian" setting poses the question: What would be the most acceptable environment for this type of art?

While the visual equivalent of such a problem may be figurative, the result could be abstract, as the Abstract Gallery in Art of This Century shows. This is confirmed by a collection of strange sketch-forms, part of an important body of drawings and gouaches characterized by overwhelming fantasy, humor, and irony. They show surprising proposals for presenting art in stage-like environments and putting spectators in unusual positions, equipped with peculiar instruments, and exhibition support-systems that take on anthropomorphic forms. One of these drawings shows a person who seems to be balancing on high heels and "chained" to a wall [FK.13a, 13b]. Only after using a switch is a process set off that activates the lighting and allows a view of the picture. As in the previously mentioned drawings, Kiesler was not attempting to illustrate a real spectator or a real situation. Before he attempted to draw a functional solution,

he developed images of “physiological” conditions that he thought could ensure ideal psychological conditions in which to interact with artworks. To Kiesler’s mind, the spectator should feel free of physical constraint as well as stress. His process could be called “research by drawing.”

Kiesler’s radical—and in their historical context, extraordinary—exhibition designs continue to serve as an important source of inspiration for architects. But when displaying sketches, drawings, gouaches, photographs, letters, and publications from the Kiesler archive, the question repeatedly arises as to how to conserve and protect the originals without sacrificing their “workshop” character and related inspirational power. The use of complicated frames mounted on walls would prevent the adequate auratization of the works, and much of the authentic quality necessary for their productive reception would be lost. There is also a second aspect to consider when designing an exhibition of Kiesler’s work: his conviction that exhibition object and exhibition design are equally important.