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Friedrich Kiesler: Art Of This Century

KIESLER HELPED ME GO TO WAR By Milton Gendel

Frederick Kiesler was small, rather round, with thinning brown hair, mobile brown eyes and a good-humored vitality. When I met him he was in his mid-forties, and as I was twenty-two I saw him as an elder citizen, part of the settled grown-up world. The attraction, though, was his fantasy and lightness of touch which were thought to have been developed in his earlier life in Vienna.

Kiesler's first landmark on the New York scene, built in 1929, was the Film Guild Cinema on 8th Street, the main drag of Greenwich Village, the heart of the then small American art world. The façade of the movie house reflected Bauhaus functionalism and the parallelogram esthetic of De Stijl. The screen, however, was grippingly organic in inspiration and marked the architect's future direction. It was like a giant cat's eye whose iris unfolded symmetrically to reveal the rectangular screen.

So Kiesler was already a legendary figure in vanguard, bohemian New York on the eve of the Second World War. We met after I moved from my parents' uptown apartment to an attic on Washington Square. As a graduate student at Columbia University, I was serving as an assistant to the inspired art historian Meyer Schapiro.

Bob Motherwell, a fellow student, from California, looked as confident as if he had just come off a tennis court. In fact he was introspective and in conflict over his aim in life. He had spent a year in Paris intending to become a painter, then was attracted to scholarship and signed up at Columbia. Schapiro decided that he might be better at practice than theory and sent him to Kurt Seligmann, the surrealist painter and engraver. Motherwell dropped his studies and set to work full time at Seligmann's studio in Bryant Square. His earliest paintings indeed were in line with those of Seligmann and Eugene Berman.

Surrealism dominated the climate of the arts, for New York followed in the wake of Paris at the time. But the tide turned and a flood of refugees arrived from Europe that included celebrities such as André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Jean Arp, Duchamp, Zadkine, Lipchitz and Chagall. Kiesler, in the States since the twenties, instantly became the *trait-d'union* between the newcomers and the American artists, especially as he could speak German and French as well as English.

Bill Hayter's Atelier 17, his print-making studio in the Village, became a main meeting place for artists where you might find Joan Miró and André Masson working beside the still unknown De Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Introduced by Seligmann, Motherwell and I took up engraving and found ourselves in the midst of the art world that had further social centers in the Peggy Guggenheim household on the East Side, the Bernard and Becky Reis apartment on the West Side and the various artists' studios and apartments below 14th Street, as well as Fred and Stefi Kiesler's.

These settings offered an interesting range of interiors. The Guggenheim ménage, luxurious and expansive, featured an outsized wickerwork throne where Max Ernst perched like an aging eagle. At the Reises' we were in an Italian Renaissance palace with striped Venetian gondola poles to support the window awnings. Breton's wife, Jacqueline, filled their Greenwich Village apartment with a little jungle of house plants framing a somnolent Bush Baby and a trapeze for the gymnastics

of the lady of the house. The Kieslers' apartment was comfortably contemporary with one unusual attraction: a silver noodle-style chair designed by H. van de Velde.

The New York art world was rather ingrown but encompassable, and in short order Motherwell and I were included. Breton seemed amused to have two young Americans attend his evening gatherings, play *cadaver exquis* and the ostentatiously unprudish truth game. When he launched the magazine *VVV* – in a somewhat distracted reference to the war this stood for Victory, Victory, Victory – Motherwell and I were made joint editors. Flattering though this was, it was little more than window dressing. The United States had come into the war and Motherwell, David Hare and I were the only native Americans in the group.

As part of the war effort Hayter meanwhile had organized with Percy Goodman, architect and friend of Kiesler like everyone else on the scene, the Camouflage Engineering Company to design systems to protect military objectives from air bombardment by fooling the eye. The designs were in fact admirable abstract paintings, and I was included in what was in effect an extension of Atelier 17.

After numerous sessions with Breton and company surrealist culture at close quarters began to lose its allure. Breton's declamations and pontifications were leavened, it is true, by the impish spirits of Kiesler and Matta. But when it came to the notion of *épater le bourgeois* and turning the real into the surreal Hitler was outdoing the fantasies of Breton and his followers sheltering in Manhattan.

The war of course became the main theme, but a terrible drama intervened and focused the attention of the surrealists. Gorky, much esteemed by the group had become intimate with Matta. They were so close that for a time it was hard to tell whether a given painting was by the one or the other. Gorky had cancer and had also fractured a neck vertebra in a car accident with Julien Levy. One evening he came into New York from Connecticut and made the round of his friends, looking for his wife. Noguchi couldn't tell him where she was. Jeanne Reynal pretended not to know that she had gone off to Washington with Matta. Gorky gave up, went back to his farmhouse and hanged himself from a tree.

To my surprise Breton, reacting morally in the most conventional way, banned Matta from his group. Kiesler refused to be a party to this interdiction, as did Motherwell, David Hare and I. Hare was our successor as editor of *VVV*, when after only a few months Breton threw us out. We had engraved Christmas cards at Hayter's studio, and when we innocently presented them to Breton he blew up and denounced us as middleclass chauvinists.

I began to appreciate more and more Kiesler's feet-on-the-ground rationalism combined with leaps of fantasy. Like the wonderful Art of This Century gallery he designed for Peggy Guggenheim, his eye-opening architectural projects eschewed the standard box formulas and treated space as organic creations. By then it was already apparent that minimalist box architecture was leading to the monetarization of space. Though it was not predictable that it would become a cancer proliferating everywhere at so much the square meter.

Kiesler's friendship and advice became crucial for me. I couldn't justify to myself the peculiar privilege of staying out of the Army because we were busy planning the camouflage of the Alaska Highway, which was meant to be a major supply route for our Soviet ally. Air attacks by the Japanese became more and more unlikely, and the introduction of saturation bombing promised to make any attempt at disguising military targets futile.

When I discussed my misgivings with Motherwell he replied judiciously, "In my opinion artists and intellectuals are precious vessels who have the duty to preserve themselves alive". Duit, the young poet of the surrealist group, was turned down by the draft board as his mass of wilfully unkempt

hair made him look like Struwwelpeter. Breton's pronouncement when I finally told him that I was going into the Army was, "*Ah oui? Je trouve ça vraiment con*".

But firm moral support came from Kiesler and Jean Héliion. Kiesler saw that the only way I could resolve my moral dilemma was by signing up, and encouraged me to do so. Héliion of course, having been in the war and written his *They Shall Not Have Me*, which described his capture by the Germans, imprisonment and escape, was also all in favor. Their letters to me during my time in the Army were a constant reassurance that I was where I should be.

Kiesler and I remained in touch for the rest of his lifetime, and it was a great pleasure to learn in the years before his death in 1966 of his increasing fame and achievements, culminating in the magisterial creation of the Shrine of the Book, a perfect antithesis of box space.