

# Book Review

Peter Bogner and Gerd Zillner, eds.

Frederick Kiesler:

*Face to Face with the Avant-Garde: Essays on Network and Impact.*

Basel: Birkhauser, 2019.

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**F***rederick Kiesler: Face to Face with the Avant-Garde: Essays on Network and Impact* is a fascinating collection of essays focused on Austro-American Frederick Kiesler's collaboration with various avant-garde movements and artists from the 1920s to the 1960s. During his career as a visionary architect, designer, exhibition organizer, theorist, and artist, Frederick Kiesler advocated for the necessity of radical changes in our built environment. He had a multifaceted personality and was a prominent name in the theatre scene, the art world, and in architecture. His profound knowledge of and close association with numerous avant-garde circles gave him a unique position among his peers. It is this understudied aspect of his work that *Face to Face with the Avant-Garde* explores. In twenty-one essays, a wide range of scholars, art and architecture historians, and curators investigate artists, exhibitions, and movements that he was closely associated with both in Europe and the United States. Meticulously researched, mostly drawn from personal diaries and correspondence, the essays reveal the surprisingly vast array of Kiesler's social networks, attributing contemporary terminology such as "networker" or "influencer" to his social position.

While Kiesler's interior designs for galleries are often considered his most

significant contribution to art history, this collection celebrates an important facet of his connection to the visual arts that had hardly been acknowledged. In the last few decades, art historians Cynthia Goodman and Mary Anne Staniszewski have explored concepts such as interactivity and continuity in his exhibition designs, while scholars Dickran Tashjian and Lewis Kachur have examined these designs in relation to exiled French Surrealists in New York. The catalogue for a major exhibition on Peggy Guggenheim's gallery in New York City, *Art of This Century*, edited by Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, sheds light on different aspects of his design for this space. Recently, a monograph by architectural historian Stephen J. Philips has broadened our knowledge of the theoretical frameworks behind Kiesler's architectural projects. *Face to Face with the Avant-Garde* scrutinizes his intimate relationship with the visual arts and provides evidence that Kiesler was an active agent in the development of modern art. By supporting artists, prompting ideas for exhibitions, and creating networking opportunities, he played a crucial role in connecting the art world of the two continents, Europe and the United States, during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. In other words, Kiesler the mediator (or curator, as we might say today) is the subject of the book, and not Kiesler the architect, artist, or thinker.

The collection can be divided into two general parts: the early years of his career in Europe and his professional networks in the United States after 1926. The first part of the book offers valuable information about Kiesler's work in Vienna and Berlin which had been overlooked in previous publications. However, despite their broad scope, these essays raise more questions than they answer. While these essays in the first section of the book present important facts about Kiesler's participation in these circles and movements (such as the November Group, and the Bauhaus and Futurist schools), they reveal little about the ways in which Kiesler influenced (or was influenced by) those particular movements or

artists. In fact, these essays are more descriptive than analytical.

The second part of the book proves stronger in this respect. A case in point is Stephanie Buhmann's essay on Hans Arp, "My Ears Are Filled with Memories," which traces part of Kiesler's formal language to Arp. Focusing on archived letters and postcards, it also beautifully presents the persistent connection of two artists who, over the course of three decades, supported and influenced each other's careers. While Arp maintained Kiesler's link to the European avant-garde by translating, publishing, and promoting his work in Europe, Kiesler effectively did the same for Arp in the United States, prompting art dealers and professional contacts to show Arp's work. Alexander Kauffman's essay, "The Marcel-Imprint", focuses closely on Kiesler's friendship with Marcel Duchamp. Kauffman highlights the importance of Kiesler's encounter with and interpretation of Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915-23), which was crucial in the formation of two projects: Kiesler's design for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York and Duchamp's design for his last artwork *Étant donnés* (1946-66). Kiesler praised *The Large Glass* for its architectural character, considering it as a synthesis of painting, sculpture, and the built environment. The display techniques in Art of This Century, according to the author, were influenced by *The Large Glass*. In turn, the peephole structure of Duchamp's last work recalls Kiesler's designs for this gallery.

Towards the end of the book, the reader encounters two essays which are slightly different in nature from the rest of the book. Being first-hand accounts, these essays are written by Carroll Janis and James Wines, who knew Kiesler personally. Janis, whose parents founded the renowned Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in the 1940s, recounts his memories of Kiesler's association with his parents. However, it is Wines's essay that aptly explores Kiesler's relevance to the twenty-first century and his legacy for today's art and architecture.

Wines is an American artist and architect who, at the time of his friendship

with Kiesler, was part of the New York art scene and has since been advocating for “environmental thinking.” In 1970, Wines established SITE in New York, a collective of artists, architects, and technicians whose goal is to merge ideas from visual art, building design, urban planning, and landscape architecture. Between 1962 and 1965, Kiesler mentored and laid the foundation of Wines’s thought for years to come. Wines’s contribution to the book captures some of the key characteristics of Kiesler’s notion of art, notably his belief in “art as an absorptive act of inclusion; as opposed to an insular exercise in form and style.” (Wines, 2019, p.305) Expanding on Kiesler’s idea of “correlation,” Wines succinctly describes Kiesler’s passion for creating flexible structures which undergo an evolution through coordination with their environment. According to Wines, Kiesler’s “environmental message” which was “discarding ‘object thinking’ in favor of ‘contextual thinking’” was his most important legacy (ibid., 310). He also gives a convincing criticism of Kiesler’s practice versus his theory, or as Wines puts it “the conflicts between his philosophical intentions versus their transition into built form (ibid., 310).”

Kiesler’s career in New York spanned four decades, whereas his activities in Europe did not exceed 5-6 years. Therefore, the second half of the collection, which deals with Kiesler’s professional network after his move to the United States, offers more to explore. Notably, as the editors acknowledge in the introduction, his involvement with Surrealist exiles in New York as well as his relationship to the New York music, theatre, dance, and literary scenes is not examined. Overall, the book initiates an interesting discussion about Kiesler, while leaving researchers of his work unsatisfied. It can largely be viewed as a call for scholars to further explore these connections. On the other hand, it gives us a compelling view of the ways in which the dynamic interaction of individuals and groups instigated the circulation of avant-garde ideas between circles, countries, and disciplines in the

20th century.

*Face to Face with the Avant-Garde* is edited by Peter Bogner, director and Gerd Zillner, archivist of the Frederick Kiesler Foundation marking the Foundation's 20th anniversary, an institution that has been instrumental in the development of extensive research on Kiesler, yielding numerous events, exhibitions, and publications. The Kiesler Foundation is currently working on the edition of an unpublished manuscript by Kiesler, *Magic Architecture: The Story of Human Housing*. This was Kiesler's most ambitious attempt to express his theories on our relationship with the built environment, to which he dedicated almost a decade of his life. Its publication would be another step towards broadening the discussion of Kiesler's career.