

Endless Visions, Virtual Desires, and Broadcasted Emotions.

Frederick Kiesler's Architectures of Immersion

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The article aims to investigate the salient features of Frederick Kiesler œuvre – the theatrical mise-en-scene as a multimedia display, the dramatization of the space of consumption and the space of the art exhibition for immersive purposes, cinema understood as a totalizing and spiritual experience, and the intuition of a virtualized, individual and domestic experience of the artwork – through the analysis of a selection of his projects, in light of the most recent categories proposed for the investigation of immersivity. The purpose of this study is to place Kiesler's work in a media-archaeological perspective that takes into account the constant and fruitful asynchrony with the media present in which his work is historically situated.

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INTRODUCTION

Frederick Kiesler (Cernauti, 1890–New York, 1965), a Viennese architect, theorist and artist naturalized American¹, is a pivotal figure in modern architectural research, whose legacies foreshadow inescapable themes of contemporary transdisciplinary debate. Kieslerian practice and theoretical reflections are situated in the historical context of the intellectual exchanges between European avant-garde and the North American cultural basin that would lead to the proliferation of modernist ideas in art and architecture across the ocean beginning in the 1920s (Bogner 1988; Lesák 2019, 361–73; Held 1982, 41–57; Makaryk 2018, 166–192). Kiesler, who moved to the U.S. as early as 1926², is considered one of the pioneers of the wave of European intellectuals that would soon pour into North America as a result of progressive European Nazification (see, e.g., Clarke and Shapira [2017]; Hochman [1990, 240–8 and 291–310]; Jordy [1965, 10–14]; Jordy [1969, 485–526]; Klonk [2009, 133]). Reconsidering his figure within a media-archeological theoretical framework, is the goal of the following pages. Crucial to this study is the concept of *immersivity*, understood in spatial terms and pursued by Kiesler through the modification of architectural space using media technologies. Immersivity has been conceptualized on several occasions in media studies: from the debate on the

psychological domination of the cinematic apparatus brought up by Jean Louis Baudry (1970, 1975) and developed by film studies scholars (see, e.g., Bellour [2012]; Albera and Tortajada [2015], among the others), the effects produced by the contemporary screen proliferation (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007; Casetti 2014; Carbone 2020), the genealogical surveys around the features of media devices and technologies that prefigure the construction of digital virtual reality (see, e.g., Bruno [2002]; Friedberg [1993, 2006]; [Grau 2003], on this topic) to the description of the atmospheric immersivity of the emotional landscape and the space of experience (Böhme 2001; Griffero 2017). The meaning of immersivity that is considered most cogent in this study with respect to the re-actualization of Kieslerian practice and thought is the definition of “environmental image” recently introduced by Andrea Pinotti (Pinotti 2020, 2021, 91–120). The author points to the indeterminacy and infinitude of the space of representation beyond a conceptual and/or a physical framing (*unframedness*) and the use of media technology to construct an effect of constant *presence* of the subject in the space of representation (*presentness*) (Andrea Pinotti 2021, XII–XVIII; for a general investigation on the concept of presence in virtual environments see, e.g. [Eugeni 2021]). Kiesler’s designs give rise, through technology, to an immersive experience of spectators and consumers marked by the dissolution of spatial framing and proximity in physical spaces. “Endlessness” (Kiesler 1926a, 1930, 1939, 1966), a Kieslerian key concept and necessary premise to the understanding of his practice, is based on the idea of spatial continuity and can be summarized succinctly in this assumption: by breaking down architectural barriers, one is able to transform any environment into a flexible and organic *continuum* that can be assimilated into a single image. In turn, endlessness is based on the principles articulated in the Correalist theory (Kiesler 1939, 1949a, 1965), which postulates a reconceptualization of space through a new architecture that originates from the energetic weaving that is established between the elements that constitute the environment and humans. From the drive to understand space as infinite and continuous, without boundaries, to the idea of an immersive environment in which the distinction between image and reality thins out, the step is short.

THE STAGING OF “R.U.R”. BETWEEN SENSATIONAL EXPERIENCE, BROADCASTED FEELINGS, AND MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY.

The staging of the play *Rossum’s Universal Robots* (R.U.R., 1920) by Karel Čapek, staged in Berlin in 1923, represents Kiesler’s attempt to transform the theatrical setting into an immersive environment through a wide range of technological inventions and media tricks.

Kiesler’s staging is situated in the climate of renewal of stage space and actor performance that distinguished the first two decades of the last century:

from Edward Gordon Craig's *über-marionette* understood as an emotional automaton, to the actor as an efficient tool instructed according to Meyerhold's biomechanical technique and Prampolini's actorless theater, the presence, absence, and potential replaceability of the acting body and the interaction between audience and performance are hotly debated (see, e.g., Craig [1908, 3–15]; Leach [1993]; Prampolini [1924]). One wonders whether the machine—in industry as well as on the stage—can replace the human being and whether its physical and mental presence as a spectator or actor is absolutely necessary or can be displaced through telecommunications engineering.

R.U.R. describes an automated world, populated by artificial entities in the service of production—robots³—where, in the face of the labor relief for humanity offered by automation, social and political complications arise due to the complex coexistence of enslaved humanoids and master humans. Between *techno-phobia*, which translates the fears of the European population grappling with the post-war crisis, and modernist and constructivist *techno-philía*, foraged by rampant American capitalism (Graham 2013, 113–14), in Čapek's fiction, themes gravitating around the body re-emerge: the body, as the whole of flesh and psyche, transcends the boundaries of the factory and becomes an object of aesthetic reflection in the media sphere. Questions are raised about spectators' emotions, about "feeling like" or "feeling with" actors, and about techniques for tightly integrating spectator and performance (McGuire 2019, 4–11). The stage set created by Kiesler articulates these instances through the implementation of "actual media apparatuses that transformed the stage into a new kind of spectatorial technology" (Graham, 2013, 125) and constitutes an ode to the experiential possibilities offered by mechanization, with a futurist-inspired momentum (Prampolini 1924) and constructivist-like forms. The set mimics the factory in its work compartments and routines, recreating an assembly line apt to produce, in this case, spectacle. [Fig. 1]

Among the mechanisms used, whose operation had been carefully choreographed, were a seismograph, an iris diaphragm, and a Tanagra Aparata,

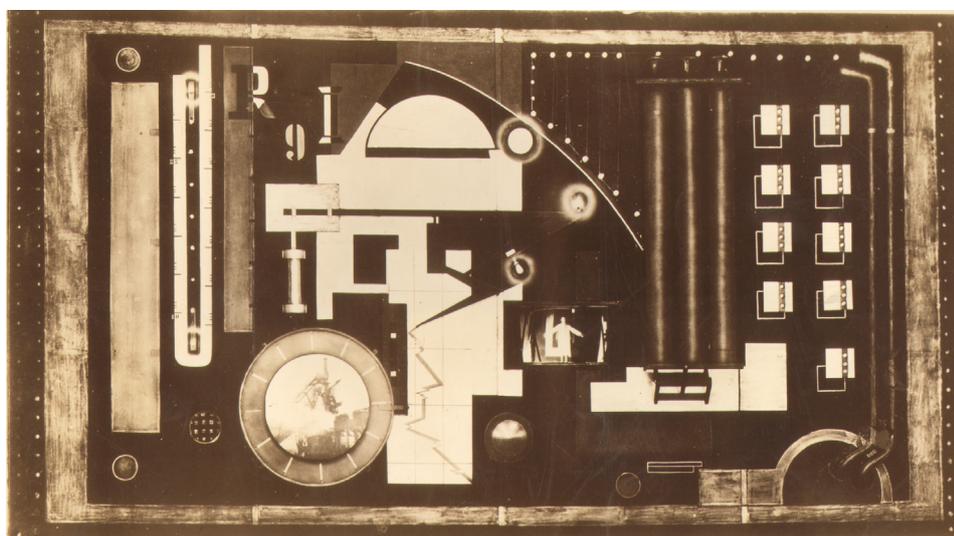


Fig. 1
Frederick Kiesler, sketch for the set design for the performance of *R.U.R.* by Karel Čapek, Theater am Kurfürstendamm, Berlin, 1923, preserved at Österreichische Frederick und Lillian Kiesler-Privatstiftung, Vienna.

an instrument invented and used between the 19th and 20th centuries for puppet theater (see, e.g., [Held 1982, 16]). Using a system of mirrors, the Tanagra created the illusion that actors were acting off set while their miniatures were visible on stage, framed by a small screen in an approximation of the closed-circuit television system. The second attempt to anticipate closed-circuit television as a stage apparatus is the use of a short film inserted as a prop in a dialogue scene⁴. At that time, it was customary to intersperse the scenes of a play, drama, or musical with a cinematic interlude, often projected directly onto closed curtains to extend the plot time and allow for a scene change or other scenic adjustments (Held 1982, 11–15). The primacy of Kiesler's use of the cinematic interlude is still controversial⁵, but its use remains organic to the stage device: only with the staging of *R.U.R.* is the film "designed into the setting; the film was shown during an appropriate portion of the action, within the act, and used to represent a machine of the future— closed circuit television" (Held 1982, 15). Kiesler is interested in the dynamic relationship between the *front* and *back* of the image produced by the staging and conceives the backdrop as an active part of the dramaturgical space (Kiesler, 1996a). For the set design of *R.U.R.*, he anticipates the use of rear projection (Kiesler, 1996b, 42; Rogers 2019, 19–58) for narrative purposes, to multiply the stage space, stratify it in time and space, displace it geographically and, at the same time, annul the distances between spectator, stage space and places of action, reflecting on the "fourth dimension"—time—understood as the last and final dimension of space.

Kiesler, in his striving toward breaking down the fundamental code of Western theater—the clear separation of stage and audience, the so-called "fourth wall"—to immerse, literally, the audience within the staging, raises—beforehand—issues related to screen proliferation, transparency, and ubiquity, using technical surrogates, as Ariel Rogers points out (2019, 128, 137–40, 195–6, 209)⁶, to achieve a composition of *recadrage* and *decadrage* that re-articulate the edges of the frame defined by the proscenium. The imaginative tension with which it invests a television apparatus still in the making, Rogers argues, more or less consciously appropriates a culture of the mirror and the window, which permeates the urban landscape and the interiors of palaces. The proliferation of mirrored or transparent surfaces that multiply the presence of images—reflected or framed—refer to the "distant vision" associated with television, and when these screens are used by the avant-garde to reorganize space "through multiperspectivity, transparency and simultaneity" they contribute to making the stage and exhibition space a "flexible space machine" that aims at the construction of an autonomous subjectivity of the spectator.[Fig. 2]

For Kiesler, *movement* remains an indispensable condition, and set and stage, thanks to mechanized stagecraft, can animate autonomously without human intervention, according to a predetermined score in order to "create tension in space" (Kiesler 1996b, 43, [my translation, emphasis added]). As Charlotte Klonk (2009, 114) suggests, Kiesler "started to pursue the idea of a multi-perspectival space experience created by the relative motion of viewer and objects ", and the *R.U.R.* display emerges as a media device that relates spectator perception and

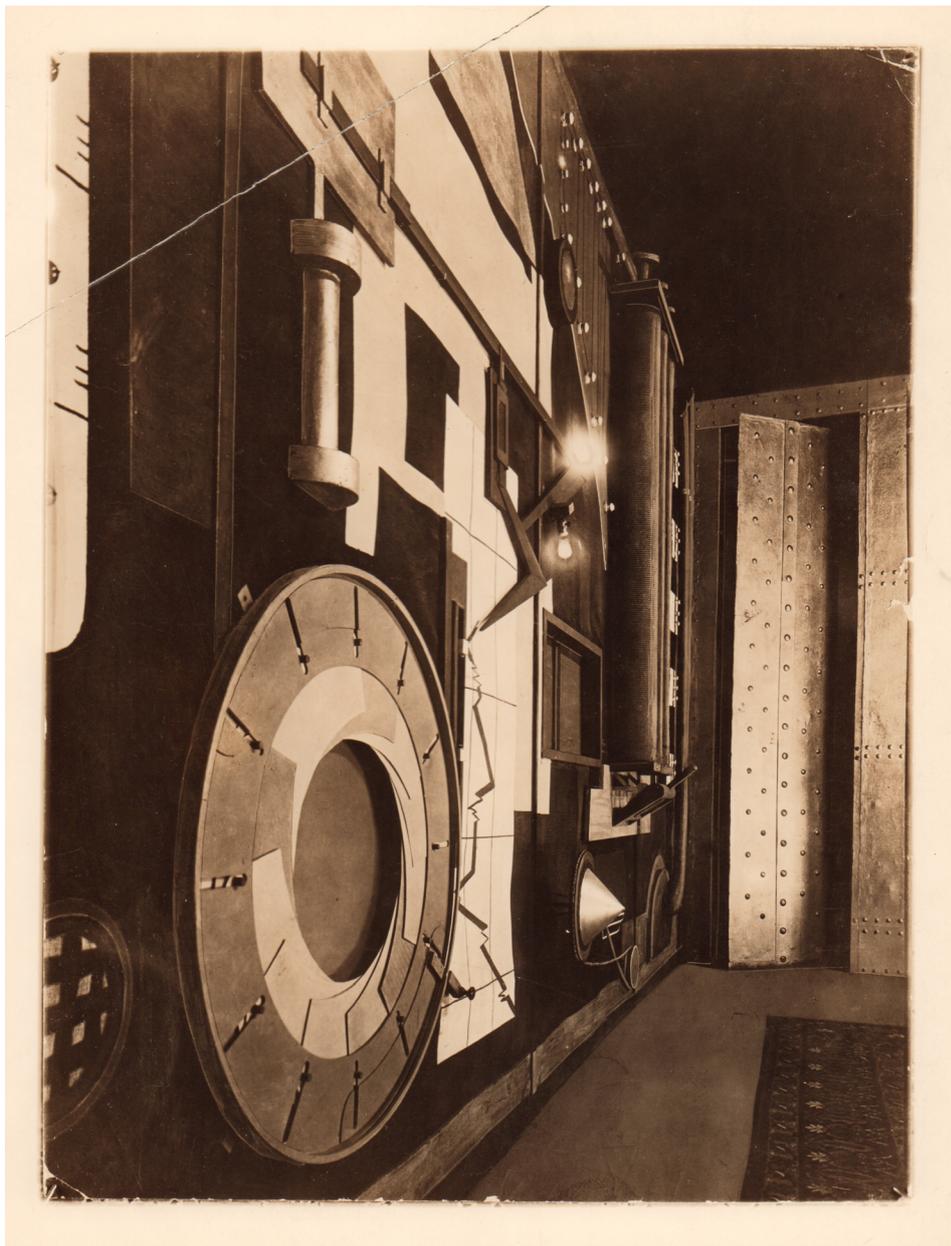


Fig. 2
Frederick Kiesler,
set design for the
performance of R.U.R.
by Karel Čapek, Theater
am Kurfürstendamm,
Berlin, 1923. Photograph
preserved at
Österreichische Frederick
und Lillian Kiesler-
Privatstiftung, Vienna.

performance space through technology (McGuire 2019, 13, 18-20).

The experience is little mediated by narrative but, rather, constantly presentified by the activation of purely perceptual expectations. Graham (2013, 133) highlights the meeting point between the subjectivity of the robot investigated in Čapek's text and the spectatorial subjectivity brought into play by Kiesler, "the former drained of emotion, the latter finding it heightened". The perceptual hypertrophy of some experiments in avant-garde theater and cinema privileges *artifactual emotions* that "consist in all of the emotional responses that can be solicited directly by the artifactual status of film as opposed to the content of the fiction" (Plantinga 2009, 74).

Thus, it is not a question of emotions related to the narrative, but rather to the nature of the film as a technical medium that gives rise to the *shock aesthetic* (Benjamin 2008, 39,41) that distinguishes the cinema of attractions, and to a

spectator “hungry for thrills” (Gunning 1983, 126). Kiesler’s scenic choices, while aiming to accentuate an effect of verisimilitude, never cease to showcase the technical apparatus and the infinite variety of its *modes of presentation* (Gunning 1983, 127) as part of the spectator’s enjoyment and completion of the aesthetic experience. Kiesler’s theater is *exhibitionist* theater insofar as it primarily shows itself, using plot as a pretext for the staging of the apparatus⁷. This makes the technique a spectacular device, revealing the machine as a form embedded in the performance, in the stage fiction, thus helping to blur the sharp separation between the technological reality producing the effect and the effect itself.

IMMERSED IN DESIRE: DEPARTMENT STORES AND WINDOW DISPLAYS AS VISION MACHINES

Kiesler confronted the impossibility of breaking down the architectural barrier between viewer/consumer and merchandise/display when, in 1927, he designed the storefronts of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York and, in 1930, published *Contemporary Art Applied to Store and Its Display*, a volume devoted to store display and the architectures of consumer spaces.

Kiesler does not believe that “selling through glass” (Kiesler 1930, 73) is the best possible way to maintain a tactile relationship between merchandise and consumers, yet the storefront remains an obligatory condition in the modern urban context. The architect weaves an admirable web of solutions, based on the immediacy of optical perception, to transform the storefront into an immersive scenic machine, a viewing device capable of producing ever-changing images. He strives to make the storefront an active medium, proposing the elimination of the frame element in favour of the implementation of facades and buildings understood as *one image* (Kiesler 1930, 102–3).

In *Contemporary Art Applied to Store and Its Display* Kiesler brings out the screen surface nature of the storefront. The storefront, like cinema, is a container of desire, identity projections, and narrative.

The storefront window has been primarily understood as a para-cinematographic apparatus activated by the movement of the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse* in Walter Benjamin’s volume dedicated to the Parisian *passages* (Benjamin 2010).

The analogy between the cinematographic frame and the storefront window is captured by Giuliana Bruno when she states that “cinema has the habit of consuming space”, while using it and at the same time appropriating it, and it is at the same time “a *space of consumption* and a *consumption of space*, it is a user’s space [emphasis added].” (Bruno 2002, 65). Anne Friedberg describes window shopping as a “distanced contemplation,” a spectator experience akin to that of cinema, itself described as “a tableau, framed and inaccessible, not

behind glass, but on a screen" (Friedberg 1993, 68–91). Regarding the proximity between the—female—identification processes underlying the fruition of films and shop windows, Mary Anne Doane states that the "cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access the other" (Doane 1987, 33) and both the displays involve the subjectification of women as spectators and their simultaneous objectification as images. For Jane Gaines "cinema-going is analogous to the browsing-without-obligation-to-buy pioneered by the turn-of-the-century department store", and spectators and customers share and exercise a similar "*visual connoisseurship* [emphasis added]" (Gaines 1989, 35).

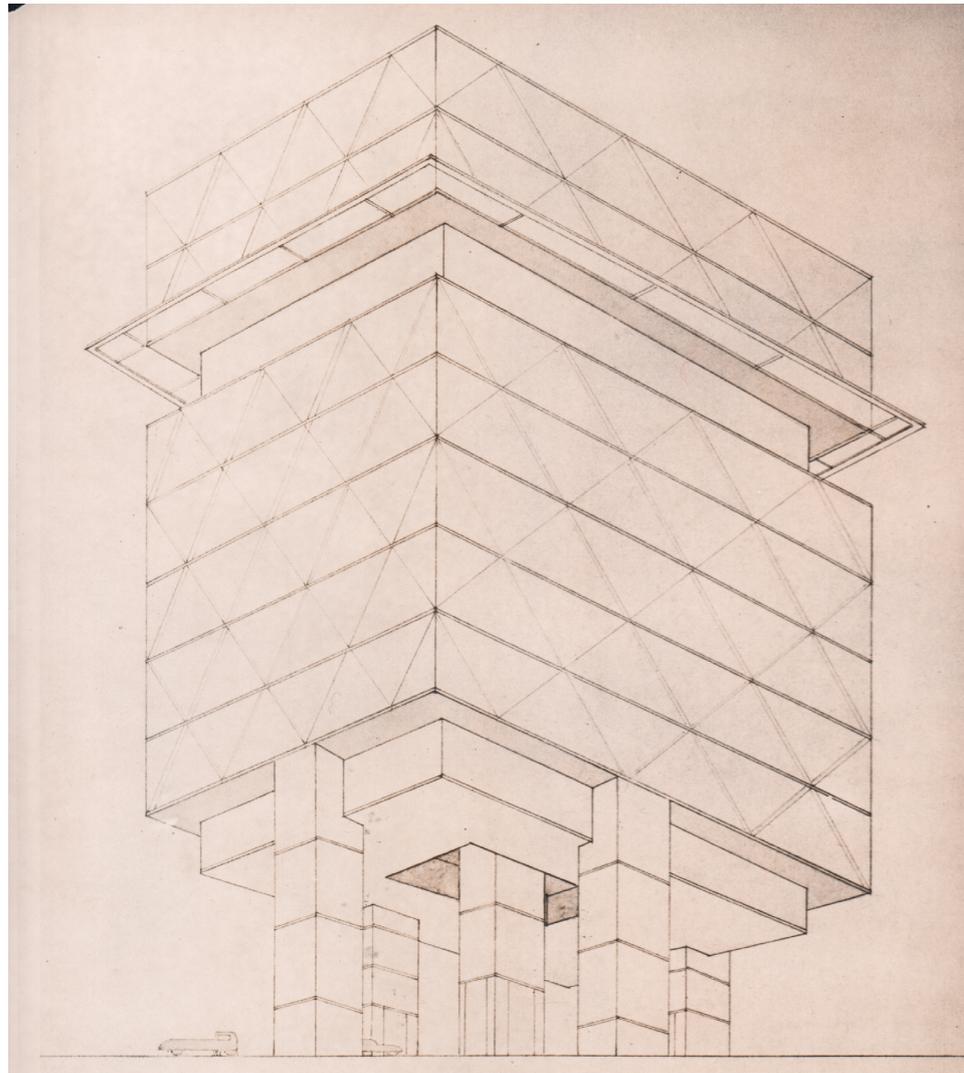
Kiesler proposes two consumer building hypotheses whose façade is made entirely of glass (Kiesler 1930, 49 and 97) and allows the building to fabricate its own climate (Kiesler 1930, 97) while housing the technologies necessary to transform the façade into a sophisticated image-generating device. The volume presents plans for a department store enclosed in a transparent glass tower whose spiral internal structure would ensure freer and more harmonious movement of customers (Kiesler 1930, 49). The infinite continuity of the walkway—the infinity that would increasingly characterize his designs—would lead customers to "walk down several floors without realizing it because of the slightness of the incline" (Kiesler 1930, 49), transforming the building into a continuum that envelops the consumer in a separate, protected, semi-oneiric dimension, comparable to the experience of cinema (Friedberg 1993). [Fig. 3]

Kiesler assimilates the storefront to the stage and proposes a "dramatization" of its display to create a veritable "peep show" (Kiesler n.d.) for passers-by, crafted from technologies—medial and otherwise—that would go on to compose a kinetic, automated and spectacular surface that would envelop the consumer buildings of the future. He suggests introducing push-button devices for the use of passers-by, which could make the storefront experience fully interactive, in visualizing the "dream of a kinetic storefront" (Kiesler n.d.), conceptually anticipating the range of *affordances* and *agencies* that have become effectively available with the digitization of consumption and the rise of VR technology (Pinotti 2021, XII).

The technological evolution of the spectacle leads Kiesler to a still pseudo-scientific prediction at the time, according to which "the perfection of television [...] will embrace and fuse together all the dramatic arts through technical means" (Kiesler 1930, 113). Kiesler, building on the ingenious "kinetic moments" with which he punctuated the staging of R.U.R. in Berlin, hypothesizes futuristic television devices for the department store and the use of film in the commercial context by insisting on the characterization of the clientele as audience, and of the department store as "a modern place of spectacular entertainment" (McGuire 2017, 147).

Sales robots equipped with screens and audiovisual totems are joined by other visionary applications of television, a technology then still being experimented with. Kiesler hypothesizes a *broadcasted decoration* (Kiesler 1930, 120), which aims to dematerialize architecture through the massive use of broadcasted

Fig. 3
Frederick Kiesler,
project for an unrealized
department store
building presented in
1930's *Contemporary
Art Applied To The Store
And Its Display*, New
York: Brentano: 49.



images, inspired by the ways of disseminating sound in domestic environments through radio, and foreshadows its potential: "Television will bring moving images and talkies, current events and scenes on other continent, right into your home and turn it at will into a theatre, a stadium; into Paris or Peking" (Kiesler 1930, 120).

Kiesler tends to consider new media applied to *décor* in terms of *flux* and, at the same time, *object*. Broadcasting makes decoration intermittent, constantly available and interchangeable due to the ephemeral nature of televised images (Haran 2016, 87). Despite its characteristic immateriality, Kiesler assimilates broadcasted decoration to the other physical elements that make up the domestic decorative repertoire: sounds and images are "augmented" props, elements of enhanced *décor*, infinitely variable to respond to the hunger for novelty of consumer society. The storefront, transformed into an ephemeral and changeable interface, takes on a hybrid valence that moves between the work of art, the consumer good, and the scenic apparatus (Haran 2016, 89). This metamorphic nature is even more evident in the hypothesis of the *screen curtain* (Kiesler 1930, 121), placed in the space of the shop window, which, when

needed, offers a news service and can be lifted leaving the display to its sales function "with a redoubled force before an attentive gathering" (Kiesler 1930, 121). The televised image would provide an efficient set design by distributing, at very low cost, remotely filmed scenic elements after adapting them to the actual backdrop to be decorated. Kiesler prefigures a multimedia and augmented scenario where technologies and distribution platforms are mixed to offer the services of mass communication in the unusual context of scenic decoration.

The same eagerness for the new was answered by the design of the *Telemuseum* (Kiesler 1930), an interactive, changeable media device proposed in 1927 for an exhibition held at the Margaret Anderson Gallery, where Frederick and his wife Steffi had found temporary employment. The Telemuseum was to meet the desire of the curator—artist, activist and patron of the arts Katherine Dreier (Staniszewski 1998, 313; Phillips 1989, 169–70)—to create "a model apartment of the future for an exposition of modern paintings" (Kiesler 1930, 121). The purpose was to show "the relationship between painting, sculpture, and interior architecture" (Kiesler 1930, 121), a true "modern environment," and Kiesler proposed to intervene on one of the rooms in the exhibition. Kiesler's drawings showed "sensitized panels which will act as receiving surfaces for broadcasted pictures" (Kiesler 1939, 121) and describes the effects:

Just as operas are now transmitted over the air, so picture galleries will be. From the Louvre to you, from the Prado to you, from everywhere to you. You will enjoy the prerogative of selecting pictures that are compatible with your mood or that meet the demands of any special occasion. Through the dials of your Teleset, you will share in the ownership of the world's greatest art treasures (Kiesler 1930, 121).

Kiesler insists on the variety that distinguishes the teletransmission of images reproducing works of art, hypothesizing a completely immaterial idea of art exhibition. He then further expands the expressive and medial assumptions of the exterior surface of consumer buildings by pondering the elimination of the storefront in favor of an interactive shell that encloses the entire structure (Kiesler 1930, 78–122; McGuire 146–49). The architect is among the first to intuit the evolution of the architectural morphology of the consumer space into a new building type, the *shopping mall*, introduced into the American architectural repertoire at least twenty-five years later by Victor Gruen, another Austrian émigré (Sonzogni 2014, 9–12), and to predict its dimension as a multimedia device capable of "immersing the viewer in the virtual promise of technology" (Phillips 2017, 107). Kiesler envisions the complete conversion of the façade into a single screen surface capable of receiving and transmitting moving images. Television shielding would result in the isolation of the building and a demonstration of how architecture can be used to "mediate sensations" (McGuire 2017, 147). The media membrane with which Kiesler intends to wrap department stores does not constitute an osmotic surface between interior and exterior, but, rather, interposes a screen, a gap of a spectacular nature that

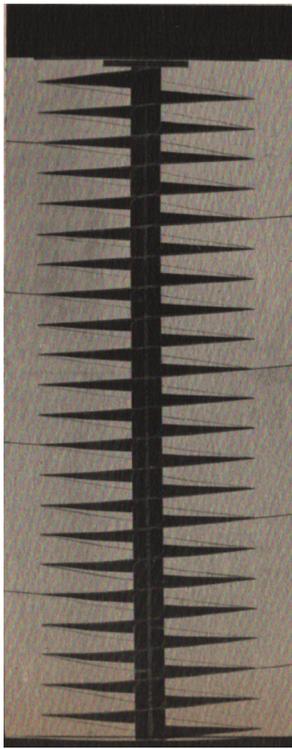


Fig. 4
Frederick Kiesler,
project for an unrealized
department store
building presented in
1930's *Contemporary
Art Applied To The Store
And Its Display*, New
York: Brentano: 97.

stimulates consumer expectations, to intensify them and control their desires.
[Fig. 4]

A JOURNEY INSIDE THE IMAGE: THE FILM ARTS GUILD CINEMA

Kiesler's focus on the immersiveness of the viewer/consumer experience is demonstrated by his interest in cinema and the place dedicated to its fruition, the movie theater, which the architect devises as a place where the image can become *environmental*. This interest is embodied in the writing of the "100% Cinema" manifesto, published in 1928 by *Close up*, where he postulates the principles of the new art—which he calls "optophonic" and, in 1929, in the design of a movie theater, the Film Arts Guild Cinema in New York, where films could be presented in an architecture founded on the specifics of cinema and an appropriate mode of presentation. The project had been commissioned by the Film Arts Guild, a small organization and distribution house committed to popularizing foreign films of high cultural value and reissuing auteur masterpieces of the past. Located in the Village in New York, Kiesler's cinema was strongly connoted, both inside and out, by De Stijl's formal principles. For the design, the architect was explicitly inspired by the facade of the Café de Unie, built in Rotterdam by J. J. Oud in 1925, and developed the concept of *psycho-function*, according to which specific materials and color schemes produce equally specific psychological effects on the spectators (Kiesler 1930, 87).

The renovation of the façade and interior is characterized by geometries and linear patterns that create the illusion of three-dimensionality and a perspective effect of escape to the heart of the building: the screen. The exterior of the hall was designed to move the gaze according to formal and chromatic rhythm, to draw the viewers' bodies inside an optically stimulating space that would provide *distraction* until the moment of entry into the hall, where the gaze, on the contrary, would be focused toward the screen surface (Phillips 2017, 116–17). The layout of the auditorium was simple, versatile and anti-decorative and radically different from the baroque, monumental and "fairy tale" architecture of the cine palaces that constituted the building norm of the great cine theaters, designed with a self-representational and celebratory function rather than to allow the gaze to concentrate on the film. Kiesler, a staunch defender of the cinematic specific, which he considers the highest expression of our eminently "optical" era, advocates an architecture that expresses the film as a "the optical flying-machine of our era" (Kiesler 2014, 29), the ultimate expression of modern speed. The centrally placed screen, called the "screen-o-scope" by Kiesler, resembled the diaphragm of a photographic lens and could adjust to the ratio of projections by two concave, sliding covers. Retractable membranes made the place of curtains while simultaneously eliminating any reference to theatrical architecture. The sloping ceiling and floor of the Kieslerian hall converged

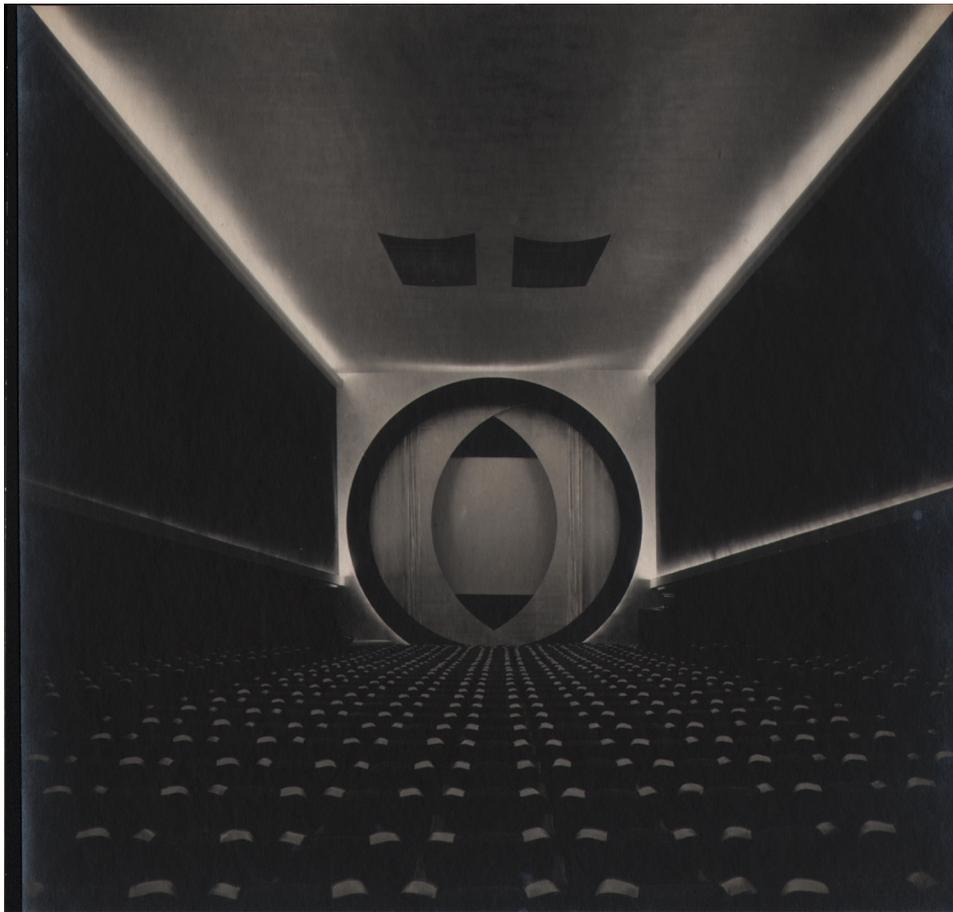


Fig. 5
 Frederick Kiesler, Film
 Arts Guild Cinema,
 interior of hall with
 "Screen-o-Scope"
 system, 1929, New York.
 Photograph preserved at
 Österreichische Frederick
 und Lillian Kiesler-
 Privatstiftung, Vienna.

toward the "screen-o-scope", guiding the viewer's field of vision in the same direction and transforming the room into a kind of optical space ship (Bruno 2002, 45). The Kieslerian screen seems to recall Eisenstein's coeval reflections on the *dynamic screen*, according to whom cinema had adopted a square screen capable of develop "a *dynamic* succession of *dimensions* from a tiny square in the center to the all-embracing full-sized square of the whole screen", a dynamic square capable of visualizing the conflicts between "vertical and horizontal tendencies", thanks to the use of masks capable of changing its size and shape when necessary (Eisenstein 1929 as reported by Somaini 2014, 155–67).[Fig. 5]

The screen-scope was not the only support intended for the projection of moving images. The walls of the room were additional and potential screen-prostheses. The environmental projections were to act as a context to the central projection and induce the viewer to a totalizing and meditative experience. The expanded screen could have enveloped the entire room, but was never fully utilized and understood (McGuire 2007, 52)⁸. It was supposed to function as a planetarium, anticipating the multimedia experiments of the 1960s, such as Stan VanDerBeek's multi-projection installations or Anthony McCall's light sculptures, aimed at dematerializing the cinematic device outside the theatre and repurposing it inside the museum⁹. The projector-scope would perform in-depth functions through additional visual apparatus and light decoration, ephemeral and interchangeable to match the style of the main film (McGuire 2007, 50).

As Giuliana Bruno (2002, 43) brings to the fore, this was “a filmic space devoted to one particular aspect of the urban experience: it was carefully designed to offer a perceptual voyage that distilled the experience of modernity,” where awareness of the journey would take precedence over knowledge of the destination. To allow the viewer to forget himself, physical space had to fade away, to make itself invisible in favor of the complete visibility of the moving image. There was a shift from the optical stimulus of the outdoors and the lobby to a place where the gaze had a chance to focus, in an alternation, as Phillips suggests, aimed at “expanding the limits of the architectural body” and, in fact, dissolving the distinction between art and life “in a continuous spatial atmosphere,” (2017, 116) in what Bruno reconfirms to be, as in Kiesler’s stated intentions, a “cinema-surface [...] a place of concentrated, private, and yet lost attention [my translation]” (2006, 44). We note that, unlike the staging of R.U.R., here the device must make itself untraceable in order for the viewer/traveler’s experience to be said to be complete and satisfying.

Kiesler pays special attention to the video-acoustic dimension of the cinematic spectacle, which he addresses extensively in his manifesto (Kiesler 2014). He anticipates later technical and theoretical insights regarding amplification systems that enable spatialized propagation of sound in the hall, such as the surround system (McGuire 2019, 5) and emphasizes the relationship between the image as surface and the space understood as sound volume, describing the acousmatic¹⁰ character of the hall.

For the architect, the cine-theater, though renovated, is but an intermediate and incomplete step toward an architectural perfection that can be realized only upon the completion of a technical optimization: “There is no doubt whatever that the film is not a final goal, but a transition to a new art which I call OPTOPHONETICS. The house of Optophonetics, as the ideal cinema, is the OPTOPHON” (Kiesler 2014, 33 [capitals in the original text]). For Kiesler, film delivers itself to its artistic specificity not only in the purity of silent images, as “The House of Silence” or “The Wordless House” —a condition he considers generated, at first, only by the technical inadequacy of the device—but also as “The House of Sounding Vibrations” (Kiesler 2014, 29).

In stark contrast to Rudolf Arnheim’s coeval position (Arnheim 1957, 4–6, 33, 75, 84, 106–11, 204–5, 217, 218, 226), he decrees the death of silent film (Kiesler 2014, 31) and claims a haptic and multisensory plane of fruition, where “everyone of the five senses must be supported by one of the others to attain its highest powers.” since “*We must be able to see music, just as we must be able to hear a spectacle or a picture.*” (Kiesler 2014, 31 [emphasis in the original text]) In Kiesler’s conception, the filmic medium will express itself in its fullness and autonomy only through the perfect technological integration of the device that allows for the abandonment of the mimetic reproduction of reality in favor of a complete illusion that gives rise to “a new form of artistic creation” (Kiesler 2014, 32).

In the brief discussion regarding the film medium, he does not forget to note the aspects related to fruition and, once again, stresses the importance of the

way the film is presented, its display, which recalls Baudry's description of the spectator's passivity in his later theorization of the apparatus (1970, 1975): "The Cinema which I have designed is the ideal house of the inactive spectator, of the passive spectator, of the individual spectator, the house of absolute Individuality" (Kiesler 2014, 30). For Kiesler, nevertheless, spectatorial passivity constitutes a foundational moment of an exquisitely filmic experience of fruition, the necessary precondition for psycho-perceptual surrender to the immersiveness of the cinematic work of art. The device conceived by Kiesler aims at the complete immobility and passivity of the spectator, in order to liberate, contrary to Baudry's assertion, his psyche and spirit. Kiesler sees cinema as a metaphysical experience, capable of immersing humans in a universal and sometimes invisible flow of energy, in accordance with the latest discoveries in physics regarding waves and particles, and the cinematic experience would have guaranteed for the audience a true "transformative event" (McGuire, 2007, 71).

CONCLUSIONS

For the design of the hall, Kiesler retains, as a frame of reference, the cinema of the avant-garde, where a stringent narrative and characters to refer to for an identity hypothesis are often absent. Passive surrender to the flow of images and the flow of sounds is but the antechamber of a transformation that, through the senses, leads to the expansion of man's cognitive faculties, opening toward that energetic and spiritual "fourth dimension" that seems to constitute the constant horizon of reference in Kiesler's practice, along with the karst outcropping of *endlessness* that, like an invisible engine, gives shape to each of his projects.

In the creation of the *R.U.R.* set design, the dimension of attraction and technical wonder of the enacted device solicits a collective response and the emergence of shared emotion that leads up to enthusiastic applause at the appearance of a new stagecraft trick (Kiesler 1996b, 43;). In imagining future places dedicated to consumption, Kiesler prefigures an experience that lies somewhere between the collective stimulation of customers and the individual, meditative experience of consumption (McGuire 2017), analogous to that of televised art in the comfort of a private residence.

The long-term outcome of Kiesler's projects in the horizon traced by the utopias of the historical avant-gardes has been widely debated. Scholars have well outlined the remarkable fact that Kiesler has brought out, almost a century in advance, issues that are stringent today with respect to the coming media turn in terms of immersiveness and virtualization of humanity's space of experience. (see, e.g., [Phillips 104–12; McGuire 2017,151–53; 2019; Haran 2013]). Their becoming, in the face of the desire to liberate the masses and contribute to the creation of free and autonomous subjects, a cue for strategies of control and induction of desire for profit, is amenable to further investigation. The virtualization of space in Kiesler's projects, often imagined from the transformation of architectural surfaces into enveloping, iridescent shielding

epidermis, does not overshadow the presence of the spectator's or consumer's body, which remains at the center of both theatrical aesthetic discourse—regarding the presence/absence of the actor's body and the communion between spectator and dramatic action—and the discussion of architecture as a space of experience (McGuire 2007, 2017, 2019; Graham 2013).

It is considered equally of great value to resume Kieslerian projects and his theoretical positions in light of today's developments in the discipline of mediarcheology. Kieslerian spatial unframedness, conceptualized by its author himself and widely discussed by scholars whose theses are presented in the text (see, e.g., [McGuire 2007, 2019; Bruno 2002; Phillips 2017]) is brought into dialogue with coeval and later reflections which draw from media studies field and concern the relationship between sound and image in cinema (Arnheim 1957), the nature of apparatus of Kiesler's projects (Baudry 1970, 1975), and observations on the concept and materiality of the screen (Eisenstein 2010). The space of experience in Kiesler's architectures is as well originated by the attractational quality of the display as intended by Tom Gunning (1983) that marks all the Kieslerian production: individual thrills, collectively shared experiences and emotions, and shock esthetics (Benjamin 2012, 45) are at the base of his conception of spectacularity, within places designated for entertainment as in those devoted to art and consumption. Kiesler's projects are often marked by an only partial transparency of the technological component likely to produce the effects on the public. Effects are often originated by the presence and recognizability of the media technology used: the transformation of space into an infinite with blurred contours is often accompanied by a manifest plurality of technologies constantly exhibited and enjoyed by the audience, mediated through their display—their organization in space and time (Staniszewski 1998, 4–15; Klonk 2009, 113–20). These characteristics entail the emergence of a modern subjectivity shaped by the new experiences resulting from urbanized life that make up the optical unconscious of modernity (Benjamin 2008, 42). The subject, identified simultaneously as spectator, client and actual or potential consumer is characterized by a "mobile and virtual" gaze (Friedberg 1993, 37–40) engaged in the consumption of goods and experiences that have become images. The coexistence—in Kiesler's projects—of reclaimed obsolete media, existing media, and approximations of future media is considered in the text as a trait that contribute to claim the presence of the spectator experience by making him conscious of the apparatus and, secondarily, helps to virtualize the architect's projects, almost abstracting his works from an unquestionable historical location, as he seems not seeking "the old in the new", yet rather finding "something new in the old" (Zielinski 2006, 3). The continuous oscillation between a media past to be recovered, a present not yet technologically perfected, and a future of imaginary media constitutes a mediarcheological coming and going "remarkably forward looking, pointing toward the culture of interactivity" (Huhtamo 2010, 229), constitutive of contemporary media immersiveness.

Notes

¹ The chronology of events concerning Kiesler's life is based on that compiled for the catalogue of the monographic exhibition Frederick Kiesler at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989, curated by Lisa Phillips. See Lisa Phillips (ed.), *Frederick Kiesler* (New York: Whitney Museum e W.W. Norton, 1989), 139-161.

² Kiesler traveled to New York at the invitation of Jane Heap, editor of the American magazine *The Little Review*, who, impressed by his staging of the 1924 *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* in Wien, asked the architect to propose a new version at the Steinway Building in New York with the support of the American Theater Guild.

³ The term *robot*, derived from the Czech *robota*—work—, first appears in this text. The use of the term in the guise of a language game is due to Čapek's brother Joseph. The etymon holds within it the notion of *servitude*, which is propagated in much of the subsequent current usage, transforming itself, through adoption in the industrial and technological lexicon, into a condition of servitude of the machine to the human. See James D. Graham, "An Audience of the Scientific Age: Rossum's Universal Robots and the Production of an Economic Conscience", *Grey Room* 50 (Winter), Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013, 112–42 (114).

⁴ This is the dialogue scene between Domin and Helena Glory—the two main characters—that opens the drama. The film was intended to show the woman—and the audience—that the neat rows of workers were actually robots.

⁵ Examples of the use of filmic parts in the theatrical diegesis described in detail by Held and later compared to Kiesler's use of the filmic fragment include Ostrovsky's play *Enough stupidity in every man* staged in 1923 under Eisenstein's direction, Walter Mehring's 1919 Dadaist production of the satire *Simply Classical* staged as a puppet theater, and the stage action that takes place in 1911 in the Posen Municipal Theater during the performance *One Million*, by Berr and Guillemand.

⁶ Rogers finds, in the face of the normativity of the cinematic device institutionalized by classical Hollywood, multiple "screen anomalies" that stem from the technical innovation brought by increasing industrialization and, by distributing themselves in the spaces experienced in everyday urban life, pave the way for the contemporary spectator who is a user of mobile, portable and scattered screens.

⁷ Kieslerian set design leads back to a dramatic unity nothing more than a series of attractions, echoing Méliès's attitude toward the plots of his films, used as a "pretext for "stage effects," "tricks," or for a well-composed tableau. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde", *Wide Angle* 8 (3-4) 1983, 63-70 (64).

⁸ Due to budget problems, no additional projectors were ever purchased for environmental projections.

⁹ On the dematerialization of the device by the artists of the second avant-garde see Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film", *October* 103 (2003):15-30.

¹⁰ *Acusmatic* refers, etymologically, to a sound whose origin cannot be traced.

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