

**Marco Dezzi Bardeschi**

## **Kiesler, the Florentine School and the Curving of the World (1966)**

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It is exactly thirty years since Maria Bottero has been passionately and reasonably exploring the vertices of the singular triangle formed by three great Masters of the project, such as Louis Khan, Buckminster Fuller and Frederick Kiesler, all born within the Modern Movement but who, with their inexhaustible research, have extraordinarily dilated the conformist boundaries of the Tradition of the New. Out of this impassioned trilateration now comes Kiesler's exemplary "biography," conceived as a compelling open book in which chapters of criticism alternate with shining fragments of micro-history: diary excerpts, interviews, testimonies of friend-enemies (frenemies). A biography, published by Electa, which formed the backbone of the fine exhibition with which the Triennale wished to bring attention back to the figure and cross-cutting work of the brilliant architect-sculptor born in Romania in 1890 but, after only two years spent in the effervescent Vienna of Loos' *Raumplan* (praised by Schoenberg), and immediately landed in New York (in 1925) where he permanently remained until his death (1965).



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Today Kiesler, paradoxically even for some of the same promoters of his quasi-contemporary (and independent) exhibitions in Milan and Paris, continues to be only a visionary “figure énigmatique et atypique” with a “trajectoire vagabonde et polymorphe” (Chantal Beret), an embarrassing “eclectic” (!) and “difficult to place” (Berté) character. In short, an artist “elusive, nuanced, impregnable, whom it is not possible to place in a historical-critical sense,” but who can at most intrigue a little precisely because of his being “different, far” from us (Nicolin), in short “an outsider repropounded by another outsider” (Botta). The truth frankly seems to me a little different.

Those who, like me, were educated between the 1950s and 1960s were able to become acquainted early on with his astonishing “galactic” research thanks to the timely interest shown to him by André Bloch in *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*: his Manifest of correalism had already been published in 1949, and the *Endless House* experienced a sensitive series of design insights and developments. In the Florentine milieu in particular his dogged crusade for “an architecture as sculpture and as a mystical rebirth of the if,” an architecture freed (finally) from the asphyxiatingly Cartesian parameters.

of Rationalism (his Pseudo-Functionalism of Modern Architecture fought “against the functionalist dogmas of the ‘International Style’”) made inroads in those years: in 1959 Kiesler, at the end of his profound (and little understood) worldly parable, designed one of the last versions of the Endless House, and in that very same year in Florence Vittorio Giorgini, son of the “king of fashion” set up the “Quadrante” art gallery for his sister, transforming a dark, deep, traditional ground-floor loft on Lungarni into a stimulating cryptic architecture. “Some historical checks on the Baroque, on certain experiences of Gaudì and Van de Velde, up to the rediscovery of certain dominants of free structuring in the manifestos of Kiesler and Saarinen, up to the “work of Sidney, awakened my interest in this kind of research,” the author explicitly stated. The search for spaces freed from the rigid stereometric grid was directed toward the use of the membrane system and the technique of light mesh as reinforcement for the concrete casting, which continued two years later (1961) with the unique zoomorphic inhabited sculpture of the Saldarini house in the Gulf of Baratti, a “grotto” raised from the ground on informal feet resting on metal hinges and made entirely of mesh structure and shot concrete, in a later presentation-revocation of those experiences at the 1978 Venice Biennale, in a crowded, trendy exhibition with a meaningful title (*Topology and Morphogenesis*) curated by Lara Vinca Masini, Giorgini confirmed the role of prophet and guru played for him by Kiesler.

And this was not an isolated phenomenon. In fact, even Leonardo Ricci, another agitated enfant terrible of the Florentine School, after having – in the 1950s – vernacularized on the hill of Monterinaldi with a beautiful view of Florence many components (spatial and material) of Frank Lloyd Wright’s frontier architecture, was now taking up almost verbatim the model of the Endless House without fear of bordering on plagiarism to realize the archetypal Waldensian village of Monte degli Ulivi in Rieti. The comparison can leave no doubt: the Florentine

architects of the middle generation then most closely linked to American culture (such as Ricci and Giorgini, precisely) and most intolerant of the laces of the now worn-out Cartesian stereometry of the Modern Movement, regressed to an empty repetitive formula (the International Style), thus found in Kiesler's bio-typological research a referent of exceptional interest. The same restless Grand Old Man of the Tuscan School, Giovanni Michelucci, an exact contemporary of Kiesler's, beginning, from January 1960, his great adventure of the project (and then of the building site) of the Church of the Autostrada del Sole proposed (and realized) yet another radical turning point precisely in the name of freedom: "I believe--he wrote--that architecture as it has been conceived up to now belongs to a past that has nothing in common with the future. And the future will certainly be richer than the present: it may have deeper unhappiness and sorrows, but it will be a heady pursuit of knowledge and human contact in a spirit of freedom that has been unknown to us." Perhaps the houses have not quite gone, so far, as the optimistic Master hoped, but for that very reason it is good to remind ourselves, to hearten us a little and to renew, in spite of everything, our confidence in the near future, "what hopes and what choruses" stirred the most conscious and thoughtful architects at the beginning of the "fabulous sixties." While from a renewed and profound relationship with nature gradually materialized in his drawings "the living body" (May 1961) of this amazing path architecture, Michelucci received the commission for the project of the church of the "rocky" San Marino (the first drawings are from September 1961) with which he pushed his own desire to describe with drawings (and happily realize: it deserves a visit!) a decidedly anti-Cartesian spatiality that one makes no effort to define empathetically as Kieslerian, that is, "correalist" in the sense of total space and the incessant flow and vital continuity of the whole, where the perception of the process of development and the experience of fruition of the path is absolutely prioritized over that of Form.

Indeed, in those years Michelucci had been particularly shaken by the salutary whiplash imprinted on the European scene by the great LeCorbusierian adventure of the Church of Ronchamp, which he found himself hotly criticizing in no uncertain terms in his magazine (*La Nuova Città*), deeming it the fruit of an anachronistic and artificial (and therefore essentially academic) regression to a kind of pre-rational neo-primitivism. Nonetheless, Corbu's "punto e a capo" was profoundly assimilated as a lesson that at once freed itself from the dogmas of Modernism and for its profound references to the deepest archetypes themselves of a free project that returned to draw on the perennial "truth" of Nature: "A crab shell picked up on Long Island near New York in 1946 -- Le Corbusier had written about it -- stands on my drawing table. It will become the roof of the Chapel: two concrete membranes 6 centimeters thick and held together at a distance of 2.26 meters. The shell will rest on walls of old reclaimed stones." The suggestion of Ronchamp was enormous: and we can find an illuminating quotation from it precisely in the margin of one of the first drawings -- the 71/15 -- for the Autosole church. Thus Michelucci, who had always made the "praise

of Nature”, the critique of all stereotypes of Abstract Form and the exaltation of such fluid, pulsating, indescribable spaces (like life itself) his own constant point of reference for projecting himself into ever new experiments, was now returning to draw heavily on the great historical lesson of Expressionism -- from Mendelsohn to Taut -- assimilated in his formative years and which he now effectively combined with a strong focus on the “avant-garde” of the Informal (this is surely one of the rare echoes in architecture of Action painting).

Fact be it that André Bloch himself, during that trip to the East that was to be fatal to him, asked and easily obtained a visit from Michelucci to his studio in Fiesole: in that historic meeting, at which I was present, the real absent protagonist (he had died in December 1965) was Kiesler himself, whom Michelucci would have liked to know better. Was he a fantastic expressionist and irreducibly anti-rationalist à la Finsterlin? Or an organic one who proposed to return to the same primal essence of the inhabitant archetypes (the cave) pursuing goals similar to those that fascinated Henry Moore so much in sculpture? Or had he arrived by other means (and which ones) to reintroduce into the project - to give it more heroic emotional grounding - the ultimate, perennial theme of the fatal return to primal Mother Nature, a nature that ceaselessly generates, dies and is reborn and thus - this was the take-off point beyond the “certainties” of Modernity and all Modernisms - introjecting into the “work”, with that suffered birth, the same sublime and fatal rite of the dissolution of Form? These were in essence the questions that, referring precisely to Kiesler’s singular personal quest, were exchanged between Michelucci and Bloch, in beautiful consonance of affectionate confidences, in that liminal meets at sunset time on the Fiesole hill.

Thus inserting Kiesler dutifully at the very heart of the lively international debate on overcoming the Modern Movement underway at least since the end of the 1950s, it remains to be explained why a character who throughout his life forced himself to “bypass the institutional and professional world” which he rightly considered “incapable of grasping the expressive values that arise from everyday life,” an all-round artist who generously struggled to reject the flattening of the “professional” horizon (“efficiencyism and technicality, flaunted as imperatives of progress- writes Maria Bottero recalling his crusade against all conventions and conformisms of convenience, actually mark a short-sighted and alienated architectural practice, driven by market interests unrelated to the real welfare of the inhabitants as well as to dutiful considerations of environmental economy” ), suddenly ceased to get its positive libertarian message across to the new generations active since the 1970s. A great responsibility in removing Kiesler from the history of contemporary research lies precisely with the more “professional” international journals. A fact-that of the disappearance from the world of glossy paper of Kiesler’s work, considered too “different” from the very limited goals of pragmatic building-the kind that pleases checkered-paper architects and the “trilithic” universe of builders-and was noted by such an attentive witness as Mario Botta who, precisely on the occasion of the presenta-

tion of Maria Bottero's book, lamented that he had to rediscover the enthralling power of Kiesler's architecture, which he too had already known (as well as the writer) in the exalted years of his education, after a long period of silence, when he was unexpectedly confronted, during a recent visit to Jerusalem, with that work-revelation that is the Shrine of the Book (1959).

In short, one comes to think of a conspiracy of silence to ward off the thought and disturbing "work in black" of the inconvenient Maître à penser, implemented by the embarrassed critique of the positivist functionalism of the Modern Movement. The fact is that Kiesler was (and for many still remains) a presence too irreducibly nonconformist and disturbing for the Grand Barnum Circus of glossy-paper magazine circuits...

Now that at last Maria Bottero's impassioned volume and the two exhibitions in Milan and Paris, exactly twenty years after his death, reintroduce this strong personality "so energetically dissipative," it is to be hoped that the event may constitute a kind of exemplary test to return to full dignity of content and adequate qualitative depth to the increasingly impoverished routine of the project of the new.

A transparent cosmological empathy binds Kiesler to Taut under the banner of a similar participation in the Grand Theater of the World. It is difficult to find among the great witnesses of our century's project as much attention to our cosmic destiny: all expressions of man's creative activity are closely linked to the "rustling of the celestial spheres." An awareness that our daily experiencing cannot forget the hidden umbilical cord that binds us, as parts of the whole, to the great magic machine of heaven. To indicate this fundamental instance of Kiesler Maria Bottero introduces a felicitous term: "By the expression curvature of the world I mean to signify openness to the multidimensionality of cosmic space and the perception of the substantial physical and psychological unity of what exists, the physical and geographical world, the world of life cycles, the world of the psyche, with a shift of interest from the individual to the collective, from the 'object to the 'environment.

Kiesler, like Taut and Scheerbart, i.e., his most vital Central European roots, overcomes the cogent, overly oppressive gravitational force of the Modern Movement by effecting a radical reversal of the observer's point of view with respect to his habitat, a reversal analogous to that of the cosmonaut observing the earth from an elliptical planetary orbit. But the new slant of the eye does not achieve an extrinsically scenic faraway gaze that remains outside the nature of the phenomena being analyzed. It is an active and profound aim that penetrates the substance of the constituent phenomena, and writes Bottero "an exercise analogous to that operated by Lévi Strauss' structural anthropology, which, overcoming the gravitational force of Western Eurocentric thinking, observes and compares the different peoples and cultures of the earth" in search of the semantic foundations of the collective imaginary. Here, then, cosmology, anthropology and architectural research are welded into an extraordinary unity

of cognitive engagement and design behavior. The discourse now focuses on the communicative power (in space and time) of the Project, on the meaning of sign and language, involving the indefinite universe of the “symbol,” the pillar of communication. “The symbols that language produces arise from the submerged world of the collective unconscious, and this world, not unlike the globe, has a curvature: (...) the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious proposes the unity of the submerged psychological world, which can be experienced from the extrasubjective psychic space. The exploration of this world demands not only the decentralization of the anthropologist from his cultural sphere, but also demands the decentralization of the creative subject from the sphere of the everyday and the conscious.”

“Both Fuller’s and Kiesler’s research,” Maria Bottero continues, “are driven by a strong ethical impulse: but while the outcome of the former and the equivalence of the project with the search for a new geometry and new structural systems, an ecological policy and a strategy for the use of the world’s resources, the outcome of the latter and the project as a tool for the rebirth of the self. In and with the project, the creativity of the individual, his ability to modify the outer and inner world, is brought into play. The cosmic galactic structure is reflected in the psychological one, and it is at the point of reversal that collective action intervenes.”

On the ideal watermark of the white sheet on which the act of designing is ignited and renewed each time, the invisible Fuller, Kahn, Kiesler triangle acts positively. The geodesic and tensegral structures of the former confirm that matter is discontinuous and “porous.” The new “monuments” of the latter exalt the creative role of memory and tend to trace back to the “prebabelic unity of language” enhancing the heroic and universal character of the archetype. The third’s (Kiesler’s) “ecological anathema” and dogged pursuit of a dynamic concave-convex spatiality exalt the flows and fields of forces, mobility, and bioenergetic process urging us to a continuous “interaction between socio-sphere, technosphere, and biosphere.” “In Kiesler, all human functions are but subordinate secondary manifestations of dwelling, and the interpretation of the dwelling function and the Endless House as a representation of the archetypal idea of the house-utero or cave or primitive shelter-that sends us back to the origin of dwelling. The Endless House (equivalent to the ‘Endless Theater’ where the drama of being is acted out) is proposed as an energy transformer, an active principle, a molding energy whirlpool for those who live in it, acted upon by the designer and with the power to act it out.”

Thus recovered from heretic-heretical periphery to the very centrality of the philosophy (and design) of living, I believe that, after this decisive testimony of the book edited by Maria Bottero and the exhibitions in Paris and Milan, it can no longer escape anyone how much, far beyond the ephemeral and transient systems of fashions (conjugated with the sensitive interpretation of the oscillations of taste and the struggle for the dominance of “cultural” markets - these yes - on a global scale) the great lesson of Kiesler in his continuous questioning may be

a truly valuable viaticum in these low years of the end of the century to restore full awareness and confidence in the great responsibility of the oldest and most betrayed profession of "world-builders."

The cosmonaut Kiesler, just as the pop art of the great Rauchenberg delivered him to us and to the new generations with happy act of synthesis, reminds us in the end that the project is an incessant search for "the other" a compelling journey beyond all forms of convention, a continuous creative challenge against all self-satisfying clichés to "attempt the unintended, imagine the unimaginable, say the unspeakable."