FREDERICK KIESLER

VISION MACHINES

An artist, architect, writer, theorist, and celebrated oddball, Frederick Kiesler has been perpetually positioned beyond the mainstream of architectural modernism and outside of his time. Through his obsessions with body movement, breathing, new media, and the contingencies of vision, he is often portrayed as a precursor to the neo-avant-garde art of the 1960s and the progenitor of architectural experiments of the 1980s. Yet he was hardly a marginal figure. His work appeared in the foundational *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* and eight subsequent exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York before his death in 1965. He collaborated with Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and other major figures in the art, architecture, and design scenes in New York City from the 1920s to the 1960s. The prominent architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable noted that his design theory had become an “almost legendary canon of progressive thought.”

Kiesler was born in 1890 into a Jewish family in present-day Ukraine. He made a stir in Vienna and Berlin as an inventive designer of machinic stage sets before arriving in New York in 1926 to participate in an international theater exhibition. Remaining in the city, he survived with a smattering of commissions, most notably for the Film Arts Guild Theater, Saks Fifth Avenue, and the Juilliard School, where he directed the set design department. In the late 1930s he positioned his work through theoretical articles, including a series for the *Architectural Record*. In his writing, Kiesler described design correlation and “correalism,” his term for a design practice that incorporated methods and themes from diverse fields such as biology, psychology, and film.

From 1937 to 1941, Kiesler taught at Columbia University’s School of Architecture. There he directed the Laboratory of Design Correlation, an experimental teaching program that tested his theories of correalism. Our exhibition focuses on that period of Kiesler’s work and the most visible products of his laboratory: the *Mobile Home Library* and the *Vision Machine*, an ambitious device intended to visualize human sight—from optics and nerve stimuli to dream content and hallucinations. The library was no less expansive. It began with a prompt to contain books, but soon encompassed ideas of body posture, respiration rates, information sciences, and new media systems of the 1930s.

Together these two works illustrate the strange and astonishing scope of Kiesler’s correalism, spanning his techno-surrealism and biotechnique (a biologically oriented design process meant to foster human health). The theme of energy—mechanical, scientific, cosmic, and corporeal—animated the work of the laboratory, especially through its main projects, which focused on labor, consciousness, and image perception. Energy in various forms, together with Kiesler’s preoccupation with subjects including vision and correalism, permeates and activates *Frederick Kiesler: Vision Machines*.

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The exhibition’s organizers would like to add special thanks to Claudia Gould, who promoted this project during her tenure as director of the Jewish Museum.

Mark Wasiuta
Guest Curator