

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

Márton Orosz

**Revision of Vision.
Art as Humanist Science in Gyorgy Kepes' Early Work**

ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral School of Art History

Chair: György Kelényi, DSc dr. habil

Program in Art History

Director of Doctoral Program: György Kelényi, DSc dr. habil

Committee Members:

Head: Katalin Keserü, PhD dr. habil

Secretary: Ferenc Gosztonyi, PhD

Member: Krisztina Passuth, DSc dr. habil

Alternate members: András Ferkai, CSc dr. habil and Sándor Hornyik, PhD

Reviewers:

Prof. Dr. Oliver A. I. Botar

University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, School of Art, Faculty of Art History

Prof. Dr. Ákos Moravánszky

Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich (ETH), Institut für Geschichte
und Theorie der Architektur (gta)

Primary Supervisor:

Miklós Peternák CSc dr. habil

Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Chair, Intermedia Department

Subject of the dissertation (1.)

The format of the dissertation is an artist's monograph. It reconstructs the understudied oeuvre of a critical if neglected figure of 20th century art history, Gyorgy Kepes in order to demonstrate the lasting influence of the Bauhaus's principles of reform pedagogy in the United States. Hungarian-born and living perpetually as a foreign immigrant, Kepes made his name as painter, photographer, graphic-and interior-designer, environmental artist, pedagogue, curator, book designer and art theorist. The question driving the dissertation is how Gyorgy Kepes was able to reconcile in his creative work and theoretical writing the usefulness of a socially responsible art and the autonomy of the avant-garde. In other words, to what extent did he adhere to or depart from the following: the original principles of the Bauhaus as laid down by Walter Gropius regarding the enactment of inner experience; the belief in art's capacity to effect social transformation characteristic of the *activist* [„aktivista"] movement, namely the aesthetic philosophy with which Kepes gained first-hand experience through Lajos Kassák's *Munka Circle* and its objective manifestation in „képarchitektúra” [*Bildarchitektur, picture architecture*]; and new Gnosticism's spiritual program advocating „incarnation of logos” and ethical purity as conditions of a full life, encountered through his nephew Ferenc Kepes, a student of Eugen Heinrich Schmitt.

Research methods and goals (2.1, 2.2., 3., 4.)

Given the limitations of prior attempts to gather together Kepes' life's work, the preliminary task was primary source research.¹ Gathering and organizing sources and grouping artwork and documents according to type proved fundamental to the reconstruction of events and the history of the work's reception. I initially approached sources using a philological method on account of the absence of published literature. My understanding of the art historical and theoretical literature available to Kepes (known through reconstruction of his partially intact personal library) and that contemporaneous with him is based on documents located in the artist's estate, no fewer than one-hundred archives on three continents, public as well as private collections, university- and state archives, interviews and correspondence with individuals who knew the artist as well as with those close to these, and first-hand familiarity with the places and works pertaining to his biography. The models used to identify certain key issues stem from philological research, and the discursive field they establish engage methods in stylistic, technical and media history. Intertextual comparison assisted in questions of periodization and attribution, as well as the formal analysis of given works. In locating the artist within the context of a given period or movement, it was necessary to integrate the history of society, religion, psychology and philosophy within the transdisciplinary method employed, as well as draw on such revisionist paradigms as institutional critique and the German and Anglo-Saxon variations of *institutional critique, visual studies* and *Bildanthropologie/Bildwissenschaft*.

The presentation of discursive themes in the dissertation occurs before their analytical description. In order for this to assist in the broader goals of the thesis, the following questions needed to be tackled:

¹ An implied goal of the dissertation is to prepare for an extensive monograph of Gyorgy Kepes' oeuvre on the basis of criticism occasioned by its theses.

A. (i)

Why has Gyorgy Kepes' oeuvre not been comprehensively studied? (2.1.)

B. (ii)

Did cultural circles diverging from the Bauhaus-based European tradition of thought continue to have any relevance after the Second World War? (10.2.)

C. (iii)

How did the artist relate to those notions that he encountered on his trajectory from Budapest to Boston (which included Berlin–London–Chicago–Denton–New York)? How does this manifest itself in his work and in his creative process? (6.)

D. (iv)

Can Gyorgy Kepes' work be liberated from the shadow of Moholy-Nagy, with whom he worked for several decades? (6.2–7., 9.3)

E. (v)

Did this relationship influence Kepes' notions of vision and light practice, and if so, to what extent? Can a relationship of reciprocal influence be posited? To what extent did their aesthetic philosophy diverge from each other? Can we entertain the anachronistic line of thought consisting in „where Moholy might have gotten had he not died"? Which were the artists and scientists they both knew but whose significance they disagreed upon? Did this intellectual background change after Moholy's death and during his tenure at MIT, then the largest technological institute in the US, and if so, in what ways was it enriched? (9.3, 9.4., 10.)

F. (vi)

Can the objects created by the artist be located within the existing discourse of stylistic and technical histories, and could his work be canonized in the history of 20th-century visual culture? Which are the artists and schools with which it can be placed in relation? (5–10.)

G. (vii)

Can it be demonstrated that works in different mediums were interrelated? (7.2., 7.4, 8., 10.1., 10.4.)

H. (viii)

What impact did Kepes' theoretical work exert on design pedagogy, and to what extent do 20th-century aesthetic thought and paradigms in current research on visual culture regard it as a precedent? (9.3., 10.)

Organization and research results (5.–10.)

After presentation of the literature and of methodological problems, the discussion is structured chronologically. This format only relates to the sequencing of chapters. In the chapter sub-sections that are devoted to specific issues, I attempt to demonstrate overarching relationships characteristic of the entire period. Relying on a deductive method, it is now possible to determine the role played by Gyorgy Kepes in Art History as well as the inner syntax governing the different periods of his work. The results conveyed in the following have established a set of values on the basis of which one possible interpretation of the artist's *ars poetica* can be formulated.

i.

Several graduate dissertations have undertaken focused or tangential study of Gyorgy Kepes' art (Virginia Carol Marquardt, Anne Collins Goodyear, Reinhold Martin, Elizabeth Finch, Bill Arning, Leigh Anne Roach, Anna Vallye), but as the field is characterized by a complex network of divergent relationships, they have not approached Kepes' oeuvre with the appropriate emphasis, taking on no more than select issues deemed important from a given point of view. The artist's creative trajectory continues to be *terra incognita*, with most biographic citations to this day referring to the summary provided by an exhibition catalog scripted in 1978 and still within the artist's lifespan.² This lacuna leaves its mark on the history of Kepes reception and leads, in most cases, to a misunderstanding of his artistic program. This is also why I deemed it important to emphasize the artist's early Hungarian career path, his experiences and relationship to the Fasori Evangélikus Gimnázium [Fasori Lutheran Secondary School in Budapest], the University of Fine Arts, Lajos Kassák's *Munka Circle*, József Pécsi's studio, as well as other intellectual circles.

ii. (iii.)

Gyorgy Kepes never attended the Bauhaus. At the time of his passing and aged ninety-five, he could, however, rightfully consider himself its sole living heir. Introduced first-hand to Bauhaus principles at the New Bauhaus/School of Design in Chicago between 1937 and 1943 as well as by László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, he enriched it in singular fashion through his continually developing notions of a society-less anarchy and social idealism as well as a new Gnosticism as propounded by Schmitt. His conception of the Bauhaus depended on the interrelation of two worlds — that of „human solidarity” and of engineered civilization. He thereby retained the school's original principles regarding art and life. Nevertheless, the exported, American version of the Bauhaus was beset with challenges. The school's principles of reform pedagogy were implemented with more or less success exclusively as artistic training, but even this concession was not compatible with the Abstract Expressionism and the „gallery art” established by the New York School. The profit-based art scene of postwar America rejected a Gyorgy Kepes who advocated for artists' social responsibility and a community-based conceptual program.

iii. (i., ii., viii.)

The artist's first book, the 1944 *Language of Vision* details the problem of integrating the artist into society and elaborates a representational regime appropriate to these ends. In its systematization of optical laws and its structuralist definition of a sign system comprising of an image-based linguistic „grammar,” it successfully connects in concrete ways with the main representatives of early semantics (Ichiye Hayakawa, Charles Morris), Gestalt psychology (Rudolf Arnheim), the psychology of vision (Adalbert Ames), the philosophy of science of the Wiener Kreis, itself based on Rudolf Carnap's logical positivism, the Unity of Science movement and British Science and Society group, themselves conceivable as the Kreis's transatlantic heir (Alfred North Whitehead, James Crowther, Conrad Waddington). It also draws on Eugen Heinrich Schmitt's gnostic teachings on general dimensional

² Gyorgy Kepes, *The MIT Years, 1945–1977, Exh.cat.*, (ed.: Judith Wechsler), Hayden Gallery, Cambridge, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1978

relations („általános dimenzióviszony”), which are based on the psycho-physical and neurobiological aspects of sight and which describe the path to the possession of the encyclopedic knowledge as a teleological process. Kepes’ notion of „dynamic iconography” as it appears in the book (meaning the force fields created by compositional elements as the symbols of social relations) can be etymologically related to Siegfried Giedion’s contemporaneously published *Mechanization Takes Command*. It was possible to demonstrate that Kepes transferred to the language of art a vitalist-based media aesthetics striving for an organic balance between society, the individual and needs of human life, itself borrowing from the biological sciences the notion of homeostasis and from thermodynamics that of entropy. Through historical research on the history of the book’s reception, it was also possible to trace Kepes’ reverse influence on the representatives of the Bauhaus pedagogy, namely Walter Gropius in the case of his theory of design and Alexander Dorner in his critique of museums, but also works of visual semiotics such as Henry Dreyfuss’s *Symbol Sourcebook* and paradigms of current semiotics-based visual and cultural studies. In 1965, Gyorgy Kepes founded the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS), which, originally intended as the „Institute of Vision,” served as the institutionalized form of the *Bildphilosophie* governing the language of vision. Combining the work of artists, scientists and engineers in what functioned as a visual laboratory, the institute was intended as an heir to the Bauhaus, a role in it uniquely fulfills to this day. A conception of art as serving a social mission through technology’s humanization and through the collective attempt to expand the human sensorium was doomed to failure, however. Artists with similar views simply did not understand Kepes’ idea of a „civic art” (see his opposition to Jack Burnham and Robert Smithson and the boycott of the 10th São Paulo Biennale).

iv. (iii.)

In revisiting the primary source literature, it became apparent that Gyorgy Kepes did not only assist and co-create Moholy-Nagy’s graphic and scenic works, but that he took active part in the production of a number of his films, photographs and even paintings. Unequivocal signing practices have often prevented attribution on a stylistic basis. In part by drawing on critical sources, it was possible on several occasions to revisit and correct traditional conceptions. While Kepes owed to László Moholy-Nagy a „New Vision”-based media aesthetics and an aesthetic philosophy of the „whole-man” and biocentrism, Kepes’ doctrine of what one might call „active humanism” drew on different sources: folk culture and the gnostic notion of the ethical life, „true knowledge” and „light as truth itself.” Kepes’ artistic program proved far more instinctual and practical than Moholy’s similarly holistic and intellectual, but more concept-oriented aesthetic vision. Irresolvable differences such as these lead to their final separation in the winter of 1942/1943. Although the two artists’ conceptions can be related to each other, it is not accurate to judge Kepes as continuing Moholy’s program in a straightforward manner.

v. (ii., vii., viii.)

The greatest similarities between the two artists can be found in their creative use of light, as is made manifest in their establishment of a Light Department at the Bauhaus in Chicago and the „Light Book” that they began in collaboration. Kepes, however, further developed Moholy’s conception of

the physiological processes of perception through sustained study; he broadened the notion of „New Vision” with the term „New Landscape” (inspired by his own painting and the results achieved by scientists at the MIT laboratory, namely Norbert Wiener’s cybernetics, Buckminster Fuller’s synergy and Harold Eugene Edgerton’s stroboscopic experiments); he made the symbolic use of light the most important aspect of vision, in particular with the conception of light’s extendibility into the environment. He formulated his views conceptually (*Language of Vision*, 1944; a *New Landscape*, 1956; and *Vision + Value*, 1965–1972), developing them simultaneously in the more practical context of his curatorial work (*Light as a Creative Medium*, Harvard, Carpenter Center, 1965), his urbanistic experiments (in the seminars on camouflage during the war, 1941–43; *Fun Room*, 1949; the *Museum Oasis*, 1950; in the *The Perceptual Form of the City* project, co-authored with Kevin Lynch 1954; in addition to the luminokinetic murals between the 1950s 1970ss in New York, Boston and Milan).

vi. (vii., viii.)

Although the artist’s relationship to painting changed numerous times over the course of his career, the pictorial organization of his paintings and photograms reveals a foundation in affect/sensation throughout. This is made manifest in the overlapping structure of elements governing the image. In explicating Kepes’ compositional logic, I utilize Werner Hoffman’s notion of the „ars combinatoria” in my formal analysis, itself based on Kenneth Clark’s observation of the dialogue between the „blot” and the „diagram.” The „complementary harmony” of Gyorgy Kepes’ simultaneously geometric and abstract images can be included in no specific movement and even technically speaking represent hybrid mediums (light-drawing, photo-painting, light-fresco, etc.) and combined techniques (*cliché verre* made through drawing, gouache and photograms, painting-collage made up of photos and other objects collaged onto canvas, sand fixed with casein substituting the value of oil paint). „Ars combinatoria” also seems relevant to comprehending Gyorgy Kepes’ divided career. As an artist who either as pedagogue or as practicing artist devoted himself to new media, who assumed the role of a member of a collective, and whose images were not meant for the market but were painted using traditional techniques, Kepes could freely choose to call his space laboratory, workshop, or studio.

key words:

Gyorgy Kepes, László Moholy-Nagy, Lajos Kassák, Sigfried Giedion, Bauhaus, gnosticism, avant-garde, media art, design theory, Walter Gropius, Eugen Heinrich Schmitt, Ferenc Kepes, József Pécsi, MIT, light, Marcel Breuer, Kevin Lynch, Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, Harold Eugene Edgerton, Werner Hoffman, Kenneth Clark, photogram, cliché verre, Jack Burnham, Robert Smithson, Alexander Dorner, Henry Dreyfuss, visual studies, Alfred North Whitehead, James Crowther, Conrad Waddington, Rudolf Arnheim, Ichiye Hayakawa, Charles Morris, Adalbert Ames, New York School

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