György Kepes and Modernism: Towards a Course and Successful Visual Centre[1]

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ABSTRACT: The Hungarian-born American György Kepes (1906–2001) may not have been the most influential, or indeed most original, of artists and theorists, but the fact that a centre dedicated to his life and work is based in Eger makes him an ideal starting point from which to embark upon a survey and analysis of the Modern Movement.[2] While this is an opportunity that has yet to be exploited in the 15 years since the György Kepes Visual Center opened at Vitkovics House, it is one that should be taken soon, before the Kepes family finally carries out its threat to take the collection to a more appreciative home.[3] In this paper we would like to suggest that the students of English at the Károly Eszterházy College could play a significant part in restoring the Kepes family's faith in Eger as a worthy custodian of the György Kepes Visual Center by making the collection an active part of their undergraduate studies.

There is no doubt that the György Kepes Visual Center in Eger has been a massive disappointment to its supporters.[4] Although the exact reasons for such a failure are complex, we would like to suggest that it can be explained, at least in part, by Kepes's own writings.

That the Kepes Collection can be found in Eger at all is due to the fact that Eger is the county town of Heves, the county of the artist's place of birth, Selyp. The bequest was made, therefore, to a town, which, while

[1] This is an abridged and adapted version of a lecture entitled "György Kepes and Modernism" given by the author at Vitkovics House on 13th February, 2005, as part of the Kepes celebrations marking the one hundredth year of his birth. A Hungarian summary of the lecture with an accompanying suggested bibliography can also be found on the Kepes Visual Center website: www.muveszetekhaza.hu.

[2] György Kepes's name often appears in the American literature as Gyorgy.

[3] The institution is officially named Center rather than Centre.

[4] The artist's great-nephew, András Kepes, was forced to admit recently, in the March 2005 Internet edition of *Premier* magazine: "In 1991 the temporary Kepes Collection opened in Eger, in the Vitkovics House. Since then nothing has happened."

having no direct Kepes links, had considerable cultural pretentions and a ready supply of potential visitors. The fact that those visitors have thusfar decided not to visit the Kepes Collection led the local government to make an issue of the Center by including it in its bid to become EU Town of Culture in 2010. It was then that the proposal was made to move the exhibition into the Orthodox Synagogue at 21, Kossuth utca, with one of Kepes's works installed in the courtyard behind it.[5] Although press coverage prior, during, and indeed after the failed bid made a great deal of György Kepes's perceived status as a "world-famous" artist,[6] experience suggests that even the relocation of a permanent exhibition dedicated to the artist's life-work will not improve the fortunes of the collection. This is particularly the case when one bears in mind what Kepes himself wrote on the subject of exhibitions:

> Art is outgrowing its traditional limitations. The artistic forms have increased in size and acquired explosive dimensions. The isolated, sheltered, limited space of a room at home or in the galleries or museums has proven claustrophobic for many dynamic, explosive explorations. Today, the strain is no longer limited to the physical, spatial dimension but includes the conceptual realm as well. Thus, the exhibition, the traditional medium used to create communication between the work of art and the public has had to be questioned. It has been questioned in all its implication [sic!]. An exhibition, as an anthology of individual work and personal achievements, no longer seems a force in the new sense of life that motivates creative expression. [7]

[5] The official reason given for choosing the synagogue was that it lies on one of the thoroughfares most commonly used by tourists when visiting the town's most famous landmarks.

[6] Typical examples of rather exuberant press coverage include: S. J., "Képgyűjtemény a zsinagógában" (Picture Collection in the Synagogue), Népszabadság, 8th October, 2002; Doros Judit, "Eger a fény városa lehet" (Eger could be the Town of Light), Népszabadság, 25th May, 2005; Sz. R., "Kepes, a fény művésze" (Kepes the Light Artist), Heves Megyei Hírlap, 11th January, 2006. The lack of references to György Kepes in popular accounts of modern art means that Herbert Read's reference to Kepes in his *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (new and augmented edition) (London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 214), is a notable exception. Here Kepes appears in a list of leaders and disciples of the Modern Movement, which includes László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Hans Richter, Lyonel Feininger, Herbert Meyer, and Marcel Breuer. It is interesting to note that while György Kepes has a premises dedicated to his work in Hungary, László Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer do not. Although Pécs, the town of Marcel Breuer's (1902-1981) birth has a room named after him in its arts centre, his name did not feature in Pécs's successful EU City of Culture bid.

[7] Kepes, Gyorgy, "Toward Civic Art", *Arts in Society*, University of Wisconsin, 1972, p. 84.

The Wall-less Museum and Modernism

Such calls for the "wall-less museum" go back to the years immediately following the Russian Revolution of 1917 when Futurist-Constructivist poets such as Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) demanded: "We do not need a dead mausoleum of art where dead works are worshipped, but a living factory of the human spirit – in the streets, in the tramways, in the factories, workshops and workers' homes."[8]

György Kepes was, like his Russian constructivist forebears, challenging the traditional boundaries of art and society in keeping with what he calls a "new sense of life". Although he does not tell us in the above-mentioned quotation what that sense was, it was something new and at odds with what people were used to. In suggesting that the modern era had brought with it a new sense of life Kepes was not alone. Indeed, he was subscribing to one of the key tenets of the Modern Movement.

For an understanding of what these tenets were one should turn to Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, first published in 1936, the year Kepes moved from Berlin to London, having left Hungary in the first instance in 1930.[9] It is a work which remains perhaps the standard account of the early development of the Modern Movement.[10]

For Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–83) the industrial (or what Reyner Banham was later to call "the first machine") age required a new art.[11] The developments seen within the fields of technology, science and industry had left art and design struggling in its wake. As Pevsner points out, whereas the

[8] Similar sentiments were expressed by those active within the Surrealist movement like Georges Bataille, who proclaimed in his article "The Oldest Museum: Ashmolean Museum", *Documents 5*, 1930: "The museum is the colossal mirror in which man, finally contemplating himself from all sides, and finding himself literally an object of wonder, abandons himself to the ecstasy of art journalism" (trans. Annette Morrison, taken from the exhibition: *Undercover Surrealism*, held at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2006). When referring to the post-modernist architect Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks, in his *Modern Movements in Architecture* (2nd ed., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 222), notes a reemergence of the idea of the wall-less museum when suggesting that "the age of travel and tourism" is in itself "the age of the 'museum without walls'", an idea therefore contemporary with Kepes's, but given an altogether different meaning.

[9] Subsequent revised and partly rewritten editions were published under the fuller title of *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*.

[10] The account is almost replicated, albeit in a shorter form in the relevant sections of Pevsner, *An Outline of European History* (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1940), and Richards J.M., *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* (Pelican, Harmondsworth, 1940). Both give an impression of the state of modern architecture at about the time Kepes left England for America in the late 1930s.

[11] See Banham, Rayner, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London, The Architectural Press, London, 1960).

Great Exhibition, held in London in 1851, had been held in a "Crystal Palace" made of iron, glass and laminated wood, which made the very most of the latest industrial processes, what was to be found exhibited inside, alongside "the most cunning inventions to facilitate the production of almost any object", were mass-produced products "bulging with tasteless decoration, vulgar and lacking in taste".[12]

What was of greatest concern for Pevsner, however, was not the lack of taste, but the immorality of it all. Not only had the standards of previous ages slipped, but the work going on in the factories was "bleaker than ever before in European history".[13] In making this link between the plight of the worker and the quality of design Pevsner singled out William Morris for selection as the first of his pioneers, as much for his views on the plight of the industrial labourer as his "clear and sober" designs.[14] It is interesting to note that Kepes also quotes Morris when discussing the social role of artists and the state of design, although it is the damage industry has caused to the townscape, rather than on the workforce, which is stressed:

> Cut down the pleasant trees, among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse, and it's nobody's business to see to it or mend it: that is all that modern commerce, the counting house forgetful of the workshop, will do for us herein.[15]

Where Pevsner and Kepes depart from Morris, however, is in the belief that all good design is dependent on manual labour. Pevsner and many of his subsequent pioneers, while not necessarily rejecting the idea that the arts and crafts produce high quality objects, question whether manual labour of the creative kind Morris prescribes is in fact preferable on moral grounds, pointing to the laboriousness and drudgery of the handicrafts, and the liberating effect of the machine.

Once Pevsner has clarified this, his account becomes a description of how technology has been embraced in the creation of a new art. Kepes was equally captivated by the possibilities of technology and its possibilities nearly 40 years later:

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[12] Quoted passages from: Pevsner, Nikolaus, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (reprinted with additions, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1975) p. 41 and p. 43.

[13] Op. cit., p. 45.

[14] Watkin, David, *Morality and Architecture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977). pp. 83–84.

[15] Morris, William, Speech delivered before the Trades' Guild of Learning, December 4., 1877, quoted by György Kepes in op. cit., p. 86.

> The sculptural possibilities of reinforced concrete, prestressed concrete forms, plastic, stainless steel, aluminium, new techniques of welding; and the potentials of prefabricated units, pictorial use of baked enamel on steel, luminescent walls, photosensitive glass, spraying techniques ranging from metal spraying to color spraying, and new adhesives are only a few suggestions of the technology waiting to be explored.[16]

Kepes and Moholy-Nagy

To its practitioners, the machine-made modern aesthetic was expressed architecturally in horizontal lines, table-like roofs, great simplicity, and the energetic exhibition of construction and materials,[17] perhaps best summed up by the work of the Bauhaus.[18]

The Bauhaus was to have a great influence on György Kepes, and perhaps more importantly on Kepes's mentor László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946).[19] In many respects Moholy-Nagy's arrival in Berlin in 1921, resembled Kepes's nearly ten years later. Both were young unknowns from Hungary who soon enjoyed the help and support of leading members of the avant-garde. In Moholy-Nagy's case this had been Walter Gropius, director of the Bauhaus, who invited Moholy-Nagy to join his staff shortly after his arrival in Germany.[20]

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[16] Kepes, Gyorgy, "The Visual Arts and Sciences: A Proposal for Collaboration" *Architectural Record*, 1965/5, p. 156.

[17] Watkin, David, *Morality and Architecture* quoting Pevsner, op. cit., p. 85.

[18] The Bauhaus school of art and design had three directors from the time the Grossherzogliche Sächsische Kunstgewerbeschule merged with the Grossherzogliche Sächsische Hochschule für Bildende Kunst to form the Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar: Walter Gropius (1883-1969), who directed it from 1919 to 1928, during which time the school moved from Weimar to Dessau; Hannes Meyer (1889-1954), director from 1928 to 1930 and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), director from 1930 to 1933, when it was finally closed down by the Nazis.

[19] Born in Bácsborsód near Szeged in 1895, he left Hungary shortly after the fall of the Republic of Councils having studied law in Budapest and completed his military service in 1918. He arrived in Berlin, after a brief six-month sojourn in Vienna, an untrained artist producing portraits somewhat in the manner of Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele. Within a matter of months, after overcoming a certain scepticism towards the Berlin art scene, he embraced those artistic endeavours bent on celebrating technology and modern forms of urban living, including elements of Dada, Futurism, the Suprematism of Malevich and finally Constructivism, at which point he abandoned painting altogether as an out-dated and irrelevant undertaking.

[20] For an account of Gropius's initial interest in Moholy-Nagy's work see Banham, op. cit., p. 313; Frampton, Kenneth, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1980), p. 126; Passuth Krisztina, *Moholy-Nagy László* (Budapest, Corvina, 1982), p. 34.

Shortly after arriving in Berlin in 1921, Moholy-Nagy took his first steps in the direction of purely non-objective painting, when he combined Dada elements such as collage, montage and the use of typography, initially with a Constructivist interest in urban forms (bridges, railways, cables), ultimately creating what he called "Glass Architecture" (Glasarchitektur), when his paintings, prints and drawings were stripped of all reference to the visual world, in their attempt to reach perfection on their own purely formal terms.[21] As he stated himself: "my belief is that mathematically harmonious shapes, executed precisely, are filled with emotional quality, and they represent the perfect balance between feeling and intellect."[22] It was in this spirit that Moholy-Nagy led both the Bauhaus's preliminary course (Vorkurs), which he shared with Joseph Albers, and its metal workshop.[23] Nevertheless. It was Moholy-Nagy's contribution as brain-child and co-editor (with Gropius) of the *Bauhausbücher* (fourteen of these books were published between 1925 and 1930) that brought Bauhaus ideas and the importance of new technologies in art and design to the attention of people like the young Kepes.[24]

Moholy-Nagy, however, along with fellow-Hungarian Marcel Breuer and other *Bauhäusler* of a similar artistic and less politically committed persuasion, was to leave the Bauhaus following Gropius's resignation in 1928, at a time when the Bauhaus was becoming more strictly aligned to the Marxist cause as espoused by Gropius's successor, Hannes Meyer.[25] Moholy-Nagy subsequently earned his keep partly by publishing articles in the Hungarian journals Kepes read in Budapest.[26]

It was therefore as somewhat of an outcast that Moholy-Nagy received Kepes in Berlin in 1930 following a brief written correspondence. It was there that Kepes organised exhibitions, did graphics, took photographs and helped design stage sets. He also participated in the shooting of Moholy-

[21] For an account of Moholy-Nagy's formal development see Passuth, op. cit., pp. 11–78.
[22] Quoted in Banham, op. cit., p. 313.
[23] For an account of Moholy-Nagy's years at the Bauhaus see Frampton, op. cit., pp. 126–128; Passuth, op. cit., pp. 41–55.
[24] Banham, op. cit., pp. 285–286.
[25] For the so-called "Battle of the Bauhaus" see Saint, Andrew, *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 115–137.
[26] For example *Korunk* (for whom Moholy-Nagy wrote regularly from 1928), *Dokumentum, Munka*, both of which were published by László Kassák, who was a major influence on Moholy-Nagy before he left Hungary. For more on these journals see Passuth, op. cit., pp. 63–67; Csaplár Ferenc, *Kassák in the European Avantgarde Movements 1916–1928 / Kassák Lajos as európai avantgárd mozgalmakban* (bi-lingual) (Budapest, Kassák Múzeum és Archívum, 1994); Passuth Krisztina, *Avantgarde kapcsolatok Prágától Bukarestig: 1907–1930* (Budapest, Balassi, 1998). Kepes may indeed have seen Moholy-Nagy in person in Budapest in 1930, when the latter gave a lecture at the Ernst Museum.

Nagy's five-minute film *Black, White and Grey* showing his kinetic sculpture, the Light-Space Modulator, in action.[27]

Kepes in England

For many like Moholy-Nagy and Kepes the flight from fascism took them to the United States via England, where, between 1935 and 1937, they enjoyed the hospitality of Herbert Read, utopian socialist and chief apologist of the Modern Movement in England.[28] Like many of those who chose the west rather than the Soviet Union, Read believed that Utopia could be aesthetically generated.[29] Kepes worked in Moholy-Nagy's studio at a time when Moholy-Nagy was working on the sets for Alexander Korda's film version of H.G Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come*.[30]

England, like Germany, had its critics of Modernism. Architect Sir Reginald Blomfield, in his 1934 essay *Modernismus*, was among the more outspoken:

> It is forgotten that unlike those countries in which the new movement is most popular, ours is a very old civilisation, with a character of its own, unique in its way, and we are not to abandon lightly instincts and traditions which are ingrained in our people even if not consciously realised. It is significant that the wildest efforts of the New Architecture are being perpetrated today in Finland, and of course in Russia. At Moscow there is a 'House of Labour', deliberately designed by M. Golosov on the model of a dynamo; and largest and most dominant part of this building is designed as an enormous cog-wheel. Then there is that notorious observatory in

[27] Lengyel László, *The Permanent Exhibition of the Visual Center: The Art of Gyorgy Kepes / A vizuális központ állandó kiállítása: Kepes György művészete* (Eger, Gyorgy Kepes Visual Center, 1992), p. 8. The silent film is occasionally on display at the Tate Modern, as it was during the summer of 2005. The combined effect of the modulator, the camera shots and the editing is that of a rhythmically dynamic three-dimensional abstract painting, where the play of light on the shiny metal and glass surfaces creates a twinking, dappled effect not dissimilar to a rippling water surface or sunlight shining through wind-buffeted leaves. A reconstruction of the modulator, positioned along side the film, formed one of the highlights of the *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From Bauhaus to the New World* exhibition held at London's Tate Modern from 9th March to June 4th 2006.

[28] Herbert Read describes this period, when the likes of Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Eric Mendelsohn, Naum Gabo, and Piet Mondrian found sanctuary in Hampstead in "A Nest of Gentle Artists". Nikolaus Pevsner, also left Berlin at this time, deciding instead to stay in England rather than moving on to the States.

[29] Hannes Mayer was one of those who left Germany for the USSR in the early thirties. Gropius also visited Russia in 1932 to return bitterly disillusioned. See Saint, op. cit., pp. 128–137.

[30] Passuth, op. cit., p. 62 tells us that although Moholy-Nagy's services were called for, the sets he designed were not actually used in the final version of the film.

> Potsdam, by Herr Eric Mendelssohn, which looks like a gun turret of some nightmare battleship, with the lower part of it shaped like a ram, and windows designed to resemble the embrasures of eight-inch guns […].[31]

Perhaps the most savage critique of Modernism in England, however, can be found in Evelyn Waugh's 1926 novel *Decline and Fall*. His creation, Professor-Architect Otto Friedrich Silenus, was a harbinger of those modernist architects who were to arrive later:

> Professor Silenus – for that was the title by which this extraordinary young man chose to be called – was a 'find' of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's. He was not yet very famous anywhere, though all who met him carried away deep and diverse impressions of his genius. He had first attracted Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's attention with the rejected design for a chewing-gum factory which had been reproduced in a progressive Hungarian quarterly. His only other completed work was the décor for a cinema-film of great length and complexity of plot – a complexity rendered the more inextricable by the producer's austere elimination of all human characters, a fact which proved fatal to its commercial success.[32]

The inexperience of the young genius and his involvement in a difficult film mean that Professor Silenus appears to incorporate elements of both Kepes and Moholy-Nagy, although the intended model is more likely to have been Walter Gropius, whose striking presence had already been noted when Waugh wrote his novel.[33]

Kepes's Arrival in the United States

When the great masters of the Modern Movement arrived in the United States in 1937, they were greeted with an enthusiasm not dissimilar to that of Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde. Within no time they were either occupying senior

[31] Blomfield, Sir Reginald: "Modernismus" (1934), quoted in Benton, Tim and Charlotte, with Sharp, Dennis, eds., *Form and Function: A Source Book for the History of Architecture and Design 1890–1939* (London, Granada, 1975). In its lowest form, such criticism suggested that Modernism was not only alien and intellectual, but Jewish.

[32] Waugh, Evelyn: *Decline and Fall* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1937), pp. 143–144.

[33] Saint, op. cit., pp. 115–6. describes Gropius's "lifelong charisma", quoting Lyonel Feininger's observation: "He works till three in the morning, hardly sleeps, and when he looks at you, his eyes are like stars. I'm sorry for anyone who can't gather strength from them". Waugh's spiritual heir Tom Wolfe, chooses to lay into Gropius himself rather than resorting to a fictional creation in his *From Bauhaus to Our House* (London, Cardinal, 1981). The particularly soulful image of Gropius Wolfe selects (p. 11), chin resting on deliberately set wrist, is accompanied by the words, "Walter Gropius, the Silver Prince. White God No. 1. Young architects went to study at his feet. Some, like Philip Johnson didn't get up until decades later".

positions within America's foremost higher educational establishments, or running institutions they themselves had been instrumental in founding. Walter Gropius was made head of the school of architecture at Harvard, where he was joined by Marcel Breuer. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the final director of the Bauhaus before it was closed down by the Nazis, was appointed dean of architecture at the Armour Institute in Chicago.[34] László Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus in Chicago, where he invited Kepes to run his own department, and Joseph Albers started a rural Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, in the hills of North Carolina.[35]

It was on such campuses that the European emigrés were given free rein to carry out their work. While Walter Gropius singularly failed to produce anything approaching his early work, Mies van der Rohe designed arguably America's three greatest post-war buildings: The Farnsworth House, Fox River, Plano, Illinois (1946–51); 860 Lake Shore Drive, Chicago (1948–51); and The Seagram Building, New York (with Philip Johnson) in 1958.[36]

Kepes and Abstract Expressionism

Kepes was a particular admirer of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, describing it as "a beautiful crystalline structure in America's greatest city

[34] Mies van der Rohe had succeeded Hannes Meyer as director of the Bauhaus in 1930, and remained in the post until the Bauhaus closed in 1933, leaving Germany belatedly in 1937 before making his way to America. So late in fact that Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, wife of László, was forced to admit in 1965 that: "When he (Mies) accepted in July 1933, after the coming to power of Hitler, the Commission for the Reichsbank he was a traitor to all of us and a traitor to everything we had fought for. He signed at that time a patriotic appeal which Schultze-Naumburg had made as Commissar to the artists, writers, and architects of Germany to put their forces behind National Socialism" (Watkin, op. cit., p. 97, fn.).

[35] Wolfe, op. cit., p. 46.

[36] This is not to say that Mies did not have his critics. The case against him is rigorously put by Jencks (op. cit.) in his chapter entitled: "The Problem of Mies", where he quotes from Lewis Mumford's 1964 "The Case against Modern Architecture": "Mies van der Rohe used the facilities offered by steel and glass to create elegant monuments of nothingness. They had the dry style of machine forms without the contents. His own chaste taste gave these hollow glass shells a crystalline purity of form; but they existed alone in the Platonic world of his imagination and had no relation to site, climate, insulation, function, or internal activity" (p. 96). Not surprisingly Wolfe (op. cit.) is even less sparing in his criticisms. His illustration of Mies, puffing on a cigar, is accompanied by the words: "Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. White God No. 2. He put half of America inside German worker-housing cubes" (p. 47). Critics like Charles Jencks and Tom Wolfe also point to the catastrophic effects imitators of Mies and the other modernists had on the urban environment, while noting the irony of the fact that it was the world's leading corporations who often commissioned a modern architecture which had in the meantime become "stripped of its social idealism".

(itself a symbol of the finest thinking in contemporary architecture and at the same time, like the Torre of medieval Tuscany, a boastful symbol of wealth and power) displaying, in surroundings that state an absolute control of contemporary materials and techniques and perfect mastery of the new beauty of architectural space".[37]

To his consternation, however, inside the walls were covered with "images of torn and broken man. In its offices and corridors are paintings and sculptures shaped with the idioms in tune with the twilight spirit that created them: surfaces that are moldy, broken, corroded, ragged, dripping; brush strokes executed with the sloppy brutality of cornered men."[38]

For Kepes such unnamed, yet clearly recognisable, abstract expressionist works were not only ugly and indisciplined, but lacking the necessary optimism and social commitment (ills. 1 and 2). He continues:

> Rather than accept the creative challenges within the range of the visual arts, rather than learn to see a broader world, most of us, our artists included, divorce ourselves from common obligations, turn our backs on the rational, and separate man from himself, from his fellow men, and from his environment.[39]

Interestingly, such attacks on Abstract Expressionism and talk of common obligations would have found sympathy east of the Iron Curtain where Abstract Expressionism was considered a manifestation of an anti-social degenerate capitalist art.[40] This was something Kepes himself was keenly aware of, stating that striking a moral stance could have catastrophic consequences on the creative process:

> It is unfashionable today, if not taboo, for artists to think and act on the broad terms of cultural and social ideas. No doubt moralizing on art can lead to creative suicide, just as market-policed and state-policed art can lead

[37] Kepes, Gyorgy, "Introduction to the Issue The Visual Arts Today", *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Winter 1960 (Cambridge, Massachusetts) 1960, p. 10.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid. Interestingly Clement Greenberg, the great apologist of the abstract expressionist movement partly agrees, calling Rothko's Seagram murals "disastrous" (in "After Abstract Expressionism", first published in *Art International*, VI, no. 8, Lugano, October 1962, pp. 24–32, quoted at length in: Harrison Charles and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Ideas* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), pp. 766–769.

[40] It is interesting that Kepes appears unaware of the CIA's role in promoting Abstract Expressionism as a manifestation of free artistic expression abroad. For more on American post-war cultural imperialism see Cockcroft, Eva, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War" in *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 10, June 1974, pp. 39–41, republished in Francis Frascina & Harris, Jonathan, *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London, Phaidon, 1992), pp. 82–90.

> to the murder of artistic honesty. But the other extreme – lack of intellectual curiosity and rejection of commitment – leads to emaciation of artistic values.[41]

Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, however, while rejecting overdramatic existentialist interpretations of abstract expressionist works, were at pains to stress the movement's intellectual curiousity and commitment. They saw the likes of Jackson Pollock as being the legimate heirs of an artistic tradition going back to Courbet and Manet.[42] As for Pollock himself, he claimed that the way he handled paint was the expression of the contemporary aims of the age he was living in:

> My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique.[43]

While rejecting the results Kepes would no doubt have agreed with Pollock's sentiments. Interestingly, looking at Kepes's late paintings, it would be difficult to deny, however, that Kepes was not left untouched by Abstract Expressionism.[44]

Kepes and Pop

But everyone was caught unawares by the arrival of Pop Art, another new art arrival which Kepes greeted with scorn. In fact he had very firm views on popular culture in general. Prior to Pop Art's arrival on the New York art scene in 1962, Kepes writes: "For the tragedy of democracy is the chaos of communication: the three-hundred-ring commercial circus of advertising, public relations, slick magazines and fatuous entertainment. To

[41] Kepes, Gyorgy: "The Visual Arts and the Sciences: A Proposal for Collaboration," p. 148.

[42] See for example, Greenberg, Clement, "Modern Painting" first published in *Arts Yearbook*, 1, New York, 1961. Reprinted with slight revisions in *Art & Literature*, no. 4, Spring 1965, pp. 193-201 additions in which form it was republished in Harrison and Wood, op. cit., pp. 754-760.

[43] Paraphrased from Jackson Pollock's interview with William Wright (1950), transcript published in F.V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1967), pp. 79–81, republished in Harrison and Wood, op. cit., pp. 574–578.

[44] The way Kepes often flicked paint onto the surface of the canvas in a tachist manner can be inspected at the top gallery of the Gyorgy Kepes Visual Center at Eger's Vitkovics House (Széchenyi u. 55.).

most people, ideas and values are imparted by middlemen whose objectives are crassly narrow and nonsocial".[45]

Following Pop's arrival Kepes was to add:

> A most recent group of artists has returned from abstract images to concrete objects in their environment. They have become fascinated by vulgar features of everyday life, and they have chosen them as their emblems. […] Their unresolved mixture of private attachment and public critical social commentary takes no account of the revolutionary artistic achievements of the earlier part of the century. […] Most of the mushrooming art movements seem to have forgotten the essential role of artistic creation. By and large, the art world has become the scene of a popularity contest manipulated by appraisers and impressarios who are blind to the fundamental role of the artistic image.[46]

While we are not told here what the fundamental role of the artistic image is, there were many artists pursuing their formal and technical pursuits in the spirit of truth and integrity who were similarly perplexed at this recent development. One of them was Clement Greenberg the propagandist of the abstract expressionist movement, who was alienated by its use of representation, conceptual wit, and sources from "low", commercial, popular culture. Indeed, he went so far as to call Pop Art a fashion, a school, a degenerate mannerism.[47] This was a view that differed significantly from the views of Lawrence Alloway, who, like his fellow pop artists and theorists, was interested in "a vernacular culture that persisted beyond any special interest in skills in art, architecture, design or art criticism that any of us might possess". He continues, "[t]he area of contact was mass-produced urban culture: movies, advertisement, science fiction, Pop music. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals,

[45] Kepes, op. cit., 1960, p. 8. Pop Art was invented in London in the mid-1950s under the aegis of the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Its great formative event was the "This is Tomorrow" exhibition of 1956, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. As Edward Lucie-Smith describes in his: *Movements in Art since 1945* (revised ed., London, Thames & Hudson, 1975): "[…] probably the most significant part of "This is Tomorrow" was an entrance display provided by Richard Hamilton – a collage picture entitled *Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing*? In the picture are a muscle-man from a physique magazine and a stripper with sequinned breasts. The muscle-man carries a gigantic lollipop, with the word POP on it in large letters. With this work, many of the conventions of pop art were created, including the use of borrowed imagery" (p. 135).

[46] Kepes, op. cit., 1965, p. 148.

[47] Reise, Barbara M., "Greenberg and The Group: A Retrospective View" *Studio International* vol. Nos. 901 & 902, May & June 1968, republished in Harrison and Wood (eds.), op. cit., p. 255.

but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically […]"[48]

What is surprising, or perhaps not considering his age, was that Kepes failed to see Pop's debt to Dada, which had been an important stepping stone in both Moholy-Nagy's and Kepes's artistic development. Moholy-Nagy had used the collage and the montage in his early work, and looking at the insertion of the *objet trouvées* in his later paintings it appears that Kepes was once again prepared to accept that he had been wrongly dismissive.[49]

The English artist Keith Vaughan puts the dilemmas facing the artists of the earlier generations, accustomed to other ways of seeing and expressing the worlds in which they live, in the following terms:

> After all one has thought and dreamed and longed for it turns out that toffee paper, cereal packages and mass media wrappings and publicity are the vital, significant and fertile aspects of the age we live in. I live in it too. And I just don't feel that way. I feel like a stranded dinosaur – fat, lethargic, frightened and slow-witted. I look at my work – the result of some forty years' effort and hope – and theirs – the result of 5 or 6 years at the most. And it's I who feel defeated. Because all the values I've lived by now count for nothing. If this is what it was all going to lead to one need not have bothered. Oh I wouldn't mind handing on to someone who saw further, had more talent, more youth, energy and time before him. But this. Liquorice allsorts and ton-up motorbikes bursting out of the canvas.[50]

The Modernist Tradition Today

Pop had an off-the-wallness, a youthful exuberence which left Kepes and many of his generation cold, and in doing so they failed to appreciate the next turn the Modern Movement was about to take. Whereas Kepes's technology was aloof, cold and moralistic, Pop's was people-centred, hot and sexy, as were the architectural ideas it was to unleash.

A group of designers formed by Peter Cook and others in 1960, known as Archgram, were just some of those who yearned for the likes of "a miniaturised, mobile, cooking, refrigerating, sewage disposing, VHF and three-channel-televiewing, dry-cleaning and martini-dispensing services robot with fitted ash-trays and book rest, that will follow us around the house riding on a cushion of art, like an interplanetary hoover."[51]

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[48] Lippard, Lucy, *Pop Art* (London, 1966), p.32, and quoted by Jencks, op. cit., pp. 271–2.
[49] Once again the evidence is there to see at the Vitkovics House in Eger.
[50] From Vaughan's Journal 45–40, 7 April 1964, quoted in Yorke, Michael, *Vaughan Keith: His Life and Work* (London, Constable, 1990), p. 221.
[51] Cook, Peter in *The Architect's Journal*, 1960, p. 415 quoted in Jencks, op. cit., p. 294.

This latter vision spurned equally wild conceptual architectural projects, where the services almost became more important than the building itself, as in Archigram's: Computer City, Walking City, Blow-Out City, Plug-In City. The modernists of the previous generation were horrified. Sigfried Giedion, Kepes's one-time boss at the Chicago Institute of Design wrote:

> The worst example of all (dystopias), however, appeared at a London 1963 exhibition where a walking city was shown, with all buildings conceived as steel tanks moving mechanically and certainly crushing, as tanks do, nature and any person outside them. The example is appalling, not only because it represents an inhuman conception of the city of the future by a small group of people, but because it received wide publicity without, as far as I know, any corresponding protest.[52]

For young architects like Richard Rogers (b. 1933) and Norman Foster (b 1935), however, Archigram's theoretic exercises in "populist technophilia" were both exciting and thought-provoking.[53] As Bryan Appleyard states in his biography of Richard Rogers, it "represented a profound and genuine reassessment of the modernist movement in the light of experience and of emerging technologies. They were reconceiving architecture from the ground up, having discarded much of the burden of ideology which had become attached to modernism."[54]

It is within such a context, therefore, that Kepes belongs to the tail end of the Modernism of the First Machine Age, with its interest in exploiting the developments of the industrial revolution (glass, steel, concrete, electricity etc), rather than the beginnings of the Second Machine Age ushered in by the first industrial robots and related developments in science and technology.[55] Whereas the conventional machines of the First Machine

[52] Quoted in Jencks, op. cit., p. 291. Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968) was the powerful advocate of the Modern Movement, and the author of the highly influential tract *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941). Space and time were concepts often incorporated into the work and theories of both Moholy-Nagy and Kepes.

[53] For an account of their architectural development see Sudjic, Deyan, *Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, James Stirling: New Directions in British Architecture* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1986).

[54] Appleyard, Bryan, *Richard Rogers: A Biography* (London, Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 183

[55] Abel, Chris, "Modern Architecture in the Second Machine Age: The Work of Norman Foster", in *Norman Foster 1964–1987* (Tokyo, a+u Publishing, 1988), p. 13. On the subject of the ecological dimension of the new architecture Abel writes: "The transition from First to Second Machine Age came into full public focus with the Apollo programme that put man on the Moon. Looking back on the Earth from the alien landscape, a global TV public was made starkly aware that a new technological order was in effect. In the same way, Buckminster Fuller's phrase "Spaceship Earth" acquired new and urgent meaning. Though Fuller had long preached the need for a global approach to Earth's

Age which early Modernists tried to use were inflexible, working like clockwork to a fixed pattern to produce preconceived results, the driving force and symbolic machine of the Second Machine Age is the adaptable, general purpose computer.

This is not to say that architects such Richard Rogers (b. 1933), co-architect of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and Norman Foster (b. 1935) turned their back entirely on the great pioneers. They had both been at Yale as students of Paul Rudolph, one of the first generation to have graduated from Walter Gropius's Harvard School of Architecture, and Rogers himself acknowledges the power of landmark structures like Mies's Seagram Building, albeit criticising their inability "to respond to the ebb and flow of contemporary life".[56]

Thus, one finds in Rogers' buildings flexible solutions based on concrete and potentionally ever-changing solutions. Both the Pompidou Centre and the Lloyd's Building in London, have the appearance at least of being open to further development through the addition of units, while at the same time using technology skillfully, frequently exploiting the latest technological developments in both the aerospace and armaments industries. Indeed, such high-tech buildings are like Mies's in being beautifully crafted. Sometimes using standardised products, they were also to rely on new custom-made hand-crafted parts, made in the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement from whence Pevsner began his account of the Modern Movement.

Conclusion

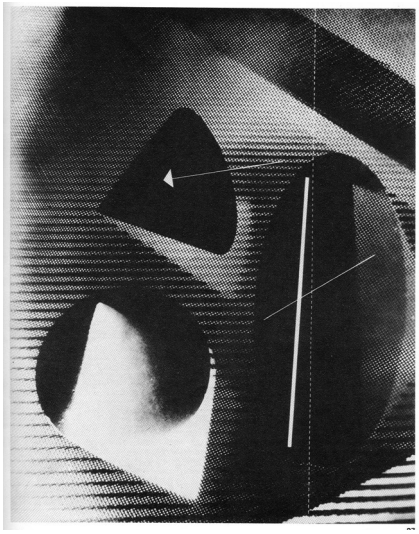
Thus, by following the career of György Kepes, with the benefit of all the resources that are available to us here in Eger we have a context in which to trace the history of the Modern Movement from its origins right up to the present day. Kepes's controversial and forthright opinions, as well as the clarity and simplicity of the language in which he expressed them, not only make his theoretical writings ideal reading material for seminars, but a suitable starting point for discussions, course work and undergraduate theses. At a time when György Kepes's name is being banded about by local government officials and politicians who have little understanding of what György Kepes was trying to achieve, it would be to the common good if Eger finally had a group of individuals who were actually familiar with Kepes's writings and the movement to which they belong, and who may

human and natural resources, the vision of a small and frail-looking planet brought home to its passengers the dangers of not caring after their life-support system".

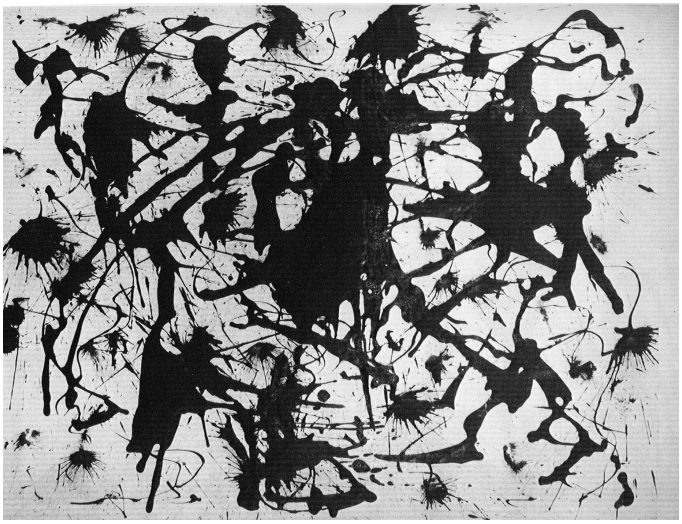
[56] Sudjic, op. cit., p. 45

also, one day, be in a position to give concrete reasons for why the György Kepes Visual Center is worth keeping.

Illustrations:



1. György Kepes. *Light Graphic*, 1965 (The Kepes Center, Eger)



2. Jackson Pollock. Untitled, c. 1950 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)