KEPES GYÖRGY

KEPES, GYÖRGY (ke'pish dyûrd'y)

Oct. 4, 1906- Artist; educator; author
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To his efforts to resolve the ever increasing dichotomy between art and science, György Kepes has applied an exceptional wealth and diversity of skills. As designer, typographer, film maker, architect, sculptor, teacher, and writer, he has used technological advancements to encourage a cross-fertilization of what C. P. Snow crisply called the "Two Cultures." At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which he directs, Kepes, who is also a painter, has found a base for his search for common ground, creating art forms that utilize neon lights, metals, and ignited gas and contributing to the design and development of organic architecture. Because the split in cultural life has increased the fragmentation of twentieth-century man, Kepes' quest is for "humanism in design and the recognition of the individual." In an essay of 1949 he asked, "Has not our concern for the efficiency of detail led to the neglect of the efficiency of the most important design . . . man as an individual and as a member of society?"

A native of Hungary, György Kepes was born in the small town of Selyp on October 4, 1906 to Ferenc and Ilona (Fai) Kepes. When as a child he made drawings and paintings of everything around him, he was encouraged to develop his talent by the example of an uncle, a physician who also painted. Another of his uncles was a magistrate and art collector. The Hungarian composer Béla Bartók had a strong influence on Kepes, who quoted him in a conversation reported in *Arts Magazine* (May 1970): "One has to get both the root and the fruit to comprehend the system." Entering the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, he studied under Istvan Csok and earned his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1929. While at the academy, in 1928, he had joined an avant-garde student group, Munka, with whose members during the next two years he espoused socially sympathetic views toward labor. His contact with that group perhaps sharpened and enlarged the humanism seen in his later writings on aesthetic theory.

In his protest against social injustices Kepes

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turned in 1930 from painting to film, which was

then regarded as a more honest and effective medium of visual communication. During that year he went to Berlin to work on films, stage sets, exhibitions, and graphic designs, often in collaboration with Lázsló Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian painter, designer, and photographer. Both artists were associated with the Bauhaus, which emphasized the union of artistic principles with utilitarian design. In Berlin, from 1930 to 1934, and later in London, from 1935 to 1937, Kepes experimented with the effects of light and shadow on photosensitized paper and on exhibition and other types of design.

Moholy-Nagy, who had also spent about two years in London in the mid-1930's, moved to Chicago in 1937 to become director of the so-called "New Bauhaus" and then sent for Kepes to head its light and color department. After the failure of that school a year or so later, Moholy-Nagy opened the Chicago Institute of Design, with Kepes again in charge of the light and color department. In the United States he had continued his film experiments, producing, for example, *Photomontage* in 1937. During the early years of the decade of the 1930's his work had been exhibited in Budapest, Berlin, New York City, and London. His first major one-man show in the United States was held at the Katharine Kuh Gallery in Chicago in 1939.

For about five years, or until 1943, Kepes taught at the Institute of Design. The educational ideals and methods, some of them Bauhaus-inspired, that he developed during those years were summed up in his book *Language of Vision* (Theobald, 1945), which through analysis of how design is perceived pointed the way toward new possibilities in representation in art. In 1944 he designed the exhibition "Arts of the United Nations" for the Art Institute of Chicago and in 1945, the introduction room for the Exposition des Techniques Américaines de l'Habitation et de l'Urbanisme in Paris. During the period from 1938 to 1950 he accepted commissions for graphic designs from *Fortune* magazine, the Container Corporation of America, and Abbott Laboratories.

Although he has said that he loves to paint, during his early years in the United States Kepes painted only intermittently, altogether no longer than about six months. In 1950, however, he resumed painting on a fairly regular basis. His attitude toward his work was well articulated in a statement written for the catalogue of the 1952 University of Illinois Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, in which, in part, he seems to be contrasting himself with the somewhat strenuous action painters then in vogue: "In painting I am not satisfied with the muscular acrobatics of violent lines and explosive colors, with their compassless abandon. I suspect the ego-dominated visual exercises in personality competition. I am searching for those low-energy experiences which, in their subdued scale, allow more embracing patterns of order. I am seeking affinities between my complete moments and the

patterns of my surroundings and have found for myself a new meaning for landscape. The tranquil, yet very much alive, rhythm of some age-old, commonplace experiences—a sunset—branch of a tree—suggest for me the coherence and completeness so lacking in our urban industrialized chaos. By painting them I keep them to guide me to the rich potential values inherent in the new landscape of the scientific world."

Kepes' abstract and semiabstract pictures—some quiet, some aflame with color—owe a part of their affinity with romantic nature painting to a technique of collage that the artist has followed effectively over the years. Customarily he first covers his large canvases with a thin coat of color on which he drips glue or plastic adhesive in patterned trails and globules to hold lines and patches of sand. He then applies light, glazed layers of color and often lavishly lays on gobs of bright pigment with a palette knife. The result is more than a diversity of textures: as Dorothy Adlow pointed out in the *Christian Science Monitor* (March 4, 1963), "The picture approximates a bas-relief."

With titles like *Serene Image, Sky Mirror, Whispering Winter Whites, Flock of Tender Hues, Trembling Veil,* and *Inviting Mistscape,* Kepes' paintings are a poetic expression of man's confrontation with nature in which the inner and outer worlds are brought into correspondence by an appeal to the emotions, the mind, and the senses. "Kepes keeps his romantic tendencies firmly under control by the use of horizontal bands of darker colors, squares or vertical lines," Susan Drysdale wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor* (May 26, 1972). "But fortunately they are not sufficient to subdue the strongly lyrical streak in his work."

As a teacher and theorist Kepes has also had an important influence on contemporary art. After leaving the Institute of Design in 1943, he taught briefly at North Texas State Teachers College and at Brooklyn College. In 1946 he became professor of visual design in the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There he taught drawing, photography, and commercial art and also organized a light workshop, as he had in Chicago.

Writing on function in modern design, in an essay pleading for humanism, or renewal of recognition of the needs of the individual, in design, Kepes was the chief contributor to the 1949 Harvard University Press publication *Graphic Forms; The Arts as Related to the Book.* At MIT he had an excellent opportunity to observe the relationship between art and science, particularly in convergences of natural phenomena and art images, a subject that had long fascinated him. In *The New Landscape in Art and Science* (Theobald, 1956) he used photographs of magnified sights seen otherwise only through laboratory instruments to illustrate new dimensions that the natural scientist is bringing to the visual world. "Science has opened up resources for new sights and sounds, new tastes and textures," he wrote in his introduction. "If we are to understand the

new landscape, we need to touch it with our senses and build the images that will make it

ours. For this we must remake our vision." Kepes was chosen to edit and write the introduction to "The Visual Arts Today," a special issue of *Daedalus* magazine that appeared in the winter of 1960.

Kepes' most ambitious undertaking was the compiling and editing of the landmark six-volume "Vision + Value" series (Braziller, 1965-66), a collection of about a hundred essays by eighty-four natural and social scientists, architects, and critics. The well-illustrated volumes, for some of which Kepes also wrote an introduction, are titled *Education of Vision; Structure in Art and Science; Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm; The Nature and Art of Motion; The Man-Made Objects;* and *Sign, Image, Symbol.* Many of the essays grew out of Kepes' teaching at MIT. They represent a kaleidoscope of disciplines pushing at the frontiers of the "language of vision"; at the same time they seek to amalgamate the energies and sensibilities of art and technology to provide an ecology for man.

Basic to Kepes' philosophy in "Vision + Value" is that the many specializations of contemporary men and women cut them off from one another. Besides advocating the advancement of knowledge in every human endeavor, Kepes insisted in one of his lectures, "we must combine and intercommunicate all such knowledge so that we may gain the sense of *structure,* the power to *see,* in the deepest, richest sense, our world as an interconnected whole." "Vision + Value" attempts to show the way to integration through an eclectic synthesis of anthropology, biology, experimental psychology, relational mathematics, communication theory, linguistic analysis, and engineering. At the least, Kepes' work is the cornerstone of a new structuralist art criticism of matching conventional patterns and intrinsic motives viewed through any one of the above sightings. More simply, the thrust is toward mutual identification through form expression—for example, snowflake crystals, molecular designs, laser light refractions. The similarities of artist and scientist discovery/creation are evident. Through complementation, integration may be arrived at.

In an article for *Daedalus* (Winter, 1965) Kepes wrote, "I propose the formation of a closely knit work community of 8 to 10 promising young artists and designers. . . . It is assumed that close and continuous work contact with one another and with the academic community of architects, city planners, scientists, and engineers would lead to . . . the development of new ideas." His proposal of what may be regarded as a Yeatsian meeting of moon and sun led to the opening in the fall of 1967 of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, of which he was made director. The formal dedication of the center, jointly with that of MIT's Center for Theoretical Physics, took place in March 1968 and was marked by a symposium on science and art.

Despite too little time for planning and limited funds, Kepes organized an exhibition, mainly the

work of this center, to represent the United States at the 1969 São Paulo Bienal. Protesting repressive measures against native artists taken by the government of Brazil, the artists of several other countries boycotted the show. Although urged by some of his colleagues to resign as head of the United States group, Kepes tried to convince the others that the exhibition should be held at São Paulo as a positive show against a negative force. American participation was eventually canceled, but Kepes' stand may be interpreted as an apolitical maneuver to preserve growth in a stultifying world.

Some of the plans for Kepes' show at the São Paulo Bienal were developed in an exhibition titled "Explorations," which was presented at MIT's Hayden Gallery in March 1970 and at the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. the following month. The aim of Kepes' "cross-disciplinary team," was what he terms a "symbiosis" between the expression of personality in art and the anonymity of science. For him, the province of the artist is not simply aesthetic preoccupation, but tasks of civic and social importance.

Movement and light, basic ingredients of modern life, have suffered ugly mutations, as the neon light, for example, blights American cities. Kepes presents light as an energy source interacting with man. The "Explorations" show effectively demonstrated the possibility of Kepes' earlier recognition of light as the "palette" of the "new civic art." Electricity is not Kepes' only light source. His *Flame Orchard*, a twenty-foot field of gas flames responding to music, won a top award at the 1972 Colombian Bienal Coltejer.

The deterioration of America's urban landscape has involved Kepes in organic architecture. That movement obviates structure as a mirror of external nature and seeks strong, beautiful new shapes in gossamer walls or membrane roofs like Pier Luigi Nervi's dome in Rome's Sport Palace, which resembles a transectional microphotograph of a plant stem. True to the integration of art and science, Kepes pursues the same end. He has collaborated with the Nobel Prize winner and inventor of the strobe light, Thomas Edgerton, on a water fountain whose water flow would flick like a strobe. Another of his projects is a mammoth lightwater monument for Boston Harbor celebrating the 1976 United States Bicentennial. Ghetto bathing fountains for children is another of his architectural proposals. His forty-foot series of screens, designed in 1963, with squares-within-squares sprinkled overall with aluminum filings that fronts New York's Pan Am building is not an "intricate grill of stainless steel bars," but an interpretive representation of metal oxidation moving under the kinetic light of a microscope.

Among Kepes' other architectural murals are those for the Children's Library in Fitchburg, Massachusetts; the Graduate Center of Harvard University; the Church of the Redeemer in Baltimore; the Manufacturers Trust, Time-Life Building in New York; the Wellesley Public Library;

the chapel window of Bradford Junior College; and hotels of the Sheraton Corporation in Philadelphia, Chicago, and other cities. His work has been seen in group and one-man shows throughout the United States and in several European countries. His honors include a degree from the Philadelphia College of Art, awards from the American Institute of Graphic Arts and the Society of Graphic Arts, the Silver Medal of the Architectural League of New York (1961), and the Fine Arts Award of the American Institute of Architects (1968). He was a Guggenheim fellow in 1960-61 and is a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

During his first year in the United States, György Kepes met Juliet Appleby, an art student who had just arrived in Chicago from her native England. They were married on November 3, 1937 and have a daughter, Juliet, and a son, Imre. Mrs. Kepes is an author and illustrator of children's books. Like her husband, she became a naturalized American citizen. Kepes has grayish green eyes, conservative tastes in grooming, and a quiet, intense manner. Both he and his wife are interested in Eastern art, and their home in Cambridge is said to be "almost Oriental" in atmosphere. Kepes does most of his painting at the studio of his house in Wellfleet, Cape Cod, where sand for his pictures is close to hand.

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