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## LEONARDO THINKS

### Opinion: In Memoriam: Gyorgy Kepes, 1906-2002

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Gyorgy Kepes lived for almost a century. His artistic, visionary thinking spanned and at times dominated much of the spirit and intellect of the integrative arts for over two-thirds of the 20th century. His suggestions and projections remain alive and forceful at the onset of the new millennium.

His work-photos, paintings, books, teaching, design, environmental and architectural realizations-carries a glow of the creative power of his ideas, which cohered into an image of the new world in which we are beginning to live. His command of visual imagery and linguistic metaphor was altogether poetic and lent irresistible persuasiveness to his lifelong discourse and resulting imperatives regarding the conflict between the world into which the human race was born to create and the world it created.

The mission he pursued with an intensity bordering on fanaticism declared: Humans are born to be whole, born to use all their gifts and facilities to build a life of union with nature through art, science, technology, industry and continued labor toward harmony and order yes, order, a recurring word in his writings. The human "inner compass" guides a formation of constructed and lived order that reflects our innate order.

Facing the epic chaos, catastrophes, crimes and threats of World War I, World War II and the nuclear age, it took moral resolve commensurate with the spirit of the United Nations to fight for a modern world in balance. Gyorgy Kepes's arms and armor were teaching and setting examples of corresponding harmonies-such as exhibitions and built environments that quoted scientific, natural and artistic beauty in dialog. An ever-growing audience listened and acted: artists, the academic world, public officials and citizens. The unifying ferment among his audience has been the appeal to the basic creative momentum in all humans.

Kepes's predominant medium was light, as in *Light as a Creative Medium*, the title of a show he designed in 1966 for the Harvard University Carpenter Center.



The Harvard exhibition occurred almost 30 years after Kepes's arrival in the United States in 1937 to head the Light Department at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, at the invitation of its director, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. In Chicago, Kepes became a doubly international force: On the one hand he carried European, e.g. Bauhaus, traditions into the all-powerful Americas, and on the other hand American industrial, urban and intellectual might swept his tempting vision "across the time"-in contrast to the beginnings of the "post-Bauhaus" Bauhaus school, then falling into utter poverty.

Colleague-friends were there, too-a historically ironic European cultural conquest in the United States while America was inflicting terminal defeat on Germany et al. Over many years immigrants like the Hungarian Kepes-Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, Breuer, Hoffmann, Archipenko, Albers, Arnheim-preserved the central European momentum toward renewal by transplanting it in the New World.

A seemingly teleological further cultural shift moved Kepes with his admirably dedicated English-born wife, Juliet, to the core territory of American innovation in science, humanities and technology: MIT and Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1946. Here he structured his art, science and light vision into a complex but transparent organism of ideas and suggestions. Here he taught a generation of young architects and here he befriended a succession of MIT presidents, some of whom, e.g. James Killian and Jerome Wiesner, were science advisors to U.S. presidents.

One of Kepes's strongest arguments advocated what is now called "public art" ("Art in Civic Scale," as was titled a Kepes-inspired MIT symposium in May 1971). Its appeal is social, communal; it implies a large audience, as does media art, which was also then emerging. Its means are therefore complex, often complicated, and thus require teams, collaboration, in a practical rationalization of Kepes's vision: "All facilities and human facilities together."

Social arts, art as a method of thinking, art as research where scientific research attends to art and the fields feed back upon each other-MIT carried much promise then as an ivory tower and as a playing field for collaboration and participation (the word "interactive" was attracting growing fascination). In 1959, Gyorgy Kepes proposed the institution of a Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT. In 1965 his proposal was published; in the fall of 1967 work at the Center began, and in March 1968 the Center was officially dedicated in the midst of student conflicts and the war in Vietnam.

The Center's founding fellows were (in order of their arrival) Harold Tovish, myself, Vassilakis Takis, Stan VanDerBeek and Jack Burnham; the building, a renovated "No. W.il" (formerly the MIT COOP); the rebuilding budget: \$250,000. The emerging practice: Fellows find, with Kepes's help, MIT scientist and engineer partners in relevant labs and programs. Each fellow has a studio with little or no equipment of its own. Ideas and the artists' skills in building and making art reign. A sense of community is born.

Communal projects (such as Kepes's starter project: "The Boston Harbor Project"-meant to be "Bicentennial"-a *Denkmodell*) brought the individuals together in (sometimes "heated") discussion. For the initial 10 or 12 years,



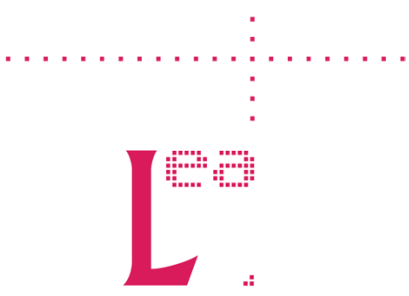
CAVS was the only institute dedicated to integrated effort in art-science-technology and, consequently, interdisciplinary teaching. The 1990-1991 *International Directory of Electronic Arts* (an art-and-technology guidebook published in Paris) lists, under "Institutions/Organizations," 854 addresses internationally. Such growth!

However, this is the place to acknowledge kindred, too: In about 1967, I met with John Latham and his wife while they were working on the Artists Placement Group in London, addressing science, technology and industry. Better known and organizationally far-reaching, Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) was formed by Billy Kluiver and Robert Rauschenberg circa 1967. CAVS and EAT complemented (and literally complimented) each other; the difference: EAT was "loose" and CAVS university based, therefore methodical, academically backed, leading to education and evolving professions such as the artist/architect, the "electronic artist," the media artist, the environmental artist.

Despite his insistence on protocol and academic discipline, Gyorgy Kepes always remained the poet mixing metaphor, reality and utopia. He forever suspected technology alone to be "for the mechanics." Humane expression powerfully communicated was to be the gains of artscience-technology effort. A better, a purer, more intelligent, brighter world was on his mind, was his hope. "Vision and Value" for all was his prophecy-which he preached sometimes with solemnity, sometimes with humor, doubt, sarcasm, a spectral arrogant wit.

During his last year, at 95, an unsuspecting visitor from Hungary bellowed at him, "Spring is just around the corner"; from his wheelchair Kepes shot back, "Which corner?"

We thank you, Gyorgy, for your fire!



Bio: Otto Piene, an internationally respected sculptor, was the CAVS Director at MIT from 1974--1993