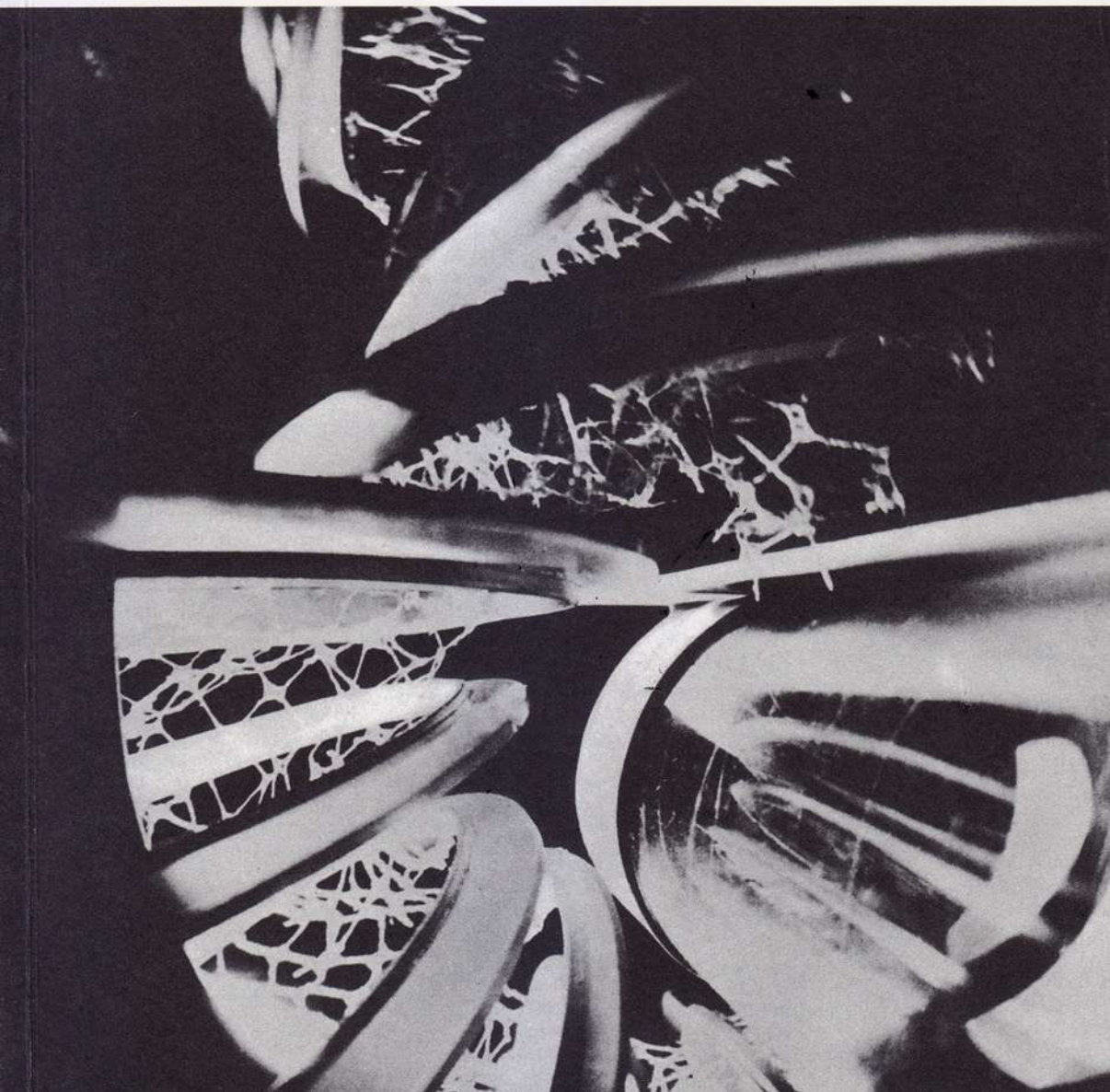


# Maurizio Sacripanti

Österreichische  
Friedrich und Lillian Kiesler  
Privatstiftung

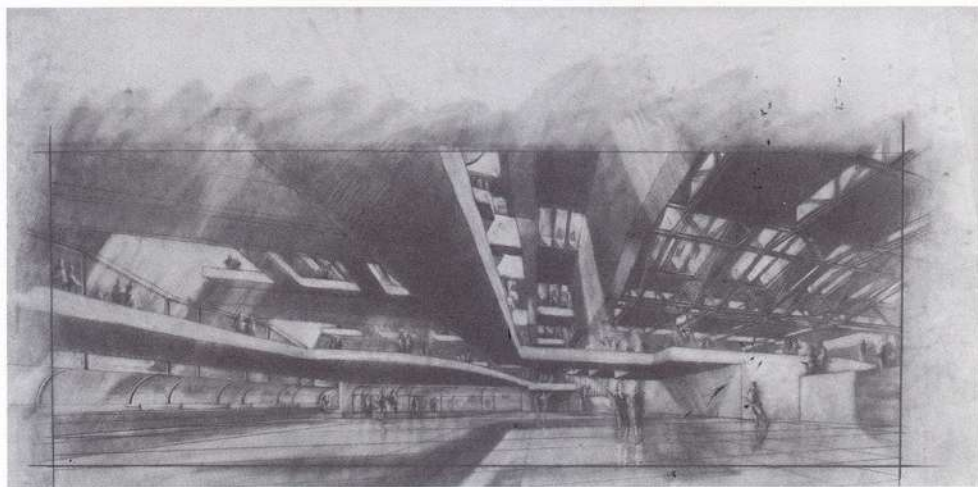
Austrian  
Frederick and Lillian Kiesler  
Private Foundation



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**Innenansicht**  
interior view



## Friedrich Kiesler and Maurizio Sacripanti: Analysis of an Atypical Atemporal Parallelism

Alfonso Giancotti

About five years ago I was writing a short study on the work of Maurizio Sacripanti with Renato Pedio, a legacy that fortunately came my way for having worked with the Roman architect in the last years of his life. After finishing the opening section of the book, Renato asked me to read it and give him my opinion. This extraordinarily gratifying honor caused me to pay particular attention in reading the text, which I found fascinating as a whole. I was particularly struck by one passage, which I shall quote in full in its definitive version: “comparisons are odious, as Wright used to say, but those who return—as they will—to addressing time as a living material of architecture in the same way as scale, physicality and light will have to refer to him just as much as and indeed more than to Tatlin. The latter rotated a habitable stellar clock; Sacripanti gave the ‘fourth dimension’ independent plastic value. For him it was tangible, open to architecture, not in the simplistic sense of the time of traversal but as ‘material’”.<sup>1</sup> I shall take the liberty of briefly remembering Renato Pedio. Through his constant, intelligent activity as a writer, translator, critic, poet, semiologist, painter, and so on, he always embodied to my eyes the image of an intellectual, in the strictly etymological sense of the term, or better still, “*homme de lettres*”, to use Le Corbusier’s intriguing definition of himself. The lines quoted above made me think of the Austrian architect Friedrich Kiesler’s studies in the 1920s for an Endless Theatre and his project for an Endless

1 R. Pedio, „Maurizio Sacripanti-Altrove“, in: A. Giancotti, R. Pedio, Maurizio Sacripanti. Altrove, Turin 2000.



p. 86 House, which he developed from the 1940s on up to the last version, presented at the MoMA in 1961 in the "Visionary Architecture" exhibition along with works by figures such as Taut, Wright, Fuller and Le Corbusier. I believed that there is a thread—and no slender one—artistically linking the work of these two architects (only apparently distant in terms of training and extraction), between whom an atypical parallelism of the Kieslowskian type was established. Atypical because the careers of the two masters were marked by a precise spatial and temporal stagger, an almost perfect and hence surprising *consecutio temporum* at one remove. By way of example, suffice it to mention the project that brought Sacripanti international renown, namely the Peugeot Skyscraper in Buenos Aires, presented in 1961, only four years before the inauguration of the Shrine of The Book in Jerusalem, followed a few months later by Kiesler's death.

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First of all, I shall quote some episodes documenting (demonstrating) the contribution made by the two architects in/to the social and cultural context in which their lives developed.

Sufficient evidence of the outstanding role that Kiesler, born in Černauti in 1890, played in terms of world art is provided by the memorable funeral held in New York after his death in 1965. Including eulogies by René d'Harnoncourt, then director of the MoMA, the playwright Sidney Kingsley, and the musician and critic Virgil Thomson, it was remembered above all as a "theatrical event" due to the respectively figurative and musical performance of Robert Rauschenberg and the Julliard String Quartet, who played music by Mozart and Schönberg for the occasion.

Not less evocative was the cultural climate pervading Rome, where Sacripanti was born in 1916 and died in 1996, from the 1950s on. The Latinist and writer Luca Canali spoke of "barbaric, ingenuous times" in commemorating the death of the Roman architect, when there was a great gathering of figures in the sphere of the Italian Communist Party at the "Canova" bar in Piazza del Popolo. "I got to know Maurizio in the 1960s when the bar frequented was Rosati and there was always good company to be found at 7.30–8.00 in the evening talking about abstract art, Art Informel, socialist realism, and the films of Fellini, Antonioni and Rosi, often in their presence."<sup>2</sup>

The environments of New York, where Kiesler settled in 1925 after training in Vienna, are juxtaposed with Roman restaurants like the one run by the Menghi family on Via Flaminia, the epicenter of the tales told by Ugo Pirro.<sup>3</sup> The regulars

2 A. Giancotti, M. L. Neri, C. Serafini, I. Thermes (eds.), Maurizio Sacripanti maestro di Architettura, Edizioni De Luca, Rome 1997.

3 U. Pirro, Osteria dei Pittori, Sellerio Editore, Palermo 1994.

4 Interview with Achille Perilli by Elisabetta Cristallini in: *Forma 1 e i suoi artisti. 1947–1997*, ed. G. Bonsegale and S. Lux, Nuova Argos Edizioni, Rome 1998.

comprised the new leading figures in Italian and international art, from Mafai to Perilli, from Consagra to Turcato, from Afro to Corpora, to mention just a few. And Sacripanti was, of course, one of the company. Thinking back to the atmosphere of Rome in the 1950s and 1960s reminds me of an interesting definition of the artist's role recently formulated by Archille Perilli, a friend, supporter, and above all frequent collaborator of Maurizio Sacripanti in his projects. In a recent interview on the occasion of the exhibition "Forma 1 e i suoi artisti 1947-1997", the Roman painter stated that the role of the artist today is still what it was yesterday, namely bringing to light the mysteries of vision.<sup>4</sup>

I regard this definition as fully capturing the "artistic" sense, in terms of uniqueness and consistency of thought, of the work of the two architects and as clarifying their common starting point at the same time.

The act of reflection and hence the development of spatial exploration takes shape for both Kiesler and Sacripanti as the result of a process primarily involving the artistic disciplines, from those figurative to the musical by way of the theatrical and finally the scientific.

To be honest, I must admit to being attracted by architects who are hard to pigeonhole due to the unique nature of their thought and are labeled with a large number of isms, including in this case elementarism, superrealism, informalism, brutalism, and utopianism. As against this overabundance of isms, I still find convincing and exhaustive the simple definition of "artist". If something more were required, it might be sufficient to add "avant-garde".

I have made a point of formulating this idea in order to justify the need to abolish any artificial classification and categorization of the work of the Austrian architect and the Roman. Both the projects and the completed works, both the installations and the theoretical manifestos, can be regarded as stages of a constant and exclusive study in which the factor of the fourth dimension, time, plays a predominant role as living material of architecture to be actually molded by the imagination, understood as a tool to bring the mysteries of vision to light.

The above considerations make it possible to reflect on a crucial moment, certainly requiring fuller investigation elsewhere, connected with the altered condition of the artist's role during the 1950s.

Kiesler's artistic work presents itself in fact as the result of an isolated trajectory in which contact with other masters represents a form of exchange required to foster declaredly individual artistic growth in the act of making itself manifest. For Sacripanti instead, the project expresses an artistic product, the result of an approach based on teamwork, which reveals itself in its most concrete and essential expression, namely architecture.

Analysis of the Film Guild Cinema, built in 1929, and the above-mentioned project for the Peugeot Skyscraper of 1961 makes it possible to detect an interesting similarity of approach in the early years of the two architects' maturity. The link with contemporary figurative movements marks the works as new experiences and new narratives. The breaking down of floor plans and volumes constitutes a sort of initiatory baptism underpinning avant-garde explorations, a necessary act confirming a break with the past and the resolute search for a new idea of space in architecture. This shared line of thought is strengthened by a reading of the theoretical output of Kiesler and Sacripanti, designed essentially to establish the criteria and reasons for the break so as to initiate the formulation of a new linguistic code to be defined entirely through the past, what Sacripanti called the destruction of our memories.<sup>5</sup> The Manifesto of Correalism ("Le manifeste du Corréalisme", subtitled "Les états unis de l'art plastique") was published by Kiesler in 1949. It opens with a menacing "que l'on chasse" addressed to art teachers, dealers, and critics, and a "que l'on démolisse" addressed to false temples in the name of a new popular architecture, no longer abandoned by the masses and betrayed by the artists, in which nature and art act as sentries and science is the watchdog, grounded on the principles of construction based on a system of free tension in a free space.<sup>6</sup> Less categorical but equally firm in *Città di Frontiera*, which opens a monographic work of extraordinary impact in terms of content and graphical conception, Sacripanti redefines creativity as the modulation of unprecedented differences, assigning the architect the task of reinterpreting space-time as time in space. The space that was made yesterday in order to be controlled today must be cohabited. Time was iterative yesterday but is pulsating today. Once entrusted to tradition, memory is now entrusted to the unconscious. The discovery of the identity of problems and intuitions midway between science and art thus reveals itself in the act of designing the changeable.<sup>7</sup>

The view of Sacripanti and, by reflection, of Kiesler recalls to my mind Bruno Zevi's insistence on the seven invariants that do not say what and how one must design but what and how one must not. They are seven NOs making it possible to ascertain scientifically whether one has broken free of old dogmas and precepts and attained the level of maturity making it possible to address a creative process in an anti-academic spirit.<sup>8</sup>

- 5 M. Sacripanti, *Sulla linguistica architettonica*, in: *L'architettura—cronache e storia*, no. 230, 1974.
- 6 F. Kiesler, *Manifeste du Corréalisme*, in: *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, no. 2, Special Edition, 1949.
- 7 M. Sacripanti, *Città di frontiera—Fontier City*, Bulzoni, Rome 1973.
- 8 B. Zevi, *Comment on Maurizio Sacripanti, Sulla linguistica architettonica*. Cf. note 5.

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The evolution of the theoretical principles seeking to define the possible scenarios of the spatial development of cities reveals itself, respectively, in the City in Space installation of 1925 at the "International Exhibition of Decorative Arts" at the Grand Palais in Paris and in the 1965 project for a city on a bridge over Strait of Messina, which identify a theoretical and practical program of hypothetical aggregative models linked to altered social conditions.

The most surprising "empathetic" analogies between the two architects emerge, however, from comparison of the Endless Theater and Endless House projects with those for the Osaka Pavilion and the Cagliari Theater.

On this occasion, the "time" factor plays the role mentioned above of material for architecture, the use of which leads Kiesler and Sacripanti to different formal results because they are measured on the basis of different methodological and applicative approaches seeking to attain a spatial result, the reasons for which are to be sought in the simplicity of the compositional action.

Time for Kiesler paraphrases, in its use, the result of the complex theatrical activities that accompanied his early productions. The physical appropriation of time takes place through the operation of placing in succession, in sequences, the flowing of spaces that recall the science action, leading finally in the Endless House to the action of digging, which evokes and suggests fetal, anthropomorphic forms, a journey back through time to the origins of mankind. In Sacripanti's works—thanks to the artistic contributions of Mafai, Perilli and Pedio, and the scientific assistance of Nonis and Decina, which enabled the Roman architect to employ technology as a form of art metaphorically deduced from science—time makes it possible to delimit, to shape, to occupy, to measure, to connect, and above all to move and change. The electronic program conceived for the Osaka Pavilion permits a spatial configuration of the plastic shell resting on the blades that can be varied for over a thousand years in relation to their range. The blades of the Osaka pavilion thus stretch the plastic cladding material just as the spiral connecting ramps of the Endless Theater design the double shell of printed glass.

And man, in the center of their work, rediscovers the possibility of relating freely to the surrounding space (in tension and in motion), of finding himself floating in the maternal womb or indifferently occupying any position inside or outside the scenic performance, whether designed by the spiral-shaped helix of the Endless Theater or by the technological tectonic slab of the Cagliari Theater.

We initially noted how the production of these two artists is more resistant than others to any form whatsoever of typological classification, in that it takes shape, as we are endeavoring to demonstrate, as the sequential manifestation of a single logical and artistic trajectory.



I shall conclude by mentioning the two last and most significant works by Sacripanti and Kiesler, who were unfortunately to have the misfortune of not giving continuous concrete substance to their projects, all feasible but not all realized because they were afflicted, as Pedio put it, by the flaw of unrealizable poetry.<sup>9</sup>

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The Shrine of The Book in Jerusalem and the Museum in Maccagno bear surprisingly moving witness to the "material" meaning of the ideas of these two architects. The theme of water is alternatively and inversely physical and metaphorical in both works. The waters of the Dead Sea and those of the River Giona evoke the theme of flow.

Resting on a bed of water from which it is slightly raised, the shrine in Jerusalem collects the energies accumulated through the succession of internal and external spaces and pathways that it offers the user. The circular central space where the scrolls are exhibited forms a spatiotemporal catalyst that paradoxically marks the end of a journey that has yet to begin.

The museum of Maccagno spans the river below as a tribute to the idea underpinning all of Sacripanti's work, namely the bridge as a contemporary meta-construction, both physical and mental, designed to permit the horizontal occupation of space and to go beyond. Every distinction between external space and internal space, fluidly and visually in perennial contact, is eliminated so the eye of the visitor suspended above the river.

Long explored in the work of Kiesler and Sacripanti, the temporal factor takes shape in these two buildings in a sense stretching far beyond the time of traversal, as we noted at the beginning.<sup>10</sup> Explored and modulated through the theme of suspension above/below water, natural or artificial, it places man once again at the center of the architectural work.

In identifying itself as metaphor and material, on a par with the outer walls, measured by light, time is revealed as the object of 20th-century avant-garde work, a legacy to be drawn upon not only for the study and understanding of the history of the last century's art and architecture but also for the purposes of architectural practice in the years to come, for which it will constitute a potential and significant starting point.

9 Cf. note 1.

10 Op. cit.