FREDERICK KIESLER
ENVIRONMENTAL VISIONARY
A PERSONAL MEMORY BY JAMES WINES - 2017

No object, of nature or of art, exists without environment.
As a matter of fact, the object itself can expand to a degree
where it becomes its own environment

- Frederick Kiesler, 1951

There are some creative artists that define a moment in time, there are others whose contributions span an era; but a rare and visionary few are able to construct enduring and fertile links to the future. Frederick Kiesler was one such bridge builder. The great Austrian-born architect, artist, interior designer, environmentalist, theoretician, essayist, poet, stage designer and intellectual catalyst has become an increasingly influential source of prophetic ideas every year since his death in December of 1965.

I had the pleasure of knowing Frederick for only a few years – from 1962 to 1965 - but in that short period he changed my life. At the time of our meeting, I was a rather conservative, Constructivist-influenced sculptor. Most of my efforts were spent wrenching iron, steel, bronze and concrete into contorted abstract shapes and participating in the ubiquitous 'art in public places' initiative that pock-marked civic plazas with a plethora of (often unwelcome) intrusions during the mid-sixties. At the moment of my first encounter with Kiesler, I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the whole tradition of object making - or what I had facetiously begun to call 'plop art' . . . which has now become an institutionalized way of describing randomly installed public sculpture. In this period of restlessness, I looked to Kiesler as a mentor who might help guide me toward more fertile territory. His impact was so great that I basically abandoned my entire sculpture career and

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ventured into experimental architecture. In retrospect, this proved to be a dubious decision from an economic perspective; but it was also an artistic and intellectual epiphany. Kiesler's encouragement gave me the motivational support to make a quantum leap from which I never retreated.

During the period of our friendship, Kiesler's multi-disciplinary talents and integrative vision tended to both amaze and confuse me. I had just become well known in art circles for massive mixed media sculptures – sometimes installed in public places; but most often exhibited in conventional art galleries. Then suddenly, I became transfixed by this diminutive and iconoclastic genius. He shattered my career expectations by pointing out how hopelessly old-fashioned abstract art had become by the 1960s. The luminous alternative was his revolutionary concept of 'Correalism.' From this theoretical position, he saw the explorations of astro-physics as influential sources for a new direction in environmental art and architecture. He proposed a conceptual perspective that would draw its energy from the absorption of both immediate context and infinite space; as opposed to relying on the insular traditions of shape-making and form-making processes for their own sake. In Kiesler's view, the future of art was not about producing more and more objects; but, rather, having an objective.

After a few heady evenings of dialogue with Kiesler, even the most confident and critically successful artist could be plunged into a state of soul-searching doubt concerning his/her philosophical and stylistic persuasion. Frederick had seemingly telepathic instincts about epochal change and offered aesthetic predictions for the future of art that could disrupt complacency, dislodge sacred shibboleths, and identify uncharted territories that others had been too myopic or faint-hearted to explore.

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I can't precisely remember all of the circumstances of my first encounter with Frederick Kiesler; but I think it was in May of 1962, during the opening of a group exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery (including Stella, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Johns and Bontecou. I vividly recall his charismatic presence and scalpel sharp ability to ferret out the most important ideas on display at any given time - even when pitted against the distracting cacophony of a cocktail party. During our initial discussions, I was mesmerized by his insightful encapsulations of pivotal moments in 20th Century art and design. I was equally impressed by his own artistic contributions to a number of these seminal movements and ability to maintain his role as a prophetic force in the arts for over fifty years.

From my awareness in the 1960s, Kiesler has been identified (by a typically lazy curatorial over-simplification) as a 'Surrealist.' He was also frequently lumped in with the 'avant-garde' - a label he disdained and viewed as more degradingly conservative than being called "historical." In fact, when his wife, Lillian, once referred to him as an "avant-garde artist," he retorted: "Don't ever say that; I am not avant-garde, I am not before or after anyone. I am NOW!" In this capacity, he created a complex and varied oeuvre that defies categorization and still towers over art and architecture as a uniquely powerful inventory of multi-disciplinary innovation that, as one of its most important contributions, anticipated the environmental art movement of the 1970s and 80s.

All current historical documentation of the Kiesler legacy credits his influence on a half century of artists, architects and theater designers; plus, how he triggered movements, ferreted out the best talent of his time and enthusiastically promoted the 'dangerous ideas' of others. According to Lillian Kiesler, he was one of the first to encourage Leo Castelli to show Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and, during Marcel Duchamp's early days in New York, the Dada pioneer stayed

with Kiesler for nearly a year. It is acknowledged that Duchamp began his last great work, *Etant Donnés* (now permanently on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art) during this period. In addition to serving as an oracle, mentor and entrepreneur of the art world, Kiesler somehow still found time to produce a prolific body of work and frequently appear as an obligatory high-status guest at seemingly every important New York cultural event.

Since I was in a period of artistic flux in my work during the early 1960s, I remember more about the mental tortures of my own conceptual re-thinking than anecdotal moments with Kiesler. I vividly recall his advice – via an astute observation by Duchamp – that "to be truly creative in life, you have to clean off your desk at least three times." In terms of my relationship to the New York art world at that time, it still remains a blur of fifteen-minute pop personalities, 'me- generation' politics, annoyingly hackneyed disco music and a superficial social scene that left me feeling more like a tag-along bystander than an active participant. I had always been inspired (perhaps too idealistically) by the mythical courage that forged the revolutionary contributions of Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism. I also envisioned the major artists of these movements as compulsively dedicated to seminal ideas, which were always characterized by epoch-defining discourse and hard-won aesthetic victories. By the 1960's I saw this commitment begin to erode, in favor of a philosophically flaccid and commerce-driven art world that gained an increasingly corrosive foothold . . . and subsequently deteriorated into the ubiquitous art expo scene of today. Looking back, my discomfort was justified. In contrast to a frivolous backdrop, Frederick Kiesler's presence in New York represented a stellar embodiment of early 20th Century artistic integrity and intellectual rigor.

Aside from accompanying Lillian and Frederick to various New York exhibitions and parties in the early 1960s, my relationship with them

was mostly quiet and personal. Since Lillian and I were both teaching in the Art Department of New York University and residing at Washington Square Village, Frederick preferred evening meetings at home as the most convenient venue for dialogue. At the time, I was married to Gül Seden, an emerging television executive (R.A.I. TV) and master chef of the Turkish kitchen. After enjoying a few of her stellar culinary experiences, Frederick began to plan more and more of his 'spontaneous visits' to ten minutes before dinnertime – to a point where Gül and I could set our weekly time clocks in anticipation of his guest appearances. These dinners, magnificently blending haut cuisine, philosophical discourse and a regular diet of the master's prophetic proclamations, shaped the entire course of the next decade of my artistic development.

Strangely, I was only invited to Kiesler's Broadway studio a few of times, while engaged in our most intense period of dialogue. During these abbreviated visits, he showed me models and drawings for the Endless House and several furniture pieces – yet only in a summary and curatorial way. His greater enthusiasm was reserved for the Galaxy sculptures he was exhibiting at Castelli Gallery. I found this somewhat confusing, since he had already advised me to distance myself from Constructivist influences and the traditional production of abstract art objects. But, such conflicting views confirmed my impression that Frederick's critiques of the work of others were often based on what he perceived as conceptual or aesthetic deficiencies that had nothing to do with his personal commitments of the moment. Still, in his assessment of the architectonic features of my steel and concrete sculptures, he clairvoyantly recommended that a quantum leap into architecture was my only hope for career salvation.

In addition to attracting the friendship of the leading art stars - Jackson Pollock, Bob Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Jim Rosenquist, Andy Warhol, Bob Indiana and many others - Kiesler's good friends included the

painter Gene Vass and his wife, Joan Vass (who later became a successful fashion designer), the sculptor Tom Doyle and his wife, the extraordinarily gifted Eva Hesse. In each case, whether already famous or emerging talent, artists seemed to draw highly personalized levels of inspiration from Kiesler's work. For example, Rosenquist's random assemblages of two-by-fours, neon and barbed wire, as well as the architectonic wood beam sculptures of Doyle, paid homage to the master's Galaxy series. Kiesler's structures, when first displayed at Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut – then later at MoMA and the Guggenheim - influenced a rash of subsequent fusions of painting and sculpture. In the case of Eva Hesse, she seemed to share a profound melancholy with Kiesler . . . a sense of remorse that was perhaps linked to their mutual German and Austrian origins and the repellent association of these cultures with Nazism. In Frederick's later work, this conflict was manifested in a visceral and tormented juxtaposition of ragged shapes; reflecting an aesthetic association with psychological distress, imbalance, entropy and de-materialization. Similarly - but with a cooler and more detached sensibility - Eva Hesse's fusion of amorphous materiality and metamorphic imagery spoke eloquently of haunted memories, her early feminist struggle for art world identity and, in a sadly prophetic way, her untimely death from brain cancer in 1970.

From the period of my friendship with Lillian and Frederick, I recall certain subjects of conversation, visits together in various locations and incidents demonstrating the Kiesler influence on both specific artists and the New York art scene in general. With regard to his impact on my own work, the memories that remain most vivid today are related to his integrative sensibility and grasp of the value of art as an absorptive act of inclusion; as opposed to an insular exercise in form and style.

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Among those recollections, the most important are related to my then expanding appreciation of Frederick's social, psychological and conceptual contributions to art in a broader context. As mentioned earlier, during the 1960s my assessment of the NYC cultural scene was diminished by a growing discomfort with various colleagues' over-zealous investment in career building and their disproportionate attraction to some media-endorsed movement, hot social scene, influential gallery, or stylistic persuasion. Kiesler, while vigorously career-conscious, never communicated the notion of art business as one of his priorities. He invariably needed money for special projects, complained about the dearth of public patronage and lamented the lack of understanding of his work in curatorial circles; but, his core values were always based on ideas first . . . and his view that rewards would be nice, if they happened to come along later.

The summer of 1965 was the most significant period of my relationship with Frederick and Lillian Kiesler. They invited my wife, Gül, our three-month old daughter, Suzan, and me to visit their small summer home in Springs, East Hampton for two weeks. In May, Frederick had traveled to Jerusalem to attend the inauguration of his greatest built work - The Shrine of the Book - and the triumphant conclusion of a seven-year collaboration with architect Armand Bartos. While we talked about the museum during our vacation period, Frederick seemed resigned to the fact that this work was already complete and his role, as always, was continuing to foresee the future. I sensed each day that his health was becoming more fragile; so, he especially valued the amusing distractions provided by my youthful family. His summer home contained various fragments of memorabilia; but, unlike his Manhattan apartment's art-filled encrustations, the Spring's interior seemed oddly under-furnished and (maybe intentionally) free of nostalgic paraphernalia that might distract from an anticipatory atmosphere of visionary discourse.

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The focal topic of our summer discussion revolved around Kiesler's Manifesto of 'Correalism.' He felt strongly that, in the larger context of art and design, his key contribution to progress could be summarized by this theory and he knew that I was an exceptionally sympathetic receptacle for every conceptual nuance he wanted to impart. His original proclamation of 1947 – as reported by l'Architecture d'Aujoud'hui in 1949 – proposed; "Each element of a construction or a city, whether it is painting or sculpture, interior installation, or technical equipment, is conceived not as the expression of a single function, but of a nucleus of possibilities which will be developed through coordination with other elements. The correlation can be based on either physical conditions, on environmental influences, or even on the very essence of the actual element itself." His consistent demonstration of this symbiotic set of relationships was the Endless House. Frederick saw the structure as mutable, flexible and evolutionary. While I understood his point of view and appreciated his advocacy of fluid movement in architecture (in opposition to the constraints of rigid geometry), I interpreted the actual models as meticulously crafted orchestrations of form . . . in point, as rather prescriptive scenarios for living space. His liberation from rectangular traditions produced an organic alternative that seemed to impose an equivalent set of limitations for inhabitants. Dwelling in an environment of curved walls, undulating floor planes and idiosyncratic nooks and crannies – especially from my perspective as a sculptor in the process of rejecting my own commitment to convoluted shape-making – seemed to be asking the home owner for a high level of athletic participation, as opposed to the leisurely diversions of a relaxed lifestyle.

Among Kiesler's justifications for organic form, his sources included the circular patterns of Neolithic planning, troglodyte habitat in Asia, adobe houses of Mali, rock-cut dwellings of Cappadocia and the infinitely accommodating sanctuaries for the human body in nature. For each of

these examples, the paradigms were molded by climate, expedience, economics and cultural context; while the Endless House – at least physically – was in head-on collision with the real estate pressures of 20th Century cityscape and the car culture patterns of suburbia. For this reason. It has always been my view that the conceptual premises and environmental principles of the Endless House were its most enduring legacy. Unfortunately, as a consequence of Frederic's idealistic rationales and sculptural liberties, the seductive qualities of his shape-making had the most influential impact on a great deal of digital age architecture. From a mainstream advantage, the timing of his curvilinear forms was conveniently enabled by the global invasion of C.A.D. calculations, Sketch-up and photo-illustrative renderings – to a point where, over the past two decades, the stylistic feature of choice for innumerable museums and public institutions has included some manifestation of mega-scale undulation. Additionally, in response to the inspirational impact of buildings by Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Santiago Calatrava, the current international design scene includes an increasing proliferation of derivative spin-offs. All of the 'high-art' aspirations notwithstanding, I have some reservations concerning this whole tendency. First on my list (and heeding the cautionary lessons of stylistic history) when original aesthetic ideas degenerate into ubiquitous fashion, it is time for a change. Secondly, too many of the shape-making preferences that characterize current architecture appear to be cribbed from the 1950's formal strategies of such sculptors as Henry Moore, Jean Arp and Max Bill. In this regard, it seems conceptually regressive to depend on the (invisibly transmitted) tools of the cyber revolution to generate densely opaque, heavily grounded and very old-fashioned sculptural volumes in 2017. Thirdly, while inflating the scale of Endless House-like curves can visually dramatize an urban/suburban structure, the results are too often realized as giant art works, sitting on pedestals and surrounded by acres of concrete. These are spectator situations that, like conventional galleries, impose territorial points of isolation for viewing.

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And finally, most material preferences for organic shapes in current architecture are among the least ecologically responsible; in particular, the use of aluminum and titanium for reasons of toxic waste in their manufacturing processes. This deficiency undermines green design principles in the actual choice of artistic media. Some environmental advocates cite the durability of metallic surfaces as evidence of sustainability; but the increase in incidents of leakage, cracking, staining, reduced levels of insulation and the cost of manufacturing curved metal surfaces has raised a lot of warning flags over the past decade.

In terms of an absorption of philosophical content from the Endless House, the 21st Century ecological initiative has offered a more sympathetic model. The Kiesler advocacy of boundary-free and contextually integrative elements that embrace their surroundings is still, for me, the most relevant message of Correalism theory. The current expansion of 'biomimicry' in the building arts is a logical beneficiary of Frederick's (as well as Frank Lloyd Wright's) early prophecies. The activists in this movement study the interactive processes of nature, with the intention of understanding how they function and how the lessons of interdependency can contribute to a sustainable built environment. The biomimicry challenge is to identify the ingredients of ecological symbiosis that can be translated into human habitat. On the more persuasive side of this argument, the scientific community has assembled a rich abundance of information on precisely how ecosystems operate; but the impediment in equating these networks to architecture is the continuing persistence of 'man conquers nature' mentality and the universal commitment to fossil fuel as the primary supply of energy. While nature is composed of vast mega-systems and dependent on the seamless cooperation of millions of mini-systems, human civilization is over-committed to a handful of power grids. Architecture, even with best intentions, is limited by a poverty of choices. There have been encouraging green initiatives in

the new millennium – for example, research into alternative energy sources, protection of existing environments, reduction of toxic materials and urban agriculture, to name a few – but, on the negative side, too many of the biomimicry design solutions seem derived from the inimitable functions of beehives, ant hills or bird nests. In this respect, there is a quality of 1960's 'new-age' naivety associated with the movement; including a preference for formal choices that end up just as sculpturally exotic as the most institutionalized versions of contemporary organic architecture.

Although Frederick never had an opportunity to experience the environmental art movement in the SoHo district of New York during the 1970s, I am confident he would have embraced the major contributors' work and reveled in the wide-ranging absorption of his ideas into a new fusion of art and architecture. As background introduction to this period, I experienced the special advantage of having lived in Italy during the 1960's; so, I counted a number of European participants in the 'Radical Architecture' revolution as friends and colleagues. The main concentration of environmental artists, from 1969 through 1985, lived and worked in the Greene, Broome, Mercer, Wooster and Spring Street areas of downtown Manhattan. This neighborhood was a unique combination of low-rent facilities, social interaction and aesthetic discourse that coalesced into many aspects of the Postmodern sensibility. The SoHo community included Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson, Mary Miss, Alice Aycock, Nancy Holt, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, Alan Sonfist, Juan Downey, Mierle Ukeles, Agnes Denes, Alan Kaprow, Miralda and Dan Graham. The American and European architectural connections were comprised of Peter Cook, Dennis Crompton and Michael Webb of Archigram, Ugo La Pietra, Gianni Pettena, Ettore Sottsass, Franco Raggi, Michele de Lucchi, Gaetano Pesce, Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo of Superstudio, Andrea Branzi, Alessandro Mendini, Jean Nouvel, Robert Venturi, Frank Gehry, Haus-Rucker, Bernard Tschumi, Emilio Ambasz, Peter Noever,

Wolf Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky of Coop Himmelblau, Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi of Morphosis, Lapo Binazzi of UFO, and Chip Lord and Curtis Schreier of Ant Farm.

While Kiesler's theories were more frequently discussed among architects during the 1970's – and, as noted above, his Endless House inspired a variety of buildings expressed in organic form – there was also a subliminal assimilation of his most insightful environmental message. The incentive to discard 'object thinking' in favor of 'contextual thinking' changed the art world. Among his last predictions of 1964, Frederick declared: "The traditional art object, be it a painting, a sculpture, a piece of architecture, is no longer seen as an isolated entity but must be considered within the context of this expanding environment. The environment becomes equally as important as the object, if not more so, because the object breathes into the surrounding and also inhales the realities of the environment, no matter in what space, close or wide apart, open air or indoor." In the process of sanctioning this objective, the Post-minimalist generation had begun to reject those institutional venues of art display (with their frames, pedestals, spotlights and rituals of commodity merchandising) in favor of venturing into the public domain. To summarize this critique, Robert Smithson complained that; "Art Galleries and museums are graveyards above ground' congealed memories of the past that act as a pretext for reality." Kiesler's pioneer vision became, in the late 60's, the stimulus for an explosion of cross-disciplinary meditations in theory, an incentive for artists to move their work to the streets and landscape, plus a liberating endorsement to explore new liaisons between art and architecture.

During my 1970's dialogues with artists and architects - in particular, Gianni Pettena, Vito Acconci, Bob Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Franco Raggi, Juan Downey, Chip Lord, Lapo Binazzi and the poet/critic/Fluxus artist, Dick Higgins – the core of debate frequently

centered on the definitions of art and architecture. In this context, some of the deliberations revolving around Kiesler's ideas had to do with perceived conflicts between his philosophical intentions, versus their translation into built form. His late-in-life variations on the Endless House and Galaxy sculptures appeared to validate territorial isolation, abstract shape-making and a re-confirmation of conventional relationships between viewer and object; in fact, there seemed to be more evidence of separation than integration. But, in my view of Kiesler's stature, his most resonant insight at the time and the most enduring contribution to the future was his holistic view of the art experience. During the period I knew him, there were three Fredericks in the New York cultural panorama - the captivating nucleus of prestigious social events, the legendary guru of the avant-garde and the enigmatic prophet who attracted a lot of literary edification. These distinctly separate audiences included the Warhol-driven party circuit that was simply content to gravitate around his charismatic presence, the art star/curator/gallery scene that cherished an opportunity to rub elbows with 20th Century history and the academic/scholarly faction who relished seeing themselves as a qualified elite that 'really understood him.' It was, in the end, the environmental artists and radical architects who gained the most from Kiesler's multi-disciplinary perceptions and amplified his interpretation of borderless dimensions into a new level of visual thinking.

Although Kiesler was not physically present for 1970's Post-minimalist dialogue, his concept of aesthetic experience as a fusion of ideas from philosophy, psychology, biology, cosmology, sociology and politics became the essence of a literary and visual art rebellion against narrowly framed definitions. As the conceptual artist, Joseph Kosuth, explained in his seminal essay of 1969, entitled *Art After Philosophy*, "Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. Painting is a *kind* of art. If an artist accepts painting, he is

accepting (and limited by) the traditional baggage that goes with it." Applying this new sensibility to environmental art in an essay for *ARTFORUM* of September 1968, Robert Smithson described his vision as *Sedimentation of the Mind*. He wrote; "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion; mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing and crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason." Extending Kiesler's open-ended prescriptions for the building arts, I observed in my 1987 book. entitled *De-architecture*; "The language of architecture should now be more psychological than formal, more cosmic than rational, more informational than obscure, more provisional than stable, more indeterminate than resolved, more narrative than abstract . . . architecture of the future will convey a meaningful message if, and only if, architects are able to perceive it differently." This 1960's through early 80's initiative to move conceptually beyond the object and embrace infinity was fundamentally attributable to Kiesler's disdain for conventional notions of functionalism as a "mysticism of hygiene," and his advocacy of art and architecture as a "nucleus of possibilities."

These expansive prospects had the revolutionary effect of breaking down hermetic constraints that traditionally limited art interpretation in broader contexts. Applied to sculpture, it meant eliminating physical boundaries in favor of undefined edges. In painting, it meant abandoning the hand-crafted artifact for multi-media ephemerality. In theater, it meant trading in the proscenium stage for streetscape performance. In music, it meant exchanging orchestral composition for found sound assemblage. Collectively, the liberating provisions of Correalism – indeterminacy, interaction, heterogeneity, fluidity, mutability, intervention and transmutation - enabled substantive progress in re-defining art and design. As Vito Acconci, my co-participant in a frequent succession of 'art versus architecture' symposia, used to grumble; "James, we seem to spend our whole lives

defending artists to architects and architects to artists." The premises for combative misunderstanding were invariably based on the disdainful view of architects that 'artists are merely self-indulgent generators of irresponsible entertainment' and the equivalent view of artists that 'architects are simply perpetrators of compromised aesthetic in deference to the expedient.' As an alternative to this perennial art-versus-design dispute, Kiesler's vision offered a new threshold of conceptual fusion. From my perspective, and as I ventured into hybrid territories with my own work at SITE, I interpreted this absorptive middle ground as 'arch-art.' By being neither, I saw it as both. Since my main creative focus was on buildings and public spaces, this meant that all sources of content derived from context. Location, function, service, materiality, people interaction and psychology of situation became my raw material for art . . . in other words, the 'subject matter.' When working on architectural projects, this viewpoint relieved me from the conventions of function as an inhibiting responsibility. In this sense, I treated 'use' itself as a liberating source of ideas, rather than an obligatory determinant in the shaping of form.

Frederick never witnessed the beginning, nor the evolution, of my work in architecture and environmental art. During the last year of his life, I was still involved with abstract sculpture and I didn't visibly translate his influence into my aesthetic transition until 1968, when I began to produce a series of 'Landsite' models for environmentally oriented installations. These pieces in welded steel were intended as architectonic interventions for landscape; but were still based on Constructivist traditions. Throughout the late summer and fall of 1965, I conversed more frequently with Lillian, because of Frederick's increasingly frail health. Even on his death bed, Lillian reported that he delivered explicit instructions for a celebratory and joyous funeral. Given his heroic sense of optimism and perverse sense of humor, the last thing Frederick wanted was a farewell event full of weepy colleagues, memorial speeches and funereal rituals. The final service

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was, in fact, a jubilant occasion, animated by Rauschenberg creating an art work and friends delivering a litany of humorous anecdotes concerning the master's lifestyle – followed by a post-ceremony champagne party and dancing until dawn.

"The poet, the artist, the architect and the scientist are the four cornerstones of this new-rising edifice."

- Frederick Kiesler, 1964

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