

## **György Kepes' Light Art**

by Zsuzsa Bacsó

Kepes György – the painter, designer, sculptor, lecturer, professor and theoretical writer – was born in a small village, Selyp, Hungary in 1906. He was a student of István Csók at the Collage of Fine Art, then after 1928 he participated in Lajos Kassák's famous Workshop (Munka-kör). After 1930 he lived in Berlin, then between 1935 and 1937 in London. In 1937 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy invited him to Chicago, where he taught in the New Bauhaus and then in its successor institution. After 1945 he taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At M.I.T. in 1967 he established, then directed – until his retirement in 1974 – his world-famous visual research institution, the Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

In Kepes' oeuvre, spanning half a century, light art – light photos, photograms, film projects, light research in education, then his community and environmental light projects besides his individual light works – played the most important role. The light art in Kepes' work is a good example to show how the (opto-) electronic revolution has made light a real and unique artistic medium in recent decades.

In his early years he was influenced by Kassák's constructivism based Workshop; he esteemed the art of photography and all its kinds to be the modern media. Since his years in Berlin he was a film assistant, stage-designer, and co-worker of Moholy-Nagy, until the latter's death. In Chicago he became the Head of the Light Department in the New Bauhaus established by Moholy-Nagy. In its successor institution (School of Design), the Light and Color workgroup – led by Kepes – shaped even a wider visual thematic conception: besides light modulators, photograms, light collages, light advertisements, etc they even made military urban camouflage plans during the war, using light.

In 1945, after the success of his first book (Language of Vision) he was invited to the School of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to teach visual design courses for urban designers and architects. From those years on he pursued all-round and wide-ranging activities; he taught (various M.I.T. courses; guest professor at Harvard, 1965), he organized and led interdisciplinary lectures and seminars (with scientists like Norbert Wiener, Jerome Wiesner, Jacob Bronowski), he organized exhibitions (Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1949; New Landscape, 1951; Light and Form, 1965; Light as Creative Medium, 1965; etc), and he also published his results in theoretical essays in books and journals (New Landscape, 1956; six volumes of Vision and Value, 1965-1966; Design Quarterly, 1967; etc). He also took photos and returned to painting; which he almost neglected for two decades. Light is a central topic in his paintings (Timid Lights, Descending Light, Garden of Lights, Glowscape, etc), which were influenced by his earlier light experiments made in the late '30s.

As a results of his connections in the School of Architecture he could participate – as a co-worker – in several large-scale architectural projects. After smaller painted metal panels and enamel walls, between 1959 and 1965 he planned and produced a series of larger mosaic murals, stained glass windows, light walls, etc. Among these large-scale pieces of art, the Programmed Light Mural (KLM Office, New York) is certainly on the zenith of his light art. Pietro Belluschi selected him as a designer for almost all his

architectural projects, but Kepes worked with Walter Gropius, Carl Koch, Robert Preusser, as well with Luigi Nervi. From the '60s Kepes showed interest in urban-scale projects; he designed complex, ecological and environmental plans (Programmed Light Walls for Boston Harbor; Charles Center and Russell Corridor, Baltimore; etc). From that time on he thought in terms of team-work; since 1960 he executed the design of a center where scientists and artists of different disciplines could work together.

M.I.T. accepted Kepes' proposal and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies was opened in 1967. In the Center, under Kepes' directorship, painters, sculptors, film makers, photographers, stage designers, graphic artists, scholars, postdoctoral fellows could continuously work together; in close contact with the academic community of architects, urban designers, scientists and engineers. In the Center they worked on light-, color- and kinetic-research, experiments and team-projects, but they also had lectures, seminars and shows. Fellow artists had to devote at least half of their work time to team-projects and exhibitions dedicated to one given theme. Their first plans were to transform Boston Harbor and then the environment of Charles River in Cambridge, but later on they made even comprehensive plans for aesthetic water cleaning, as well. For the bicentenary festivities of Boston they proposed several ideas and prepared urban-scale statue-, installation- and building-plans. These complex and large-scale environmental projects of CAVS did not materialize, however, their conceptions and plans were shown to the public at several exhibitions (Explorations, National Collection of Arts, Washington, 1970; Multiple Interaction Team, Traveling Exhibition, 1972-74; Boston Celebrations I-II, 1975-76). At these exhibitions Kepes presented significant pieces of light art (Programmed Light Walls, 1969-75; Photoelastic Walk, 1970; Flame Orchard, 1970). During the thirty-three years of the activity of CAVS more than three hundred artists worked in the Center; among them internationally known light artists (Otto Piene, Director of CAVS, 1974-93; Vassillakis Takis; Chryssa; Tsai; Michio Ihara; Stephen A. Benton, Director of CAVS, 1996-). Kepes' most important achievement is probably the still working and flourishing CAVS; with a somewhat modified profile, but with the same interdisciplinary character as he designed it more than three decades ago.

Besides his directorship and team activities Kepes was also active as an individual light artist creating light walls, laser installation plans, light sculptures (The Nightscape of the City, 1968; Laser Map Fantasy, 1968; Glow Column, 1973; Red Line, 1974; etc). In Hungary Kepes became known after his two major theoretical works had been published (Language of Vision, New Landscape, 1979) and after a series of his photogram and painting exhibitions had been opened (Art Gallery, Budapest, 1976; Kassák Museum, Budapest, 1981; Vigadó Gallery, Budapest, 1986; etc). The artist has donated most of his works to Hungary; his first permanent exhibition was opened in the city of Eger in 1991 and his artistic message has been promoted by the International Kepes Society and International Light Symposiums ever since.