

Frederick Kiesler's Film Guild Cinema, photographed by Ruth Bernhard (1948)

Jeremy Rotsztain's *House of Shadow Silence* (2017)

## OUR GAZE IS THE PROJECTOR NOW—'100% CINEMA' IN JEREMY ROTSZTAIN'S *HOUSE OF SHADOW SILENCE*

On February 1st, 1929, the Film Guild Cinema opened at 52 West 8th Street in Greenwich Village, New York City. Characterized by smooth surfaces and tightly calibrated sightlines, the Film Guild's lack of flourish was in sharp contrast to the opulent 'movie palaces' that were popular in America at the time. Its divergent aesthetics were rooted in the geometric abstraction of De Stijl and deep reverence for the moving image. Designed by Austrian-born architect Frederick Kiesler, the theatre quickly established itself as a mecca for art-house fare: both *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Nosferatu* premiered there.

Kiesler intuitively understood the phenomenological implications of viewing film. An audience might be sitting in a theatre, but spectatorship transported them *elsewhere*; and editing made time a pliable material that could be sliced, diced, and reconstituted. This abstraction was writ large on the cinema's exterior, which he carved up with an asymmetrical grid of

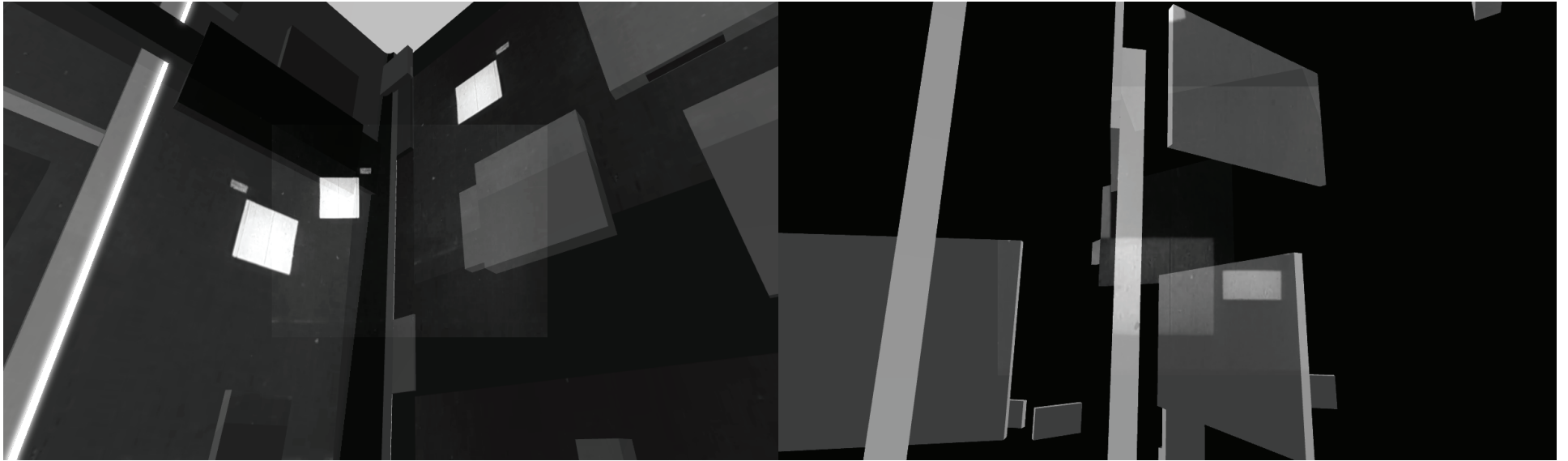
extruded volumes. Inside, Kiesler devised a diaphragm shutter that expanded and contracted—the screen was resizable to the surface area and aspect ratio required. It wasn't just the screen that was operable, though; his cinema was three-dimensional. The auditorium housed multiple projectors, distributed throughout the space, so that everything became a projection surface. He had made film immersive, and named his surround system the 'screen-o-scope.'<sup>i</sup>

Painting every available square inch with flickering light, Kiesler boasted his auditorium was “the first 100% cinema.” And it would have been, were it built to specification—due to budget cutbacks his intended design was never implemented. The knotted topology of *Endless House* (1924) earned Kiesler a place in twentieth century architecture lore, but his boundless cinema became, relatively speaking, a minor footnote.

This minor footnote is the subject of both exploration and extrapolation in Jeremy Rotsztain's *House of Shadow Silence*. Over the course of a six-minute virtual reality (VR) experience, the Canadian artist ushers viewers into a 3D reconstruction of the cinema, per Kiesler's original vision. If the experience ended there, Rotsztain's piece would be a polite homage, an architectural 'what-if?' But the artist does not simply use the Film Guild Cinema as a site; he rigs it up as a platform: *House of Shadow Silence* is an immersive meditation on the last 120 years of screen-based media.

We begin our experience seated in the middle of the theatre. The lights dim, the projector whirs. Expository intertitles describing the theatre's history appear onscreen. The curtain opens to a kinetic array of rectilinear forms whose constituent parts expand and contract—articulating new spatial rhythms.<sup>ii</sup> We levitate above our seats and float toward the front row. Animations appear on the side walls—the screen-o-scope lives—and the entire cinema fills with pulsating geometry.

We're drawn into the screen, in interstitial space, some new continuum. The illuminated picture plane recedes—is this a photon's eye-view of light in motion? We re-enter the theatre. Spotlights scan the walls; their hot, white beams delineate new edges within the animations. We breach the screen again—another new zone—and ascend upwards into a void filled with giant rectilinear volumes. Our gaze is the projector now—we are seeing machines. We return to the theatre. It flips orientation and we are pulled upwards, into the vacuum of the screen. We catch a glimpse of our fellow passengers on this journey, then pass through the projection booth windows and re-enter the theatre before beginning our final descent, landing back in our starting position.



Still from *House of Shadow Silence* (ascending into the cinema)

Still from *House of Shadow Silence* (rectilinear forms inside the void)

Soviet director Dziga Vertov believed film activated a ‘Kino-Eye’ that allowed audiences to observe and formulate new truths. Decades later, American video artist Nam June Paik offered a more mobile counter-assessment: “cinema isn’t I see, it’s I fly.”<sup>iii</sup> *House of Shadow Silence* operates at this corporeal nexus; it displaces us so we can move beyond the screen, through space, and even into the light. It’s as if Rotsztain got the keys to the avant-garde’s geometric staging ground and invited us by for a quick tour. As viewers, we may be fixed to our plush chairs and a single vantage point, but our gaze is incisive—there is much to see beyond the architecture.

That Rotsztain would reconstitute an unbuilt cinema as an aesthetic playground is not surprising, considering the themes at play in his earlier works. In *Action Painting (Masculine Expressionism)* (2008–11), he also probed the legacy and conventions of Modernism and film; using the trappings of Hollywood popcorn movies as material—fistfights, car chases, explosions—he made a suture between those hyper-masculine choreographies and the over-sized, splattered, and valued canvases of Abstract Expressionism. His music video for the electronic musician COH, *BECHA-KPACHA* (2014) signalled mastery over the ecstatic ribbon

flocks he had been training for years. While these swirling forms are far removed from the blocky vernacular of *House of Shadow Silence*, the same devotion to geometry drives both works. In the recent *Ascension (@Upfor)* (2015), we see these interests converge, with Rotsztain inviting the viewer to move beyond the canvas or screen, and into an immersive VR experience.

While the Film Guild Cinema never realized its full potential, subsequently languished, and ultimately vanished, *House of Shadow Silence* is devoid of nostalgia or mourning. Rotsztain takes Kiesler's screen-o-scope system and uses it as scaffolding in his own construction. Like in a vivid dream, we keep returning to the theatre, coming at it from slightly different angles as it reformulates itself with each pass. This overarching 'dream logic' makes the experience an allegory for the present state of VR—it is anyone's guess how the emerging medium will turn out. But Rotsztain's experience is no more *about* VR than it is about cinema. Moving image and architectural historians have described the Film Guild Cinema as encapsulating "optical fabric and perceptual fabrication,"<sup>iv</sup> and "the mutability of light as a powerful optical and architectural medium."<sup>v</sup> Rotsztain may have employed these tactics in resurrecting the dead theatre as zombie media, but make no mistake: Kiesler is not the ghost here; the viewer is.

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<sup>i</sup> Documentation of the exact functionality of the screen-o-scope and project-o-scope is fuzzy. Both Rotsztain and I have deferred to the authority of the official program for the Film Guild Cinema's opening weekend, which he spotted on eBay in 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Rotsztain plays film programmer in his resurrected theatre: the animations are executed in the style of Hans Richter's experimental short *Rhythmus 21* (1921).

<sup>iii</sup> See Paul Virilio's related discussion of 'cinema as flight' in the second chapter of *War and Cinema*.

<sup>iv</sup> Laura M. Mcguire, "A Movie House in Space and Time: Frederick Kiesler's Film Arts Guild Cinema, New York, 1929," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14, no. 2 (2007), p.47.

<sup>v</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (NYC: Verso, 2007), p.44.