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## ART REVIEW

### An Ambitious Architect Of Visions and Dreams

By KEN JOHNSON

SOUTHAMPTON, N.Y. — Frederick Kiesler is invariably called a "visionary architect," meaning that his most ambitious ideas were not practically buildable. Working with one foot in Constructivism and the other in Surrealism, he imagined structures that were as much for altering consciousness as they were for living or working in.

He is often cited as one of the inventors of environmental art, and an exhibition design produced in 1942 for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery with curved walls and paintings by various artists hovering in space remains a touchstone for holistic thinking about the integration of art and architecture. Though never built, his Endless House, which consists of interpenetrating biomorphic volumes, has a permanent niche in the dreamlife of modern architecture.

"Costantino Nivola in Springs" and "Frederick Kiesler: The Late Work 'Us, You, Me'" remain on view at the Parrish Art Museum, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, N.Y., (631) 283-2118, through Oct. 12.

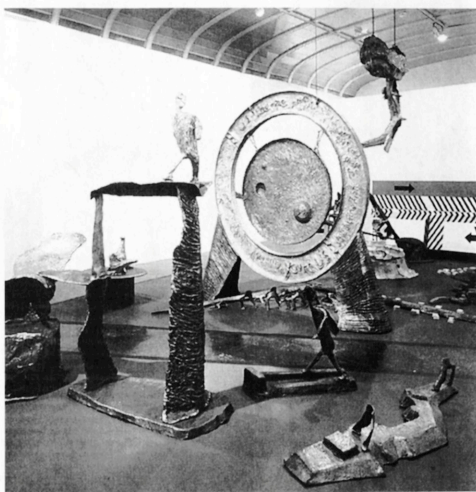
Kiesler, who was born in Austria in 1890 and moved to the United States in 1926, devoted the last four years of his life (he died in 1965) to a sprawling sculptural installation called "Us, You, Me." Now on view at the Parrish Art Museum here, it is an intriguing curiosity, if not a work of enduring beauty.

If you are familiar with other work by Kiesler, you may be shocked and puzzled by its ungainly ugliness and its clunky symbolism. But this should not be so surprising. Modern architects and designers hardly ever make good painters or sculptors, and Kiesler was evidently no exception. A kind of last testament, "Us, You, Me" tries to organize all Kiesler's beliefs into one great, universal system.

Religion, money, sex, art and architecture are the main themes. At its center hangs a big bronze gong within a circular aluminum frame. Like most of the other parts, these are cast from roughly hand-modeled materials. Opposite the gong, a satanic idol resembling some antique tribal totem emerges from a crater in a rocky mound. (Like other elements, this part has its own title: "Progress Is the Devil.")

When the gong is sounded by a big mallet, the devil, driven by a hidden

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Frederick Kiesler's sprawling "Us, You, Me" at the Parrish Art Museum.

washing machine engine, rotates violently back and forth jangling coins hanging by chains from its feline ears and stumpy arms. So you have a metaphysical war between divine harmony and terrestrial cacophony.

Around that sacred-profane duality are arranged scores of cast metal

figures, animals and objects symbolizing the spiritual chaos of a world driven by materialistic striving. These include a regiment of toy-size, crawling and running humanoid figures called "Last Efforts in Competition"; a female figure vaulting over a stool under which a male figure is

trapped called "Man and Woman Entangled in Business"; and a life-size leaping figure suspended overhead identified as "Man Escaping Into Outer Space" that might represent the artist.

There's much more, but you get the idea. One piece is completely different from the rest. It's a flat, diagrammatic painting in black and white of a striped traffic barricade with sharply defined arrows pointing in opposite directions. It looks as if it were borrowed from the studio of Allan D'Arcangelo. Here Kiesler shifted from expressionism to Pop, and the latter mode, with its emphasis on graphic clarity, was clearly better suited to Kiesler's designer sensibility. Its purpose within the overall scheme of "Us, You, Me" is obscure, but his cool lucidity makes everything else look overworked and mushy.

All that said, it should be allowed that Kiesler was, in a way, ahead of his time. In the 1980's the combination of philosophical overreaching and primitivistic aesthetics would become a standard option, as in the installations of Jonathan Borofsky and the paintings and sculptures of Julian Schnabel. Nevertheless, though Kiesler probably hoped it would be, this is not the work by which he will be remembered, and that's a good thing.

Also on view at the Parrish is a retrospective of the sculpture of Costantino Nivola, a long-time resident of nearby Springs in East Hampton, who produced some major works of public sculpture in the 1950's. Born in Italy in 1911, Nivola emigrated to the

United States in 1939 and found employment as a magazine art director and graphic designer. As a public sculptor, he collaborated with architects like Marcel Breuer, Josep Lluís Sert and Eero Saarinen, among others.

For his last word, Frederick Kiesler chose sculpture.

The retrospective ranges from cast concrete reliefs mixing Cubism and archetypal symbols from the 50's to gracefully simplified, archetypal female figures smoothly carved from marble in the 1980's. (Nivola died in 1988.)

Most appealing are small works in clay from the 1960's and 70's, including loosely modeled beds holding semi-abstracted sleepers and low reliefs representing beaches, ocean and bathers. Both convey infectious moods of dreamy eroticism. Best of all is a portrait of Kiesler, who was a friend of Nivola, made in 1961 when the architect was working on "Us, You, Me" and summering in the

Hamptons. Slouched on a small wire chair like a neglected puppet, the doll-scale figure has a lumpy, distressed body and an extraordinarily lifelike, exactingly detailed head. It's like one of Ingres's pencil portraits. Unfortunately, there is nothing else like it in the show.