



Installation view „VISIONARY SPACES: WALTER PICHLER MEETS FREDERICK KIESLER in a Display by Sonia Leimer“  
Photo: Jorit Aust / Belvedere, Vienna

## VISIONARY SPACES WALTER PICHLER MEETS FREDERICK KIESLER IN A DISPLAY BY SONIA LEIMER

28 June to 6 October, 2024, Belvedere 21

The exhibition *Visionary Spaces: Walter Pichler Meets Frederick Kiesler* in Belvedere 21 highlights thematic similarities between the oeuvres of the two artists and sheds light on important aspects of their work. The display by Sonia Leimer fosters a dialog between the works of the two avant-garde artists who differed in terms of generation and discipline.

Belvedere General Director Stella Rollig comments: "In an age where history is all too often being forgotten, we need to revisit the avant-gardes of the 20th century and gauge how they can impact the present day. Frederick Kiesler and Walter Pichler demonstrate the freedom and boldness to think *outside the box* and personify the power and innovation that can be gained from overcoming conventions."

So just what do architect, theorist, sculptor, and painter Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) and sculptor, graphic artist, and architect Walter Pichler (1936–2012) have in common? The former was an all-round designer whose concept of Correalism was based on connection, communication, and permanent change. The latter created symmetries and perfected shapes, designing tailor-made spaces for his sculptures. Yet however different the oeuvres of these two avant-garde artists might be, both men took their cue from issues relating to human beings and the spaces we inhabit. In addition, their visionary

sculptural ideas are based on the conviction that creative action is only possible in the freedom of interdisciplinary thinking and creating.

In 1924, Frederick Kiesler designs his visionary *L- and T-System* in Vienna as he does his *Space Stage*. Exactly a century later, Belvedere 21 is proud to present his spatial visions based on this together with those of Walter Pichler in the Schwanzer Pavilion – an architecturally significant place where in his first extensive solo show of 1971 Pichler explores questions of spatial organization and the presentation of works.

Although artist-cum-architect Pichler was born almost 50 years after architect-cum-artist Kiesler and they lived on different continents, they did actually meet in person once, in 1963 in New York. This occurs at a time when Pichler is decisively stimulating an international debate on the future of construction and living, something that goes hand in hand with a critique of post-War functionalism. Though no details of the meeting have survived Pichler's interest in Kiesler can be seen as representative of the interest of a younger generation that considers Kiesler a paramount example of the connection between art and architecture which they are so keen to achieve. Kiesler's transdisciplinary methodology leads to him being rediscovered in the early 1960s and emerging as an important point of reference for the Austrian art and architecture scene.

Curator Verena Gamper takes this historical meeting of the two artists as the starting point to illustrate the points of contact and parallels between them – by means of key works provided by lenders from inside and outside Austria. In six chapters, the exhibition opens up the "visionary spaces" that can be found in the examination of utopian architecture, principles of organic form, perception, spirituality, performativity, and design, and highlights their potential relevance for current issues.

"Kiesler's constant transgression of the boundaries between architecture, sculpture and painting are reflected in Pichler's refusal to accept a division between architecture and sculpture. Both artists placed human beings and their needs at the center of their reflections on space," explains Verena Gamper.

Realized by artist Sonia Leimer (born 1977), the exhibition design takes into account the significance Walter Pichler and Frederick Kiesler attached to the presentation of their works. For the juxtaposition of the two oeuvres in Belvedere 21 Leimer has adapted selected works of her own, which are situated at the interface of sculptural object and architectural setting. In doing so she effectively takes a contemporary perspective and reformulates the question raised by Kiesler and Pichler about the validity of the boundaries between architecture and sculpture.

## EXHIBITION CHAPTERS

### archiplastic

Frederick Kiesler and Walter Pichler's architectural, urbanist, and sculptural ideas are characterized by their utopian-visionary thrust, beyond convention and pragmatism. Both artists categorically reject any distinction between architecture and sculpture, and create objects that move elastically between these fields. For, in their opinion both disciplines operate with volume, proportions, and distances, the perception of which depends on our visual and physical experience of them. Consistently, both Pichler and Kiesler create sculptures that are potentially architecture, or spaces that possess the quality of sculptures. Models play a crucial role here: In addition to referencing the human body, they can innately be scaled up even to the size of architecture. As "archiplastics" they can intrinsically be read both as sculptures and as architectures. Kiesler is as aware of this in his *City in Space* as is Pichler with his various models of cities and buildings.

### organic

Organic structures and shapes derived from nature strongly influence the oeuvres of both artists. In this way, Frederick Kiesler expresses his views on the task of spatial design which he feels must grasp life as the matrix of interrelationships between humans, nature, and technology, and be correspondingly dynamic, flexible, and process based. Architecture and specifically the *Endless House* on which he works from 1947 onwards, are things he considers living organisms: "It lives in the whole and in the details. The house is the epidermis of the human body."

For Walter Pichler, the human being is likewise the measure of all things. While in the thinking behind his early designs for buildings and cities he places humans as part of the social fabric at the center of things, as of the late 1960s natural materials and the human body start to take pride of place. This approach becomes evident in an anthropomorphic formal vocabulary that also plays a part in Pichler's small-scale melding of architecture and sculpture. In this context, one key theme is the human skull, which serves as a metaphor for the entire body or to accommodate it.

### spiritual

Frederick Kiesler's architectural designs and artistic sculptures are suffused with his interest in a universal cosmic principle that spans space and time and in which the world and the mind meld in unity. Alongside themes such as religious symbols or skeleton-like elements, Kiesler relies on archaic shapes and materials. These attest to his exploration of vernacular, regional architecture, with rooms for ritual concerns, and with timeless methods and materials of construction and creation.

By contrast Walter Pichler's occupation with (Christian) iconography and liturgy is as obvious as it is misleading. Works such as *Sacral Building, Chapel, or Portable Shrine* are neither religious artefacts nor do they stand for a critical enquiry into religion. Instead, with their stringent symmetry they convey an impression of wholeness, of supra-temporality and monumentality. Through performative activation and ritual actions, Pichler charges his sculptures, to which he sometimes has a symbiotic connection, with cultic value.

### **sensory**

Both Frederick Kiesler and Walter Pichler concerned themselves with human perception as a system of processing and interpreting sensory stimuli. Kiesler invented special devices that took account of the entire body and its various senses in order to liberate the eye from the burden of the body, as it were, and enable the viewer to concentrate on visual perception. He transforms exhibitions into veritable perceptual appliances. In keeping with his concept of Correalism, reality is an elastic set of relationships between humans, nature, and the technological world. In this context, he accords humans an existential role in the perception of the world, and thus reality.

Pichler likewise sees reality not as something separate from us but rather-like Kiesler-as something related to the human body and perception. This is the starting point for the *Prototypes* and prosthetic body devices which he created from 1966 onwards. In these appliances tailored to the human body, Pichler takes a critical look at the technological achievements and media possibilities of his era.

### **performative**

For Frederick Kiesler, rooms are not static shells, but elastic as regards the requirements of the people using them. They thus need to be mutable and should offer infinite options. Here, the factor of time is crucial, as Kiesler puts it as early as his 1925 manifesto on the *City in Space*. He resorts to malleable materials such as textiles, to sounds, and artificial, some times colored light to create accents that emphasize the flexibility and performative quality of spaces.

By comparison, Walter Pichler does not underline the mutability of a space, but rather prioritizes its existential performativity: Architecture needs to be impermanent. After his archiplastics of the early 1960s, in the period from 1966 to 1969 Pichler goes on to create his *Prototypes*. Made of thermosets and thermoplastics, foam or aluminum, they breathe the spirit of the post-War era, their formal vocabulary at times alluding to aircraft construction and space travel. The idea of the machine goes hand in hand with the image of movement, progress, and the technological transformation of the human being. Its permanently changing needs are reflected in flexible, ephemeral spaces.

### **functional**

Developed in the course of the 1930s, Frederick Kiesler applies his theory of Correalism to transdisciplinary basic research in creative design. The human being and our changing needs form the pivot of this undertaking. Here, each object merely constitutes the beginning of a process as it is first through its use that the potential of all its possible functions becomes apparent. Change and multifunctionality are therefore key notions when it comes to understanding Kiesler's designs, from his *Nesting Table* through to the furniture for Peggy Guggenheim's gallery-cum-museum *Art of This Century*.

By contrast, Walter Pichler's reflections on furniture design prioritize less the flexible use of objects and more the questioning of what he felt was the dubious distinction between art and design. He devises some of his *Prototypes* as functional sculptures in order consciously to blur the line dividing artwork and object of use. Pichler is convinced that the term "art" tends to frighten off many people and thus labels the exhibits at a racing car show in Vienna's fair hall as a "compressed worldview".

## CATALOG

*Visionary Spaces: Walter Pichler Meets Frederick Kiesler (in a Display by Sonia Leimer)*

Editors: Stella Rollig, Katia Baudin, Verena Gamper

With essays by Juliette Desorgues, Verena Gamper, Almut Grunewald, Michael Krajewski, Harald Krejci, and Bart Lootsma highlighting the points of contact between the oeuvres of Walter Pichler and Frederick Kiesler from the perspective of art history and cultural history as well as from a biographical vantage point.

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A supplement to the catalog with views of the exhibition and a conversation with Sonia Leimer about her display is scheduled for publication in mid-July.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition title	<i>Visionary Spaces: Walter Pichler Meets Frederick Kiesler in a Display by Sonia Leimer</i>
Curator	Verena Gamper
Assistant Curator	Anna Ewa Dyrko
Duration	28 June to 6 October, 2024
Location	Belvedere 21 Arsenalstraße 1, 1030 Vienna
Opening hours	Tuesday to Sunday 11 am to 6 pm Late night: Thursday 11 am to 9 pm Open Mondays on holidays
Tickets	Regular   €9.30 online, €11 on-site Discounted   €6.90 online, €8 on-site Annual Ticket   €39 Children and youth up to the age of 18   free
Web	belvedere.at facebook.com/belvedere21 X.com/belvedere21 instagram.com/belvedere21wien #VisionarySpaces
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*An exhibition by Belvedere, Vienna, in collaboration with Kunstmuseen Krefeld.*

For more information on the exhibition and high-resolution press photos, please visit [belvedere.at/en/press](https://belvedere.at/en/press).