

Noguchi Museum Presents *Noguchi Subscapes and Veronika Spierenburg, Aus-Höhlen*

Companion exhibitions of sculpture and design by Isamu Noguchi and of
two films by Veronika Spierenburg explore the hidden and unseen

Opening June 15, 2022

New York, NY (May 31, 2022) — The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum presents *Noguchi Subscapes* and *Veronika Spierenburg, Aus-Höhlen*, companion exhibitions connected by a focus on the hidden and unseen: invisible forces, subterranean structures and their makers, spatial metaphors for the unknown, and the inner recesses of the self.

Noguchi Subscapes (June 15, 2022–May 7, 2023) is a series of installations of approximately forty sculptures and designs by Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988, American) that survey his particular interest in these realms. Drawn mainly from The Noguchi Museum’s collection and incorporating photographs from the artist’s archive, *Noguchi Subscapes* occupies nearly the entire second floor.

It is organized as a complement to the upcoming fall/winter special exhibition *In Praise of Caves: Organic Architecture Projects from Mexico* by Carlos Lazo, Mathias Goeritz, Juan O’Gorman, and Javier Senosiain, which will be on view at the Museum from October 19, 2022 – February 26, 2022.

The term “subspace” comes from a 1950 essay by designer George Nelson¹ about the unconsidered zone below the level of the chair seat or table top. Isamu Noguchi designed his iconic glass-topped coffee table for Herman Miller (designed 1944; manufactured 1947–73, and 1984–present) to illustrate a



Image: Isamu Noguchi, *Even the Centipede*, 1952. Unglazed Kasama red stoneware, wood pole, and hemp cord. 165 5/8 x 18 x 18 in. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York; A. Conger Goodyear Fund, 1.1955.a-k. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society



Image: Rocky Stensrud, Jr., plays under a glass-topped Isamu Noguchi Coffee Table. Photo: Joseph Scherschel. The LIFE Picture Collection / Shutterstock

now-lost article of Nelson's entitled "How to Make a Table," as well as to avenge the theft of a related design by a well-known furniture company while Noguchi was incarcerated in the Poston, Arizona, prison camp for Japanese Americans during World War II. With its transparent top and visible skeletal structure base, the table is a subscape revelation.

Noguchi understood that the fundamentals of ground, floor, and Earth of which we are not consciously aware are often the most significant baselines of our existence—their importance rendered invisible only by their scale. As he wrote in the Museum's catalogue on *Infant* (1971), which, like many of the low-lying sculptures given place of pride in this exhibition, sits directly on the floor:

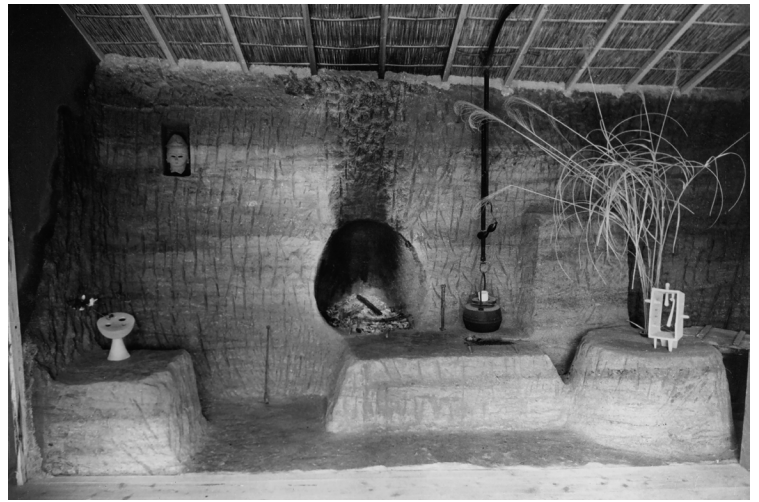
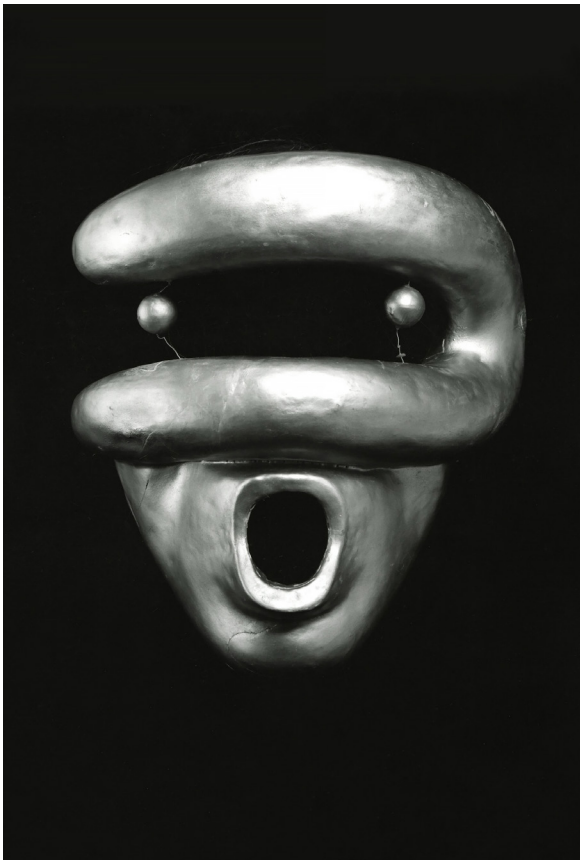
*Ultimately, the floor as a metaphor for earth is the basic base beyond all others. Gravity holds us there. The floor is our platform of humanity, as the Japanese well know. The floor in its entirety graces all who enter. They partake in the experience of being sculpture.*²

The works in *Noguchi Subscapes* represent different aspects of a hidden connectedness: the tunnels, caves, root systems, and formations below the surface of the Earth, as well as the forces and creatures that produce them.

The exhibition includes recreations of the set and costumes that Noguchi designed for the ballet *Orpheus* (1848), choreographed by George Balanchine with music by Igor Stravinsky for Ballet Society (thereafter New York City Ballet). In this modern

1 George Nelson, "Notes on the New Subscape," in *Problems of Design* (New York: Whitney Publications, 1957), 194–200, previously published as "Problems of Design: Notes on the New Subscape," *Interiors* 110 (November 1950).

2 Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), 122.



Images, clockwise from left:

Isamu Noguchi, mask (Orpheus's severed head) for *Orpheus*, 1948. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 06665. ©INFGM / ARS

Interior of Isamu Noguchi's earthen-walled studio in Kita Kamakura, c. 1951–52. Noguchi excavated and built this studio from a hillside on the land of Kitaoji Rosanjin. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 03225. ©INFGM / ARS

Isamu Noguchi, *Worm Pyramid*, 1965. Granite. 12 x 22 5/8 x 23 1/8 in. ©INFGM / ARS

treatment of the story of the musician-poet of Greek myth and his struggle to rescue his wife Eurydice from Hades, Noguchi had the opportunity to animate a journey into a literal underworld. Noguchi described the tragic story as a “kind of testament to the artist”³: “Orpheus wears the mask of the artist that blinds him to reality but opens his vision to art.”⁴

On special loan from The Museum of Modern Art, New York, is Noguchi's multi-sectioned ceramic work *Even the Centipede* (1952), a monumental “shrine” to the centipedes that filled Noguchi's earthen studio in Kita Kamakura, Japan, in the early 1950s. *Worm Pyramid* (1965), a diminutive stone work which sits so low to the ground as to be frequently overlooked (or occasionally tripped over) in the Museum's permanent installation, evokes the possibility of subterranean civilizations.

The installation also features a “Garden of Bases,” an arrangement of plinths inspired by a constellation of nine irregular marble platforms that Noguchi designed in the 1960s for the Henraux stoneworking company in Querceta, Italy, on which his own and other artists' sculptures were made in the open air and displayed. The way that a base can change the relationship between an object and the world was one of many paradigms that informed Noguchi's expanded conception of sculpture.

Read more about the exhibition: noguchi.org/subscapes

³ Isamu Noguchi quoted in Robert Tracey, *Spaces of the Mind* (New York, NY, Limelight Editions), 110.

⁴ Isamu Noguchi, *Notes on “Orpheus,”* n.d. The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS_BOL_016_003.



Veronika Spierenburg, *Aus-Höhlen* (June 15–October 2, 2022), presented across two galleries on the first floor, is an installation of two films by Veronika Spierenburg (b. 1981, Switzerland). The two films titled *Aus-Höhlen* (“From Caves”) (2015 and 2015/2019) are radically different versions of the same visual material. In both films Spierenburg places the viewer within a series of monastery caves in Georgia (the former Soviet republic), looking out from a fixed position at a framed bit of landscape as if in seated meditation. These caves have been in use for more than a millenium by Georgian Orthodox Christian monks.

Veronika Spierenburg,
still from *Aus-Höhlen*
(*From Caves*), 2015.
HD video, 21 min.
Courtesy of the artist.

The experience of the first film (2015) is of remoteness and silence, with slight environmental sounds heightening the overall atmosphere of serenity. The observer is allowed to sample the spiritual power of isolation that presumably goes with a monk’s seclusion. The title *Aus-Höhlen* is a pun on the German verb “to hollow out” – a hint that perhaps withdrawal from society is not the simple solution it seems. In the second film, completed in 2019 with most of the same footage, Spierenburg introduces voiceovers in which the viewer, still seated as if in meditation, hears unseen women interviewed on the streets of Georgia’s capital Tbilisi responding to questions from the artist which ask them to imagine their bodies as dwellings: *If your body were a house, where would the door be? If your body were a house, where would the window be? If your body were a cave, where would the entrance be?*

The resulting complex melding of physical environment, psychic space, and social awareness directly connects with what Isamu Noguchi meant by using the sculpture of spaces to “illumine the environment of our aspirations.”⁵

5 Isamu Noguchi, “Towards
a Reintegration of the Arts,”
College Art Journal 9.1
(Autumn, 1949): 59.

Spierenburg states: “It feels almost like making a collaborative work with Isamu Noguchi himself to exhibit in his Museum. Noguchi’s questions about the relationship of man to the earth are increasingly relevant.”

Each gallery of *Aus-Höhlen* also contains a cue to consider these connections in the collaborations of Martha Graham and Isamu Noguchi. In two contact sheets of photographs by Phillippe Halsman, Graham rehearses her *Cave of the Heart* (1946) with sets by Noguchi – solo in one, and with members of her company in the other.

Read more about the exhibition: noguchi.org/veronika-spierenburg

RELATED UPCOMING EXHIBITION

In Praise of Caves: Organic Architecture Projects from Mexico by Carlos Lazo, Mathias Goeritz, Juan O’Gorman, and Javier Senosiain

October 19, 2022 – February 26, 2023

The forthcoming fall 2022–winter 2023 exhibition *In Praise of Caves: Organic Architecture Projects from Mexico by Carlos Lazo, Mathias Goeritz, Juan O’Gorman, and Javier Senosiain* reflects a shared interest in the structure, cultural history, and habitability of caves.

Ranging from sculptures to architectural models, paintings to photographs, the projects by these four architects, artists, and designers inquire how caves might be adapted to modern life, the practical benefits of life below ground, and how snakes and cave-dwellers serve as the natural architects of these unseen spaces – stand-ins for humanity as it contemplates the subterranean, as Isamu Noguchi did. Together with the collection exhibition *Noguchi Subscapes*, these architectural projects will be installed so as to turn The Noguchi Museum into a semi-subterranean environment where visitors can experience the largely unconsidered world that lies underground.

LOCATION

The Noguchi Museum
9-01 33rd Road (at Vernon Boulevard)
Long Island City, NY 11106

Open Weds–Sun, 11 am–6 pm,
by advance reservation: noguchi.org/visit

Media Visits and all Press Inquiries:

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SUPPORT

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ABOUT VERONIKA SPIERENBURG

Veronika Spierenburg (b. 1981, Switzerland) is a multimedia artist. She studied in Basel, Amsterdam, and London in her early years. Her work is strongly influenced by her travels in Japan, China, Brazil, Mexico, and Georgia. In 2022, she will be artist-in-resident at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. She has published several artist books, including *Ōya-ishi—Oya-stones*. Her latest work, a fictional short film, is on view at the Kunsthaus Zurich, Switzerland, through July 17, 2022. veronikaspierenburg.com

ABOUT ISAMU NOGUCHI

The quintessential sculptor in an expanded field, Isamu Noguchi (b. 1904, Los Angeles; d. 1988, New York) believed that the purpose of art is to make us more human and in his own work sought to help humanity reestablish its sense of scale with nature. He was born in Los Angeles to a white American mother and a Japanese father. He grew up in Japan and Indiana before relocating to New York, and eventually also established studios in Japan and Italy. Never feeling at home anywhere, he learned to make himself at home everywhere. Having made voluntary exile from any one dominant culture a creative platform, he operated as a universal person and a citizen of the world. His transdisciplinarity and refusal to be categorized led him to seek a mission for sculpture outside the art world. Looking beyond what he termed the false horizon of the pedestal, he anticipated land art, art as a social practice, and the mix of formalism and conceptualism that we now take for granted in sculpture. His ability to bridge many of the supposedly irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of contemporary life—such as the one between traditional cultures and technological innovation—have made him an influential source for a wide range of creative people and a cultural icon. Using everything he learned designing playgrounds, dance sets, and gardens, he remade sculpture into a discipline for understanding our place in the universe, a technology for transcending small-mindedness, and a technique for integrating the best habits and effects of craft into daily life. Focused from first to last on a better future, he aimed for nothing less than leaving what his friend R. Buckminster Fuller called “Spaceship Earth” a more interconnected and sustainable sculpture than he found it. To learn more about Isamu Noguchi, visit noguchi.org/biography.

ABOUT THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM

Founded in 1985 by category-defying artist Isamu Noguchi, The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum (now known as The Noguchi Museum) in Queens, New York, was the first museum in the United States to be established, designed, and installed by a living artist to show their own work. Itself widely viewed as among the artist's greatest achievements and holding the world's largest collection of his works, the Museum features open air and indoor galleries in a repurposed 1920s industrial building and a serene outdoor sculpture garden. Since its founding, it has served as an international hub for Noguchi research and appreciation. In addition to managing the artist's archives and catalogue raisonné, the Museum exhibits a comprehensive selection of Noguchi's material culture, from sculpture, models, and drawings to his personal possessions. Provocative installations drawn from the permanent collection, together with diverse special exhibitions and collaborations with contemporary practitioners across disciplines, offer a multifaceted view of Noguchi's art and illuminate his enduring influence as an innovator. noguchi.org | [@noguchimuseum](https://www.instagram.com/noguchimuseum)

Notes To Editors:

- Isamu Noguchi is correctly “American” or “Japanese American,” not “Japanese.”
- He can be said to be a sculptor, artist, sculptor and designer, landscape designer, architectural designer, etc; he was not a licensed architect.
- Isamu Noguchi was not forcibly incarcerated in the American prison camps during World War II, as over 120,000 Japanese Americans were. Noguchi volunteered to go to the Poston, Arizona, camp in 1942 with ambitions to help design liveable facilities and lead arts programming; none of which came to fruition. Though he entered the camp willingly, he was not permitted to leave. Noguchi describes some of his experiences in “I Become a Nisei,” a draft of an article commissioned by Reader's Digest that went unpublished. (The Noguchi Museum collected this text in a 2020 / 2022 book co-published with The Brother In Elysium). Noguchi remained in the camp from May until November 1942, when he was able to leave on a temporary furlough.
- From New York City Ballet: “It was a performance of *Orpheus* that led Morton Baum, chairman of the executive committee of the City Center of Music and Drama, to invite Ballet Society to become its permanent ballet company, under the new name, New York City Ballet. *Orpheus* was presented with Concerto Barocco and Symphony in C at the New York City Ballet's first performance on October 11, 1948.”

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