

Another Form of the Fragment

Abstract

As a newly established institution founded in 1968, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York aimed at an interdisciplinary exploration of design and the expansion of the term to include environmental design. The opening exhibition “MAN transFORMS” (1976) is to be understood as an experiment that for the first time rendered the man-made environment a museum exhibit. Director Lisa Taylor recognized the collection items abandoned by the Cooper Union School as ‘touchstones’ to exemplify phenomena of environmental appropriation and design, and invited Hans Hollein to conceive the inaugural exhibition. The show made the actual collection exhibits accessible as artifacts of environmental production by means of a spatial assemblage that included everyday objects and commissioned contributions.

Against the background of a changing conception of the human environment, the essay discusses the genesis of the exhibition “MAN transFORMS” and its form, an exhibition environment that was produced in an assemblage of fragmentary artifacts. Instead of a rational, museum-like order, the possibility of associative linking of the most diverse objects formed an open perceptual framework. In the sense of an ecological system, the exhibition environment developed by Hollein relied on the mutual conditionality of all exhibit. Thus, within this exhibition arrangement the exhibits appeared as fragments of reality and beyond the exhibition were to refer to the ‘whole’.

What is interesting for the reconsideration of the fragment here is that the exhibit, taken from a reality, retained its fragmentary character in the joining of the artifacts. As an analogous counter-image to Colin Rowe’s ‘City as Museum’, this exhibition represents a possibility of dealing with the fragment in a way that does not transfigure it, but makes it interrogable as an element within environmental production. A form of the fragmentary can be derived from the discussion of Hollein’s exhibition that is related to Ungers’ concept of the assemblage. Such other form of the fragment invites us to un-

derstand the transformation of the environment as an ongoing negotiation and to conceive each insertion as complementary and corrective.

Keywords

MAN transFORMS, Hans Hollein, Assemblage, O. M. Ungers, Postmodernism, Exhibition History