

Minimalist Show, Minimally Revised

‘Other Primary Structures,’ a Sequel, at the Jewish Museum

By ROBERTA SMITH APRIL 10, 2014

Museum art exhibitions are painfully ephemeral. Once they close, they are gone, except for their catalogs and documentary photographs. This has understandably spurred visions of time travel among curators and curators in training.

As Jens Hoffmann, the deputy director of the Jewish Museum, writes in the catalog for “Other Primary Structures,” the new show he has organized at the museum, the history of exhibitions has become “a separate field of critical examination.” In addition, it has spawned a very hands-on form of study: exhibitions that are themselves re-creations of — or responses to — past exhibitions.

“Other Primary Structures” is in this vein. It is an unusually site-specific sequel to “Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors,” which was staged at the Jewish Museum in 1966. The earlier show was organized by Kynaston McShine, the museum’s chief curator (soon to move on to the Museum of Modern Art) and it is widely viewed as a harbinger of Minimalism.

The current show is, then, a compensatory curatorial action, a bit of historical revisionism. It presents artists from other parts of the world who might have been in the original. This is a great idea in theory, but its execution here is weak. The show itself feels skimpy and parsimonious compared to what might have been. Too large for the galleries allotted, it has been compromised

by being divided into two parts, and its catalog, while clever, is insufficient.

And yet beyond the lessons about art, art history and the curatorial craft that this exhibition only partly conveys, it morphs into something quite useful. This is mainly because of what you encounter in its final gallery: a meticulously made architectural model of the Jewish Museum in 1966, before the latest expansion of its Upper East Side home in 1993. In it is a miniature copy of the original “Primary Structures” exhibition — with each tiny artwork placed to echo the original installation.

Mr. McShine’s show surveyed the momentous changes that had been developing in sculpture since the late 1950s in the work of 42 artists, including 32 Americans, 10 Britons and, for the record, three women, all Americans — Anne Truitt, Tina Matkovic and Judy Gerowitz, who would become better known as Judy Chicago. (A review of “Chicago in L.A.,” at the Brooklyn Museum, is on Page 30.) Sculptors were abandoning the figurative tradition in favor of abstraction and were forsaking bases and pedestals to establish a new spatial relationship with the viewer. Geometric forms and color were increasingly the norm, as were industrial materials and manufacture. That show registered these changes among major Minimalists (Tony Smith, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin), soon-to-be post-Minimalists (Robert Smithson, Douglas Huebler, Ms. Chicago), relative non-Minimalists (like the British artist Anthony Caro) and lots of hangers-on.

Mr. Hoffmann aims to demonstrate that these interests extended far beyond the two English-speaking countries surveyed in the original exhibition and were being acted upon by artists in South America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, which had their own traditions of three-dimensional abstraction. But he is also indiscriminate, which isn’t the worst thing, but, as with the original show, it blurs the focus.

Part 1 of “Other Primary Structures,” which contains sculpture from 1960 to 1967, includes the work of the Brazilian artists Willys de Castro (1926-88), Lygia Pape (1927-2004) and Sérgio Camargo (1930-90), and the Croatian Branko Vlahovic (1924-79). While all are excellent, their geometries are rooted in prewar Europe, in de Stijl, Russian Constructivism and the more abstract of Alberto Giacometti’s early works. (Part 2 will include work from 1967 to 1970.)

One of the best-known artists here is Lygia Clark (1920-88), who definitively closed the gap between sculpture and viewer as early as 1960, with interactive work that skipped Minimalism, presaging post-Minimalism. Her

small hinged geometric forms, made of aluminum, are intended to be arranged and rearranged by us; it is quite pleasurable to do so. Similarly mutable (but by museum staff only) is “Situation of Four Aluminum Plates,” a 1966 piece by the Argentine David Lamelas (born in 1946), whose four shortish strips of thin, highly flexible aluminum can be arranged any way, as long as they are touching. (Richard Serra comes to mind here.)

In most cases, the show is pinched: not only too little space but also too little art. Another well-known Brazilian, Hélio Oiticica (1937-80), an artistic prodigy, is represented here by a marvelous hanging piece in painted plywood from around 1960, but that unfortunately is all. Similarly, there is much more to the work of the Polish artist Edward Krasinski (1925-2004) than the seemingly kissing arrows and speeding spear on view here — charming forms of drawings (albeit in space) reminiscent of Joan Miró and Saul Steinberg.

More conventionally Minimalist are two works by the London-based Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen (born 1935): an open steel cube painted blue (1966-67) and four painted I-beams placed side by side (1965). So is a giant black-and-white X stretching from floor to ceiling by Noemí Escandell from Argentina (born 1942). It was carefully rendered in a 1967 drawing, but built for the first time only for this exhibition, delayed partly by the mostly military rule of the late 1960s to early '80s.

All this is to say that Mr. Hoffman’s response exhibition goes blurry around the edges, as the original “Primary Structures” did. It would have been more interesting and nuanced if he had discussed some of the differences among the works in both shows in the catalog. But, as with the show, it is squeezed for space.

The cleverest part of the catalog is that it is accompanied by a second edition of the original cursory but indispensable “Primary Structures” catalog, long out of print. Less clever is that the new catalog hones so precisely to the original’s design and dimensions (even thickness) that it, too, is cursory, which makes the show feel unresearched and not quite of the present.

Far more illuminating is the intricately detailed model of the Jewish Museum as it was inside and out in 1966, when “Primary Structures” was in residence. It creates a thrilling feeling of time travel that would be valuable to anyone with curatorial interests. I felt that I was helicoptering above it, swooping in for closer looks.

The model, made by students at Parsons the New School for Design, is

certainly much more effective than the blowup photographs of the 1966 show that line the walls of the current one and distract from the art. The students' work demonstrates what a wonderful building the Jewish Museum had before it tore down its sleek 1963 wing, the Albert A. List Pavilion, and replaced it with an addition that merges seamlessly with the museum's late-19th-century fake-chateau design. It's fine that the museum wanted to concentrate more on Jewish culture, but the model makes it clear that the new design reduced the space appropriate for contemporary art, which is its own kind of loss for New York.

In emphasizing the essential relationship of art to museum architecture and space, the model shifts the focus back to the curatorial craft. Maybe every museum exhibition should have a model. We might get both better shows and better buildings.

Part 1 of "Other Primary Structures" is on view through May 18 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street; 212-423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org. Part 2 runs from May 25 to Aug. 3.

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