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Katsuhiro Yamaguchi's Influence on the Commercial Interior Design of the 1960s

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1. Introduction

Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (b. 1928) is an influential figure in Japanese avant-garde commercial interior design of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As an artist creating works with light and electronics, he was interested in avant-garde commercial interiors and designed several commercial interiors, including the club Fontaine (Tokyo, 1966, 1969), in which he attempted to create an “environment.” In this paper, I would like to re-examine the relationship between Yamaguchi's art and his commercial interior designs from the late 1950s to the end of the 1960s in order to determine what part art played in the world of interior design in this period.

2.1. The *Vitrine* Series and Interior Design

Around 1958 Yamaguchi began to make art works using Plexiglas. His Plexiglas works were part of a series called *Vitrines*. A typical vitrine was a box-shaped object containing a piece of painted glass inside and covered with a sheet of figured glass. The optical effects of the figured glass caused images painted on the glass inside the box to look distorted. In 1958, Yamaguchi used the vitrine as a decorative motif for the interior design of an apartment in Azabu, Tokyo. He used vitrines to decorate the top of a low table and cover a radiator. This turned them into objects that dominated the atmosphere. Soon after, Yamaguchi began referring to

them as “interior objects” and considered them to be a key part of his interior design.

2.2. “Stretched-Cloth” Sculptures and Interior Design

After a three-month trip to Europe and North America in 1961–2, Yamaguchi was no longer interested in designing forms and instead came up with the idea of “wrapping a void”. His new series called “stretched-cloth” sculpture has a steel frame covered with torn pieces of canvas flour and sugar bags. The architect Takamitsu Azuma used a stretched-cloth sculpture to decorate the interior of the Check pub in Shinjuku, Tokyo, in 1964, and was struck by the sculpture's powerful ability to dominate the space. Azuma called the object a “space-generator”—apparently a synonym for Yamaguchi's “interior object.”

2.3. Light Sculptures and Interior Design

Yamaguchi's belief that an object could dominate a space soon led to another idea: the concept of an “environment.” He argued that an environment differed from a space in that people are less involved in the latter. In 1966, two important exhibitions based on the environment concept were held in Tokyo: the *Color and Space* exhibition at Minami Gallery in Ginza, and the *From Space to Environment* exhibition at Matsuya Department Store in Ginza. While joining

both exhibitions, Yamaguchi designed a commercial interior in 1966. The Fontaine club in Ginza had bright blue painted walls, which might have been inspired by *Color and Space*. The light sculptures in the club functioned as “interior objects.”

2.4. Supergraphics and the OFF OFF Workshop

In 1969, Yamaguchi refurbished the Fontaine club. This time, he used supergraphics. What Yamaguchi had in mind was that supergraphics could be seen as a way of generating an “environment.” The interior of the club consisted only of geometrical forms, all of which were painted in vivid colors. Supergraphics is also an object-based idea, even when it is space-oriented. Indeed, Yamaguchi never looked at a space without considering the objects in it. This is all the more apparent from the OFF OFF workshop for interior objects begun by Yamaguchi, Takayasu Ito, and Morio Shinoda in 1970. After designing the interior of the boutique in which the OFF OFF was located, Yamaguchi again insisted that designing an interior should start with objects and then move on to the space—rather than the other way around.

3. Conclusion

In this presentation, I have examined the relationship between Yamaguchi’s art and his commercial interior designs from the late 1950s to the end of the 1960s. Early on in the late 1950s, there seemed to be no relationship between the two. However, the environment concept gradually drew them to-

gether. What lay at the root of this unity was the idea that an object dominated a space. This was borne out by the fact that Yamaguchi’s objects, such as vitrines and light sculptures. It seems that Yamaguchi applied the supergraphics method to commercial interiors with the same idea in mind. Then the idea that an object dominated a space certainly appealed to architects and interior designers of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, this way of unifying art and interior design did not last long. When the furor over the Expo ’70 died down, architects and interior designers went back to basics. In other words, they designed the space first, not the object inside it. This essentially amounted to abandoning the idea of the environment.

In the 1970s, commercial interior design changed. Designers such as Takashi Sakaizawa and Shiro Kuramata created interior spaces that were not dominated by the object. Instead, the whole space became a gigantic art object or an art object turned inside out. In the future, I plan to continue my research by examining how a new movement in interior design in the 1970s was influenced by the unification of art and design in the 1960s.

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