
The widely cast topic in this volume brings together essays from scholars and practitioners immersed in the disciplines of art, art history, philosophy, literature, archaeology, numismatics, film, and science. The publication relates to a symposium organized at the Getty Research Institute in May 2006, where several contributors were scholars in residence at the time. Editor and art historian William Tronzo refers to another source of inspiration in Linda Nochlin’s book The Body in Pieces: the Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity (1988). Following on a pictorial cue, Tronzo observed broad archetypal modalities that reveal our cultural relations to fragments in terms of contrasts – for instance, as either things received or things created. This pliant dichotomy, fittingly partitioned by artist Cornelia Parker’s portfolio, provides a general framework for the arrangement of contributions that explore the presupposed history all the way from the Paleolithic to the present.

As a result, The Fragment passes through many historical moments freed of strict chronology although set predominantly in the European context. While the reader can approach any essay independently, the established sequence presents a fine rhythm for this demanding volume. Contributing authors traverse from late antiquity through the Renaissance to describe how classical architectonic and textual fragments functioned meaningfully as referents; they circulate the events immediately following the French Revolution when the fragment was reconfigured from an object of nostalgia to one of activism; they touch on eighteenth-century Romanticism that led to the systematic collection and study of fragments, newly perceived as entities in their own right. A co-authored essay reconsiders prehistoric human traces of deliberate object fragmentation, the relation of that process to personhood, social identity, tool making, and the evolution of consciousness. The theme of deliberate fragmentation reappears in the long tradition of split coins, along with many other uses of coins as fragments; and more recent ideas of personhood get examined through sci-fi and horror movies featuring ectobrains, that is, brains living outside a body. Additional subjects treated at some length are the Laokoon in relation to the development of restoration practices, Girodet’s The Revolt of Cairo, Theodor Adorno’s rebuttal of the whole and, more generally, the notion that it is the fragment that endures, and the whole that is fragile.

The durable, hardbound volume features complementary illustrations throughout and includes biographical notes on the contributors, illustration credits, and an index. Notes following each essay contain independent bibliographic references. The Fragment is recommended for art and architecture libraries supporting graduate programs, academic or curatorial research, and multidisciplinary studies.

Dasha Dekleva, MLIS, MA, dademkleva@gmail.com