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“Art and Objecthood”

A Lecture

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Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” appeared in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum*, almost exactly forty years ago today, and I have probably now shared some thirty years of my teaching and writing life with it.¹ By the latter I mean that, at a minimum, it secured our lasting sense of a particular tendency that had been visible for a number of years and across a series of notable shows that each offered different versions and accounts of it under a still open series of names (Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures, Specific Objects, among others). Fried proposes at the outset of the essay to call the phenomenon he’s addressing “literalism”, but even within the essay that particular term has no lasting power and is quickly displaced by a number of further terms, which don’t propose to name anything so much as to describe or summarize a description of a body of work. That description has remained definitive; we do not address what we now call Minimalism apart from it. It is interesting and perhaps important that by June 1967 something else—for which we still have no better name, I think, than post-Minimalism—had started to become visible, sometimes on what clearly claimed to be new ground (as with Lucy Lippard’s important 1966 show *Eccentric Abstraction*) and sometimes oddly sharing ground with the work from which we would now fairly sharply distinguish it. It is perhaps also interesting that the sharpest early response to Fried’s essay comes from this new direction, most notably from Robert Smithson, both in a fiercely polemic letter to *Artforum* and in more subtle remarks in the essay “A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects”.²

But if that’s the essay’s particular importance in 1967, that we still find ourselves reading it forty years later has to do with how it has come to mark a turning point in our understanding of modernism more largely. Whether we understand that turning point on the model of a period break (after modernism, postmodernism) or as some more complex turn within modernism (modernism in the age or moment of its rewriting), “Art and Objecthood” laid out with an extraordinary perspicuity the terms of the modernism at stake, and so has played a large role in how we imagine its end or transformation. In that sense, it still offers the possibility of some measure of our present, even as we admit that its terms, taken strictly, cannot be our own. The essay is in this sense dead-ended: Having marked with all the power and clarity at its disposal a certain limit, it leaves itself no way to move beyond that limit, and so the inheriting of it, if one finds it compelling, is difficult.

One standard way art history and art criticism alike have tried to erase this difficulty is by embracing its descriptive force while rejecting a judgment Fried is believed to have derived from it. It’s important to see early on in one’s dealings with “Art and Objecthood” that this is not in fact possible: The essay is not a description followed by a judgment but description through and through, with judgment simply continuous with that description. If I describe

¹ Page references in the body of this essay are to Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

² Both texts can be found in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

a cat to you, what I have described is a cat, and you are not free to say in response, “I accept your description but will nonetheless choose to call it a dog”. If you persist in calling it a dog, I don’t really know how to continue our conversation. But I do know that if several years later you come to me and say, “Burglars broke in and took everything, and the dog didn’t do a damn thing to stop them!”, my sympathy for you will be limited at best. I say this because it has apparently not been obvious to many readers that the essay does in fact work this way—that it is nothing more than a description of Fried’s experience of a certain body of work, in which he evidently does not take that experience as merely his own, and, indeed, finds it continued and affirmed in the words of the artists themselves (which are then cited in the essay not as evidence in an argument but as extensions of Fried’s description). The ongoing fate of the essay suggests that the experience to which he gives voice remains recognizable by its readers, even when they imagine themselves at odds with its conclusions.

This is a difficulty we should want to understand. Fried is often taken as a Kantian, at least at this moment in his career, and so one might say that “Art and Objecthood” is an exercise in writing in the universal voice that Kant takes to be proper to aesthetic judgment. If it is that, it is interesting that by and large Fried’s opponents have evidently wanted to both embrace and reject that universality, as if confused in some deep way about the scope or terms of their own voices. But of course we don’t have to go as far as a “universal voice”, and in the case of as culturally complex and particular an object as, say, a Donald Judd piece, “universality” may well seem to go much too far in any case. It’s perhaps enough to say that we have trouble even with the much weaker claim that a voice can, in one circumstance or another, art criticism or politics, be so much as representative—to the point that it sometimes seems the only thing we can think to do with a voice that does strike us as representative is find some way to repudiate it. (Someone in the audience is, I’m sure, already working on some way to trip me in the matter of the cat—to which effort I will only be able to respond by asking why one should want to do this, and by reminding you that the burglars will be your problem). One thing this might mean is that we are often deeply unsure what we want from, or will accept as, the act of reading another.

I’ve spoken to this point as if about “Art and Objecthood” from the outside, noting its location in relation to Minimalism and to questions of modernism and post—modernism, and taking special note of the odd compact it seems to have established with its readers and most particularly with those who want to claim in response to it a ground they find available within it—description right, judgment wrong—that the essay itself everywhere refuses. Some of you, I’m sure, will have seen that we are in fact already inside the essay itself: One way to summarize its argument is to say that some readers of modernism—literalist or Minimalist readers—are shown as having claimed to find within modernism a ground that modernism itself everywhere refuses, and that can seem available only if one gets some-

thing about its fundamental shape wrong, missing the grain or grammar of its voice even while using its words. That’s what Fried means, presumably, when he writes:

Literalist sensibility is, therefore, a response to the *same* developments that have largely compelled modernist painting to undo its objecthood—more precisely, the same developments *seen differently*, that is, in theatrical terms, by a sensibility *already* theatrical, already (to say the worst) corrupted or perverted by theater. [pp. 160-61]

And so we are at last in front of the words—theater and theatricality—I’ve been asked to focus most closely on. I began by noting that although Fried opens “Art and Objecthood” by proposing “literalism” as his name for the still unsettled thing we now call Minimalism, that term itself is quickly dropped in favor of a variety of descriptive of terms. “Theatricality” is the most powerful of these, and the one that seems most nearly to encompass all the others. Fried’s use of this word has a number of peculiarities that can feel as if they border on paradox and so should perhaps be noted right away. The first is that it evidently does continue a work of description that begins with the word “literal”, while our ordinary sense of these words is likely to take them as fairly strongly opposed—“literal” pointing, more or less, to what is simply that which it is, and “theatrical” inviting thoughts of role or masquerade, gaps between reality and appearance. The second is that Fried at several points glosses “theatricality” as a “sensibility or mode of being”, and here too we are likely to feel ourselves torn: “sensibility” seeming to point toward psychology, while “mode of being” points toward what Fried will increasingly insist upon as “ontological” considerations. A good account of what the term means and does in the essay ought to leave us at peace with these ranges of the word.

In 1967 there is nothing I can see in the art world that makes the word “theatricality” particularly ripe for critical employment, let alone employment in such a distinctively negative way; it looks as if it might be used the way we use a word like “decorative”, offering a bit of description about which one might feel one way or another—a matter of, as it were, taste. There is even less to suggest it can bear the massive burden placed on it by, for example, Fried’s closing invocation of “the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theater”. When he goes on to say, “We are all literalists most or all of our lives” [p. 168], he is evidently no longer speaking simply of art or of criticism but, in fact, of our lives, and here too we have a kind of standard for what will be a satisfying account of the term. In 1967, “theatrical” mostly meant, as I think it continues to do so now, “mannered” and tended in particular to pick out that range of mannerism that tended toward exaggeration—rather than, say, the careful irony of the dandy—so that highly theatrical people might also be said to be flamboyant. There’s nothing, I think, in the essay to suggest that Fried is particularly attuned to this impetus of the word, and nothing in the work he applies it to that seems particularly to invite it. One can imagine easily enough a rather different critic

using the word of Warhol and his work—the critic would be activating the term’s possible proximity to “camp” and so also touching on certain images of a specifically gay culture—so it may be an actual feature of the word as it appears in “Art and Objecthood” that it carries no implication of this kind.³

In the years since “Art and Objecthood”, Fried has carried through a massive art historical project that argues the centrality of a dialectic or quasi-dialectic of absorption and theatricality to French painting from the eighteenth century on.⁴ Two points within that argument seem particularly important. The first is the initial claim that in eighteenth-century France the term “tableau” tied painting and theater to each other in such a way that painting could think its failures as a species of collapse into theater. The second is Fried’s presentation of the contrast between absorption and theatricality as having had roughly the force of a contrast between full participation in an activity and an excessive awareness of spectatorship that was taken to block or deform such participation. On this basis he works through the history of French painting from Chardin to Courbet as a series of repeated efforts at finding a way to a painting whose beholding would be fully participatory, punctuated by the repeated discovery that what appeared to be a realization of that collapsed into mere spectatorship after all. In Courbet, this conflict finally appears as internal to the making of painting itself, bringing that history to a crisis and producing the second major point in the narrative—Manet’s turn toward explicitly acknowledging the theatricality of painting in such a way that any continuing ambition toward mere absorptive painting will itself appear as irredeemably theatrical. When in “Art and Objecthood” Fried witheringly cites Judd’s remark that “a work needs only to be interesting”, he’s often, I think, taken to be doing so against a background of Kantian “disinterest”, and that may be right, but it’s worth also entertaining the thought that he is hearing Judd saying something roughly equivalent to “a work needs only to be absorbing” at a historical moment when absorption is theatricality’s buried form.

I’ve given only the most cursory sketch of the historical work, but enough I hope for it to be clear that it’s not going to be all that helpful in making out the meaning and force of theater and theatricality in “Art and Objecthood”, both because it is importantly a history constructed after the fact, distanced from “Art and Objecthood”’s particular moment by the whole distance between the 1860s and the 1960s, as well as between a distinctively French tradition and a much broader and more various modernism, and because that history itself will only be as compelling as our ability to work out in it essentially the same

³ It is in fact somewhat remarkable that Warhol emerges so unscathed—which is to say unmentioned—from an essay that whatever its animosity toward Minimalism clearly finds the Pop Art of Johns and Rauschenberg simply beneath contempt. Fried had, in fact, written a fairly favorable review of Warhol’s portraiture in 1962 and seems otherwise to have found him of relatively little interest one way or another.

⁴ See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), *Courbet’s Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

difficulties we are faced with in “Art and Objecthood” alone—that is, the question of what these terms really are, what makes them deep and serious. The histories Fried has written do have a lot to say about this of course and can help fill out whatever sense one does manage to make of “Art and Objecthood”. And I think there is probably more to be said, by Fried or by someone else, that will have to more deeply tie together an account of “experience” as a distinctively modern fact or mode of being and painting as a form peculiarly intimate with its emergence (I imagine this as, more or less, an account of Caravaggio, a project in which Fried has been interested).

If we come away from the history with the thought that “absorption” is a term in eclipse at the moment of “Art and Objecthood”, Fried’s current engagement with large-scale photography suggest that it has re-emerged and “theatricality” has now slipped into the shadows.⁵ But again I do not know that this offers us any particular guidance through “Art and Objecthood”. I suppose it could be taken to suggest that “theatricality”’s capacity to name a certain risk to art or to painting has become too attenuated to carry on under that name. One does not therefore imagine that the risk itself has similarly receded.

The history suggests, of course, that at least at a certain moment “theatricality” meant what it did for painting because it pointed quite specifically to theater as an art with which painting found itself in very particular relation. In “Art and Objecthood”, by contrast, the term is no longer specific to painting and has only the loosest of relations, if any at all, to existing theater; the tableau that bound the two together is no longer at issue, or no longer at issue that way. Fried does mention that the defeat of theater is as imperative within theater as elsewhere, and he cites, appropriately enough but without any further development, Brecht and Artaud. The rich network of relations between Minimalist art, dance, and performance in the sixties play no role in his account, and with the possible exception of a recent enthusiastic review of *Zidane: A Twentieth Century Portrait*, there’s nothing I’m aware of in Fried’s writings that suggests any particular interest on his part in theater or related forms.⁶

It may nonetheless be productive to ask how far and in what ways something like theater makes its particular shapes and practices palpable within the essay. For example, it may seem suddenly striking that while Fried is strongly critical of a certain anthropomorphism “at the core of literalist theory and practice”, and further specifies that anthropomorphism as involving a peculiar hiddenness (the argument is that the Minimalists imagine themselves to be free of anthropomorphism because their works do not look like people and so leave themselves blind to how far their works behave like people—this last is a point that Fried recurs to repeatedly throughout the essay), Fried connects none of this

⁵ On this, see Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, forthcoming from Yale University Press.

⁶ See Michael Fried, “Absorbed in the Action”, *Artforum*, September 2006.

with what might easily seem the central theatrical facts of role and costume. That theater—the actors' theater you might say—doesn't seem determinative for the essay (although it was very near the heart of Diderot's sense of theater as a problem). If you read the essay attuned to these drifts in it, I think you're likely to conclude that what does figure in it of the theater is something like the bare facts of stage and lighting and audience, so that what theatricality means in it must be something like what is left of theater once the drama "itself" has ceased to count or vanished altogether.

The philosopher Stanley Cavell makes an extended remark in an essay on King Lear that is perhaps of particular relevance just here. I cannot cite it in its entirety—it is the kind of extended dialogue that sometimes erupts in the place of argument in Cavell's prose—but it begins with the old story of someone in the audience who rushes onto the stage to stop the terrible thing going on there. The butt of this joke is evidently someone deeply naïve, who does not know what theater is, and the point of our telling it is presumably the satisfaction we take in knowing better than him. "But what mistake", Cavell writes, has the yokel in the theater made, and what is *our way*? He thinks someone is strangling someone.—But that is true; Othello is strangling Desdemona.—Come on, come on; you know, he thinks that very man is putting out the light of that very woman right now.—Yes, and that is exactly what is happening.—You're not amusing. The point is that he thinks something is really happening, whereas nothing is really happening. It's play acting. The woman will rise again to die another night.... The trouble is that I really do not understand what I am being asked, and of course I am suggesting that you do not know either. You tell me that the woman will rise again, but I know that she will not, that she is dead and has died and will again die, die dead, die with a lie on her lips, damned with love. You can say there are two women, Mrs. Siddons and Desdemona, both of whom are mortal but only one of whom is dying in front of our eyes. But what you have produced is two names. Not all the pointing in the world to *that* woman will distinguish the one woman from the other.⁷

In telling the story about the yokel, we evidently find a way to erect a defense against our actual experience of—and our actual interest in—Desdemona's death, ensconcing ourselves in our knowledge of the theater's conventionality while removing ourselves from a recognition of the depth of that convention, say our stake in the expressivity it both enables and demands—as if the fact of the proscenium alone were enough to establish us as audience (compare this with Fried's remark about "*an un compelling and presenceless kind of theater*" [p. 161]). Cavell is not the first to make this point; one can imagine Nietzsche easily enough having Euripides lean over and tell Socrates the same story about the yokel as they sit, uncomprehending strangers in Sophocle's audience. Euripides, knowing what a play is (knowing its conventions, knowing that it is merely conventional), will go home

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays, Updated Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 328.

and write one himself, and he will be doing, within and against his art, just what Fried sees the Minimalists doing within and against theirs, getting it wrong. "Theatricality" would be the knowledge of theater, of, say, its mere conventionality, as it blocks the acknowledgment of the human that is what in fact binds the drama to its audience, even as that audience sometimes turns from it.

Fried and Cavell have frequently acknowledged the mutual importance of their conversations throughout the 1960s, and while some attention has been given to various of Cavell's direct essays in aesthetics—most particularly, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It"—in relation to "Art and Objecthood", the full extent to which the essay is informed by central aspects of Cavell's work often goes unrecognized. In the remainder of this lecture, I want to bring these dimensions of "Art and Objecthood" more fully into view.

Cavell's remarks on Desdemona and the yokel both instance and specify his more general claims about the motives to our moments of skepticism about other minds, our moments of evasion of the other. As he puts it more broadly in a companion essay:

I am filled with this feeling—of our separateness, let us say—and I want you to have it too. So I give voice to it. And then my powerlessness presents itself as ignorance—a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack.⁸

The two essays I've cited—"Knowing and Acknowledging" and "The Avoidance of Love" are closely intertwined, argumentatively and compositionally with Cavell's major work, a revision of his dissertation belatedly published in 1979 as *The Claim of Reason*. He uses the word "theatricalize" twice in that book—once in a complex context I cannot adequately sketch in short compass and once in a rather more transparent context, as he explores the experience underlying the ongoing argument between the skeptic and his or her would-be epistemological confounder (for Cavell both these positions are properly called "skeptical"—his task to bring out their shared ontological motivation in our finitude). Cavell takes the experience fundamental to classical epistemology to sometimes present itself to me as a sense of powerlessness to know the world, or to act upon it; I think it is also working in the existentialist's (or, say, Santayana's) sense of the precariousness and arbitrariness of existence, the utter contingency in the fact that things are as they are. (Wittgenstein also shares this knowledge of the depth of contingency. His distinction in this matter is to describe it better, to live its details better. I would like to say: to remove its theatricality.)⁹

⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean what we say?*, *ibid.*, p. 263.

⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 236.

It's useful, I think, to see Cavell as close to Hegel here: "live its details better" would be a way of phrasing what Hegel puts as "determinate negation" over and against a blanker and more indeterminate skepticism's refusal of experience —what Hegel also calls its "fear of truth". Some part of Cavell's worry about the threat of skepticism as it bears on other minds is perhaps caught by thinking what would become of Hegel's account of human being were self-consciousness simply to decline the struggle for recognition, thus failing to gain any access to the world unfolded and sustained by that struggle, leaving its claim to self-shapedness untested or unproven and its unriskened self peculiarly both secure and unattained. What brings Cavell and Hegel together here is their shared insistence on the priority of experience over knowledge and so on the importance of actively having one's experience—hazarding it to expression, to externality and articulation—rather than imagining it as simply possessable in privacy and ineffability. In this light, one central node in the argument of "Art and Objecthood" is the section in which Fried reads Tony Smith's account of his evidently formative drive on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. After quoting Smith at length, Fried writes:

There was, [Smith] seems to have felt, no way to "frame" his experience on the road, no way to make sense of it in terms of art, to make art of it, at least as art then was. Rather, "you just have to experience it" —as it happens, as it merely is. (The experience alone is what matters.) There is no suggestion that this is problematic in any way... the question of whether or not one has really had it does not arise. [p. 158]

Smith's art just is —as fully on Smith's account as on Fried's recounting of it— the monumentalization of that not making sense, withholding the experience it nonetheless also claims. Smith, writing his account, surely felt that words failed his experience; Fried sees that Smith fails his own words, thus depriving himself and his work of the experience that informs it. In saying that Fried "sees" this, I mean that it takes this to be fully legible in Smith's own writing of it, a matter, perhaps not so simply, of reading or hearing those words and their peculiar hollowness.¹⁰

"Hollowness" is an important word in the essay —a key descriptive term, that like all such terms in it, is grounded in Fried's experience of the work in question and does not represent an empirical finding of some sort. In English, "hollow" is etymologically related to "hole", and covers much of the same terrain as words like "empty" or "vacant", but is

¹⁰ The argument between Smith and Fried is then in no small part about experience, its imagined privacy (Smith) and its obligations to expression (Fried). In this context it is worth noticing how Cavell links up certain aspects of the skeptical experience, beginning from a sense that the way we see things in the world as "almost accidental, anyway at least as dependent on our constitution as on the constitution of the world itself; or that the things of the world would seem just as they now do to us if there were nothing in it but some power large enough either to keep us in a sort of hypnotic spell, or to arrange the world for our actions as a kind of endless stage —set, whose workings we can never get behind" and ending by saying that "when the experience created by such thoughts is there it is something that presents itself to me as one, as I have wished to express it, of being sealed off from the world, enclosed within my own endless succession of experiences". [*The Claim of Reason*, pp. 143-44].

also strongly inflected by a distinct sense of "interiority" —a shelf can be empty or vacant but not hollow (or if it is, it is because our attention has shifted from what the shelf holds or does not hold to its actual material form— a shelf can be hollow the way a door can be hollow, that is, not solid) —and it is also, I think, inflected by a sense of madeness— what is hollow has in some way been hollowed out, its emptiness not a given but a consequence of some action. Hollowness has a distinct relation to sound; emptiness and vacancy have as it were no particular sounds of their own, but hollowness is a particular quality of sound —the *Oxford English Dictionary* usefully suggests "wanting body; not full-toned; 'sepulchral'".¹¹

Fried's sensitivity to hollowness as an essential dimension of the Minimalist object belongs to a larger network of recognitions that are clearly active throughout "Art and Objecthood". The object set before us and claiming to be there as a "specific object" Fried sees as all too clearly a variation on what Cavell describes as a "generic object" and understands as a crucial relay within the standard epistemological or skeptical performance.¹² The "generic object" is defined in its employment by its lack of features, and so is not arguable in the way we can argue over our recognition of fully —featured objects (as we can, for example, argue over whether or not this bird is a robin or a blue jay). If specific objects, in Cavell's sense, are distinguishable through their close contrast with other specific objects, generic objects merely substitute for one another without establishing any other contrasts. (One might note here that Duchamp's *Fountain* is unique among the readymades in its appearing or being received as a generic object, discounting its own features in favor of the frame or proscenium in which it then appears as an infinitely substitutable content devoid of interest.) Placing such a generic object before you, the skeptic draws you into the argument by saying something like, "See this —this lump of wax, or this sheet of paper, or this tomato, this nothing in particular— that I'm holding up for you?" and then goes on to draw out from you the various ways in which you are in fact not really seeing it, not seeing all of it, and so on.

Of particular interest in the context of "Art and Objecthood" is one of the several places where Cavell explores in detail the workings of the generic object within what he calls "the skeptical recital". With the skeptic holding his tomato —or his cube— up before us, we agree that we do not see all of it, that there is a part we do not see. The question Cavell asks is exactly what part it is that we do not see. If you are asked whether a particular bird is a robin or something else, you may feel you cannot answer the question because there is some crucial part of the bird you cannot see —specific objects have distinct parts, and so you perhaps cannot see the robin's red breast or his tail or whatever. Generic objects do not,

¹¹ When Fried writes early in the essay that literalism is "ideological", it's perhaps useful to recall Althusser's remark, relatively away from the explicit theory of interpellation, that ideology is just what rings hollow.

¹² The generic object is at the heart of Cavell's characterization of "the quest of traditional epistemology" in Part Two of *The Claim of Reason*.

in themselves or in their presentation, have such parts. What you cannot see is something like the object's other side, or its back half —terms that have no actual purchase on the object but depend wholly on your location in relation to it:

The moment we move, the “parts” disappear, or else we *see* what had before been hidden from view —from any other position than one perpendicular to that great circle, *that* “back half” which alone it establishes *can be seen*: to establish a *different* “back half”, a new act of diagramming will be required a new position taken, etc.¹³

And conversely, “apart from the *specific* establishing or re-establishing of some ‘part’ of the object which we do not see by a specific conducting of the philosopher’s investigation (a new rooting of our position, a new concentration to fix the great circle) there is nothing —no *thing*— we do not see...”. In this light Fried’s term “objecthood” appears to pick out the particular qualities of an object defined solely through its lack or refusal of consequential parts or features, a refusal that we may well see as continuous with the central Minimalist refusal of “composition”. (It’s tempting then to say that “objecthood” is precisely the “no thing” that we do not see, thus not a synonym for “object” but something more like its opposite.)

I won’t try to pursue in further detail how closely Fried’s account of the experience of Minimalist work coincides with Cavell’s exploration of the role of the generic object in the skeptical recital —these details would, in any case, include not only the remarks about, say, parts and shape, or about the importance of situation and the beholder’s necessary inclusion within it, or the essential objectlessness of the experience— but I do want to underline the rather more complex thought, which again has its very strong analogue in Fried, that the viewer’s position is one in which his or her response is uneasily balanced between something more or less natural and something touched with coercion or extortion: You cannot but agree under the circumstance that there is something you cannot see, and yet you cannot also help feeling that the position in which you find yourself obliged to say this is already false, already not a position in which your words can mean as they ordinarily do.

Seeing this may help with seeing how deeply terms like “subject” and “object” are at stake both in Fried’s essay and in the work, good and bad, that it addresses. Fried clearly takes it that there is a significant sense in which a work of art is not an object, and a footnote suggests that he is interested in the possible Kantianism of this, but this does not lead him to want to imagine the work of art as therefore a subject of some kind. In particular, he is extremely critical of the way in which Minimalist objecthood evidently entails also its appearing as a kind of surrogate person, and more particularly the kind of person by whom one finds one’s self at once distanced and crowded. The analogy here is worth some imaginative dwelling

¹³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, op. cit., p. 202.

on: Another person who both crowds and distances us in this way is one whose behavior strikes us as at once intentional and opaque, informed by all those subtle codes that govern how we physically stand with one another and at the same time willfully blind to them, capable of articulation and nonetheless mute, out of sync with his or her speaking. These are situations that when they arise strike us as deeply awkward and vaguely —sometimes more than vaguely— threatening. One way to say what is worrisome in them would be to say that such persons seem to be demanding of us that we should decide about an intention and even a humanity in them that they either withhold or will not themselves decide.

This suggests that Fried thinks of a work of art as something that can play a deep role in relation to our sense of both subjects and objects, and this may indeed be what is mostly fully “Kantian” in him. One would be emphasizing in Kant not the celebrated moments of disinterest, universality, necessary pleasure, or purposiveness without a purpose, but the larger stakes borne by aesthetic judgment —stakes that are perhaps well— described as “orientational”. That is, while aesthetic judgments —judgments of the beautiful or the sublime— have no propositional content whatsoever, they do something important in showing how our capacities for such judgments, both cognitive and moral, hold together in us or are discoverable by us; they show something of what it is to find ourselves in a world and so also what it is that there is, for us, a world. Minimalist objects leave us, in this sense, disoriented and worldless, leading us to misapprehend ourselves —to mistake our freedoms, our necessities, our capacities for sense.

It follows that it must be right to say that Minimalism is the consequence of a certain deep failure to understand what a work of art is. The story one might tell —far too blunt for Fried’s saying— would be about how Smith or Judd or Morris would have moved through the museum only ever seeing on the wall so many objects that had, as it were, meanings behind them, and seeing that —seeing that they cannot see all of the painting, cannot see the invisible other side where its meaning is— went on to make things like that, never realizing that their actual starting point assumed that the things on the wall were in fact of no interest whatsoever, were at best peculiar (“merely conventional”, they might say) impositions on something not directly available. For such a sensibility, the history of modernism is the progressive stripping away of those impositions in the name of something confusedly understood to be both permanently beyond them and yet inaccessible apart from them. The “behind” which is where those meanings are “in” the paintings becomes the interior void that for all practical purposes is the Minimalist work realized under the only conditions it can imagine —that of a meaning determined in advance as inaccessible because wholly broken away from grammar. Here again Cavell:

I have related the initiating experience of the [skeptical or epistemological] philosopher, and his ensuing progress, to Wittgenstein’s notion of “speaking outside language games”... suggesting that what happens to the philosopher’s concepts is that they are deprived of

their ordinary criteria of employment (which does not mean that his words are deprived of meaning—one could say that such words have nothing *but* their meanings) and, collecting no new ones, leave his concepts without relation to the world (which does not mean that what he says is false), or, in terms I used earlier, remove them from their position among our system of concepts.¹⁴

This may help see how very close Fried's notion of medium is to Cavell's understanding of language games, and this can, perhaps, return us to something close to the ordinary English of "theatricality". We will often enough call "theatrical" someone who regularly presents his or her pains and pleasures, self and meanings, as without precedent or measure, unspeakable, thus closed to us, and who nonetheless insists on our attention and our understanding. That may help us make some peace with that word as it figures in "Art and Objecthood". But of course what I really hope I've done is bring out how far Fried's argument is from any blind allegiance to aesthetic formalism and purity: it is, finally, an argument about the kinds of beings we are and about the intertwining of our ability to acknowledge others with our capacity for expression, and thus also about our deep—ontological, Fried would say—obligation to experience.

As I indicated at the outset, I've spent a lot of years now with "Art and Objecthood". Sometimes I think the writing of it must have been like the laying of a parquet floor, and so I imagine the writer's satisfaction in the way each precisely cut sentence slotted in just as it should; at other times I find myself thinking of it as piece of writing almost wholly out of control, and so find myself imagining Fried himself, but now as reader, still puzzling over it, still trying to fully understand it. I hope I've managed to give at least enough sense of its argument and the place of theatricality in it, that you feel able to go on with it. "Going on with it"—continuing in its reading—will, of course, not relieve you of that other question you cannot but have: Is Fried right—about theatricality, about Minimalism, about modernism?

Do I think Fried is right? The question is perhaps not entirely clear, but I'm willing enough to say, Yes—by which I suppose I would mean that there is nothing much more to be said about Minimalism. But of course my position, like yours, is irredeemably post-Minimal, and in saying Yes to "Art and Objecthood", I do not mean to be saying No to Robert Smithson. There is no simple end—no end at all—to the work and play of finding and losing our experience—experience does not stop betraying itself. What made Robert Smithson the most acute of Fried's early critics was that he saw that neither Fried nor "Art and Objecthood" could exempt themselves from the condition they also diagnosed: That experience does not stop betraying itself means that modernism's skeptical, theatrical other can be neither simply embraced nor equally simply relegated to its outside. In speaking and in reading, as in making work, one takes one's chances.

¹⁴ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, *ibid.*, p. 226.

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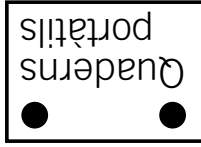
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In 2007, Stephen Melville was invited to give a lecture on Michael Fried's seminal essay "Art and Objectivity" at MACBA in the context of the course *Art, Theater and its Double*.

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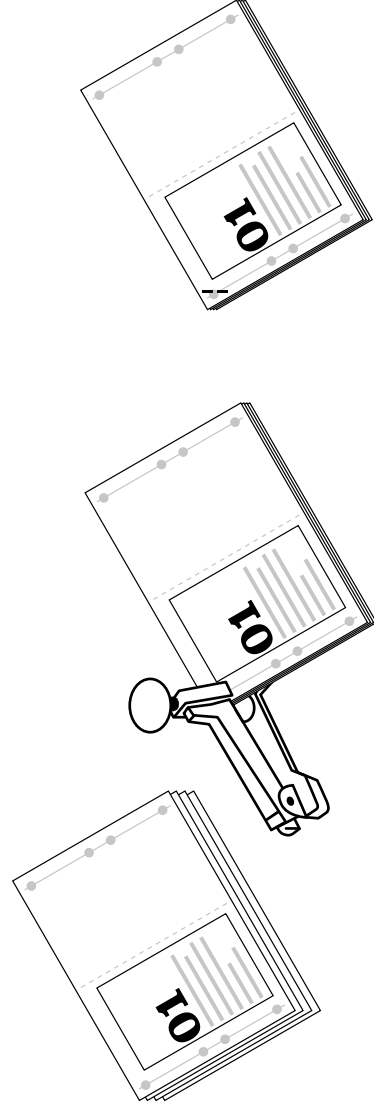


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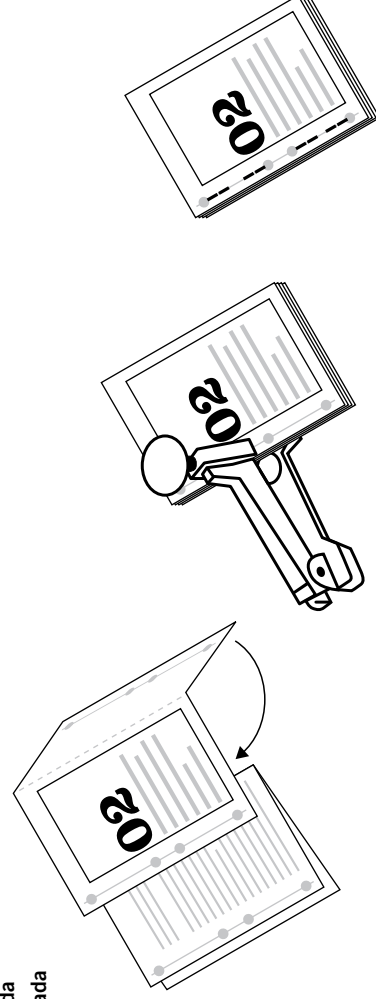
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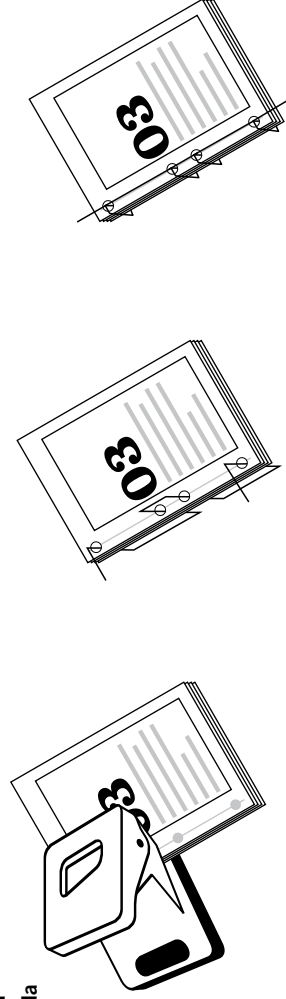
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