***Michael Fried and Philosophy: Modernism, Intention, and Theatricality*. Ed. Mathew Abbott. New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2018. Pp. 267 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Emer O'Beirne, University College Dublin

Art critic, art historian, literary critic, poet… The intellectual trajectory of Michael Fried's work since the 1960s is as varied as it is committed to evolving a set of ideas that made their first appearance in some of his earliest writing. These ideas focus on the artwork's relation to the act of beholding it, and this relation's centrality to what defines modernity has remained at the core of Fried's thought up to and including his recent engagement with photography.

Mathew Abbott's edited collection on Fried and philosophy comes in the wake of the fiftieth anniversary of "Art and Objecthood," Fried's famous 1967 *Artforum* essay. (Nonsite.org devoted a pair of issues to the same anniversary in 2017, to which two of the authors in this volume, Stephen Melville and Walter Benn Michaels, also contributed.)[1] "Art and Objecthood" laid out Fried's critique of what he termed the literalist tendency in contemporary minimalist art, the displacement of the idioms of abstract expressionism (Anthony Caro, Kenneth Noland, David Smith, Frank Stella) by artists like Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris, and others.

The fifteen essays in this volume, exploring the philosophical underpinnings of Fried's evolving thought and including a closing piece by Fried himself, all have much to offer the reader. Students of Fried will not be surprised that the analytical tradition predominates: there is ample rich discussion of the roles of Kant and Hegel and, in the twentieth century, Wittgenstein and Cavell in his work. There is, unsurprisingly, very much less in the way of recent continental phenomenology, although Fried's links to Merleau-Ponty and (more tenuously) Rancière are explored. For those new to Fried's work, Abbott's introduction provides a useful road map to those key concepts in his aesthetic theory on which contributors will focus—theatricality, absorption, intentionality, medium—and flags the significant implications of his recent deployment of these concepts in respect of photography. Yet one of the most succinct

[1] See https://nonsite.org/issues/issue-21-art-and-objecthood-at-fifty and https://nonsite.-org/issues/issue-22-art-and-objecthood-at-fifty.

articulations of Fried's thinking on modernism both in the sixties and today will be provided not by the language of criticism or philosophy but in the striking metaphors of his own poetry (not least the severed leg of a hare).

Fried's 1967 essay used the term "literalist" to describe work that projects its own material objecthood, as opposed to exploring shape in medium-specific but non-literal terms. It saw such work as "theatrical," dependent on its own and its beholder's situation, asking of him or her nothing but a sense of its experience. One of this volume's more unexpected connections is offered by David Wellbery, who draws a parallel between Fried's attack on minimalism's theatricality and Nietzsche's late nineteenth-century excoriation of Richard Wagner's "theatocracy."[2] In Wellbery's exposition, the works of Donald Judd and of Wagner stand as minimalist and maximalist expressions of the same failure of the artwork to be "answerable" (Fried's term) to the inherited achievements of past art.

The response the theatrical work seeks is not absorption in the world depicted but a sceptical, passive stance toward the surrounding world. Paul Gudel explores echoes of Stanley Cavell's Wittgensteinian critique of material-object scepticism in this aspect of Fried's criticism. Yet he also sees elements of the Kantian sublime in the denial of specific purpose to the attention that, as Fried sees it, we are asked to bring to literalist objects that make no demands and to which we react without responding. Fried's Kantian antecedents are teased out in more detail by Richard Moran, on the basis of his 2001 lecture on Roger Fry. Moran reminds us that formalism is a utopian ideal. (Fried himself talked in 1967 of the "supreme fiction" of painting's unawareness of its beholder.) That art exists to be beheld is an internal necessity, threatening the idea(l) of aesthetic autonomy itself. Within the past decade, Fried's studies of Thomas Demand, Joseph Marioni, and Charles Ray illustrate, as Rex Butler shows, that the line between intentionality and theatricality is not as clear as one might think (hence, of course, modernism's constant mission to overcome the latter). Rather than a linear transition or historical progression from absorption to theatricality,

[2] Mathew Abbott, ed., *Michael Fried and Philosophy: Modernism, Intention, and Theatricality* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 83. Subsequent references cited parenthetically.

depiction to literality, intention to materiality, these inseparable opposites do battle again and again in the works that interest Fried, each implying the other. Butler sees in these artists' ongoing negotiations with materiality not only Cavell's influence (in the idea that to remark scepticism is already to overcome it) but also that of J. L. Austin.

Fried's insight that the evolving self-understanding of art emerges from a context of competing pressures (such as the tension between opticality and literalism in Frank Stella) is a dialectical one. Stephen Melville's essay shows Hegel's usefulness in thinking about medium, as Fried does after Cavell, namely as an individual art's search for shape, making itself out of its limitations, a self-invented, self-critical, historical form. Melville's discussion focuses not on Fried's writings on high modernism but on his recent work on Caravaggio and the emergence of painting as a medium independent of architecture. The life of art theories too can be understood in dialectical terms, as Wellbery notes (and more broadly again, Melville sees philosophy and the humanities as coming, like art, to modern consciousness of their relative status). Wellbery illustrates the point by tracing connections between Schiller and Diderot and between Schopenhauer and Courbet.

How Fried's own thought sits in the context of two major approaches to art theory, those of Morris Weitz and George Dickie, is the subject of Mathew Abbott's opening essay, well-pitched and well-placed to lay the ground for the papers to follow. For Abbott, the major contribution of "Art and Objecthood" is Fried's emphasis on the mutual imbrication of evaluation (Weitz) and classification (Dickie, after Danto) and his identification of this entanglement as crucial to the modernist condition. Fried sees the question of what art is as posed on the terrain of practice and addressed, in modernism, in medium-specific and dialectical terms by an artist in constant dialogue with and answerable to recent precursors. Literalism, stepping outside the conventional context to pose, but not answer, the question of art in general, recalls, for Abbott, the attempts of analytic aestheticians like Weisz and Dickie to separate definition from evaluation. In a specific conventional space with its particular evaluative processes, the modernist artist commits to "going on in the face of" art's ungroundedness, while the (postmodern) literalist is content merely to reveal it (30).

The question of how this "going on" relates to the work created, specifically, what it means for Fried to talk about intentionality, recurs through the collection. Fried's 1970 essay on Morris Louis is central here and Walter Benn Michaels shows how, in Fried's analysis, Louis's work, particularly the "unfurled" series, not only problematises the difference between viewing an object and beholding a painting but also, by keeping the bodily gesture of drawing out of the work, separates the artistic act of meaning from that of drawing. Louis's last "stripes" series, Michaels reminds us, offered Fried a model of intention and meaning located not in a causative moment external or prior to the work (the straw-man conception knocked down by the New Critics) but in the very act of marking, the abstractness of action. Given the nature of Louis's works, particularly the role of colour and how it might inflect one's reading of their impersonal intentionality, this is an essay where colour plates would have been welcome. (There are fifteen black-and-white reproductions in the volume. Tellingly, Louis's copyright-holders insist on colour reproduction, such is its importance to the work.)

Fried of course lost his 1960s critical battle and postmodern minimalism displaced modernism. Yet that is not the whole story, and his surprising identification of a revival and evolution of modernist concerns in contemporary photography is examined by a number of contributors. Before Fried comes to photography, though, he acquires from art history, in the first instance from Diderot's reflections on the work of Chardin, Greuze, and others, a dialectical counterpoint to the idea of theatricality in the effect of "absorption" produced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting as it attempted to deny the presence of beholders by representing, and so inviting, moments of inwardness. Andrea Kern shows how Fried attempts to resolve (unsuccessfully, she argues) a tension in Diderot's discussion of viewer response to dramatic and pastoral painting, modes which seem to call for opposing responses of negation and involvement. For her, this ultimately impossible, contradictory imperative both to enter the painting and to disappear into it sums up our "necessary failure to live up to the challenge with which art presents us" (224). Ultimately, absorption-inducing strategies become empty contrivances, bringing forth the age of modernism in Manet's simultaneous acknowledgement and interrogation (distancing the viewer) of the fact that a painting is a work made to be beheld.

The most recent phase in Fried's critical itinerary may be less familiar to those who encountered him in the last third of the twentieth century either as theorist of modernism or as scourge of minimalism. Over the past decade or so, he has been exploring how contemporary photography addresses the issue of beholding and offers a form of anti-theatricality. Photographers working in the wake of Bernd and Hilla Becher—Rineke Dijkstra, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, or Thomas Struth—appear as heirs to the problematic that ushered in and in large part defined modernism for him. One photograph discussed here by Magdalena Ostas, Thomas Struth's *Art Institute of Chicago II* (1990), includes an implicit but forceful reflection on its own medium, although Ostas concentrates on Fried's analysis of what it depicts: women looking at Caillebotte's *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie* (1877) and kept at a distance from the painting by a museum rope. Ostas shows how, for Fried, the image (which she contrasts with another representation of a woman looking, viewed from behind, Caspar David Friedrich's *Frau am Fenster* [1822]) illustrates the status of the modern artwork (the Caillebotte) as dependent on soliciting from the post-Kantian viewer captured within Struth's photograph a certain sense of absence, indeed exclusion from its world. By implication, Struth's photograph does something similar to its own viewers, though this aspect is not addressed directly in the essay.

How does Fried's conceptual toolkit—beholding, absorption, intentionality, literalism, objecthood, theatricality—make the transition from painting to photography, given the intrinsic role of medium in the development of the definition of modernist art those terms articulate? In answering that question, Stephen Mulhall starts from the closing chapter on the Bechers in *Why Photography Matters as Art More than Ever Before* (2009). The Bechers' typological approach figures a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" among the generation of photographers they influenced and who also extend their lessons into new, digital photographic technologies. These developments enabled large-scale, framed, and wall-hung photographs, bringing the question of beholding and so of theatricality into photography. Mulhall calls on Wittgenstein again in his account of how these terms "project" from painting into the analogical realm of photography and how they are inflected by that new context of application, inflecting in turn our understanding of the original objects to which they applied (modernist paintings). In perhaps the most significant moment in the dialectical

evolution of his own thinking, Fried has flagged how contemporary photography reconfigured artistic practice in ways "Art and Objecthood" couldn't foresee. Modernism, it turns out, far from being in its death throes in the 1960s, had been incubating this latest form of visual practice and Fried's own critical practice has developed accordingly. (Mulhall speaks of its "revisionary reconstitution" [101].) Fried's poetry too, as Jennifer Ashton shows, has developed over the decades to integrate into its own formal whole (and thereby overcome) a sense of loss or severing (the severed hare leg mentioned earlier). Fried's poetic writing has its own dialogue with photography—he has collaborated with James Welling, a project Ashton compares to the collaboration of Thomas Demand and poet Ben Lerner, although in the latter project, formal wholeness is never quite in reach.

Photography's weak intentionality and susceptibility to the contingent have been considered constitutive by a range of aesthetic theorists from Berger to Barthes. How, then, can it properly fulfil the artwork's remit to be meaningful? A fine essay by Robert Pippin studies how Fried's ideas on intentionality make the transition from painting into photography. The inscrutability of Thomas Demand's images, produced by the anti-theatrical process of negating human detail in cardboard reproductions of scenes, communicates not any particular intention but "intendedness as such", the idea, as Pippin phrases it, of "the bearing of meaning by a sensible object" (55-6). Thus, for Fried, photography acquires the status of art object in a way distinctive for its technical medium, so susceptible to accidental detail. In direct opposition to work like that of Morris Louis, it is in the making-absent of the marks of making that intentionality is embodied in the photograph, a durational intentionality that develops in the course of the image's creation. (Pippin's essay follows Walter Benn Michaels's on Louis; the sequencing of discussions in the volume is well thought out.)

The way unintended photographic detail has been valorised (positively by Barthes, negatively by Scruton, but always within a fundamentally mechanistic view of the medium) is discussed by Diarmuid Costello. He takes issue with Fried's attempt to ascribe anti-theatricality to the Barthesian "punctum," the detail whose effect on the viewer is unintended and unpredictable, arguing the incompatibility of that position with Fried's analysis of the negation of detail in Demand's work as also anti-theatrical. In fact, Costello claims plenty of scope

for agency in the photographic process, whether analogue or digital, from conception through to printing, without recourse to Demand's staging of laborious reconstruction.

Perhaps unexpectedly, photography also draws Fried's attention back across the centuries to the prehistory of modernism. In the last decade he has written important works on Caravaggio as the inventor of absorption in paintings that simultaneously thematize—without modern or postmodern scepticism—the work's address to the viewer, initiating an age of galleries and collectors, one that, centuries later, will embrace "for-the-wall" photography. Mulhall traces suggestive lines from Caravaggio's severed heads to the "severed beholder" of photographers like Gursky (hence, no doubt, the poetic metaphor of severing) and also from the devotional context out of which Caravaggio's art established itself to Fried's notorious evocation of "presentness as grace" at the end of "Art and Objecthood". That idea of intermittent moments of something like spiritual experience (Andrea Kern, too, speaks, after Fried, of the "spirit" of the work [211]) is an element of Fried's thought that, in Knox Peden's words, evades "dialectical recapture" (191). Peden swims against the Hegelian-Wittgensteinian tide here, looking to Merleau-Ponty for a way to think about the event of meaning, an avenue that opens up connections between Fried and Deleuze but especially Rancière, with whose positioning of equality and reversibility as values in modernist aesthetics he seeks somewhat daringly to associate Friedian "grace". (This unexpected link between Fried and Rancière is also, for Peden, a way of defending Rancière's work on Walker Evans from Walter Benn Michaels's critique of it.)

Fried's own, closing contribution to the volume testifies to his ongoing commitment both to placing modernism within a historical dialectic and to acknowledging a dimension of aesthetic engagement that could be called spiritual. Reading Kierkegaard's pseudonymous *Repetitions* (1843), Fried gleans echoes of Diderot's thinking on absorption (here located not in a performance but in the audience) as well as, in the reflections of its fictional author, Constantin Constantius, on persuasiveness, fleeting premises of a modernist frame of mind. Fried's reading shows the escape from finitude that Kierkegaard (via Constantius) first associates with a vicarious experience of aesthetic absorption as ultimately having to do with mortality and so belonging to the

highest of Kierkegaard's spheres of experience, the religious (aesthetic experience being the lowest, below ethics). Kierkegaard's famous "leap of faith" was into the sphere of religious experience. For Fried (as for Proust), the experience of "presentness" in the aesthetic domain is sufficiently sacred.

While this collection is not really pitched at an introductory level, the dialogue that its contributors stage between his work and those philosophers important to it throws into relief fundamental questions around meaning, intention, value, and aesthetic response that run through Fried's writing. In his Introduction, Abbott asks:

> How is it that the relationship between artwork and beholder keeps appearing as a fundamental problem in different historical moments? Are these historical inflections of a single (properly ontological) problematic? Or is the very nature of that problematic historically determined in some more fundamental way? (10)

It is not in the nature of these questions, to which the tenacious consistency of Fried's thinking gives rise, to be definitively answered one way or the other. History can no more put ontology to bed than the converse. Their value is in the reflection and dialogue among thinkers which they invite and of which this collection gives a rich sample. That reflection and dialogue are anchored by an apparently simple event whose depth and implications it has been Michael Fried's great contribution to illuminate, weaving a thread of continuity through western art history since the Renaissance: the act of looking at a work of art.