

## **'A Supreme Fiction': Michael Fried and Art Criticism**

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#### **Abstract**

One of the striking aspects of the trenchant legacy of Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' is its status as a piece of art criticism. Widely perceived as difficult and personal, philosophical and explicatory, *doxa* or sermon, the essay stands out. To explore its singularity, my article compares Fried's conception of the period criticism of eighteenth-century French painting in his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980) and the method of criticism enacted in 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) which he saw as connected. The author pursues this and other crossings between Fried's art historical writings and art criticism, tracking it to an extended endnote in Fried's *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (2002). 'Art and Objecthood' is a key essay in this story aimed at Fried's thinking about criticism, its history, theory and practice. Doing this matters because it puts the critic in a particular relation to art and to Fried's idea of an 'ontologically prior relationship between painting and beholder'.

#### **Keywords**

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First touch me, astonish me, tear me apart; startle me, make me cry, shudder, arouse my indignation; you will please my eyes afterward, if you can. (Denis Diderot, *Essais*, p. 714, as quoted in Fried, 1980, pp.79-80)

When I wrote 'Art and Objecthood' and related essays I was a Diderotian critic without knowing it. (Michael Fried, 1998 p. 2)

Here's what I will not do in this article: I won't go into the debate between Minimalism and Modernist painting that was at the heart of 'Art and Objecthood' (there are other articles and essays that do this, most recently and comprehensively Meyers, 2012[2000]). I won't become a critic of Michael Fried, either, nor of his singular approach to art. What this article does do is consider the relationship between 'Art and Objecthood' and Fried's art historical writings, but as any avid reader of Fried will know he has sketched out this relationship many times himself. There is thus no discovery in making this comparison, but there are interesting things to work out through it because it is far from every day that one sees such crossings between historical and contemporary frames in art historical or art critical writing. Setting out the relationship may help draw out a different understanding of 'Art and Objecthood' and it may help in a discussion about art criticism and its positioning in relation to art. Fried's recurrent reflection on 'Art and Objecthood' from the time it was published until the present day means we can look at several mutating criteria for criticism. Rather than being vexed by Fried's tenacity in tending to it, or - as some have - seeing the ideas Fried sets out in 'Art and Objecthood' as fixed and unchanging (Ross 2012[2000]: 177

describes some who do this), I'm treating this as an opportunity to consider a critic explaining himself, and in odd contexts such as an endnote, as I'll describe at the end of the article.

In his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Fried (1980) defines the project of modernist painting as depending upon 'an ontologically prior relationship, at once literal and fictive, *between painting and beholder*'. (p. 76, emphasis in the original). A 'supreme fiction' identified by Diderot was that paintings nonetheless pretended that the beholder does not exist. This paradox shapes Fried's own project to define a purpose for art (he recently referred to it as a 'primordial convention', [Fried, 2011: 12] along with the idea that art (and criticism) are in constant renewal. While Fried sees these issues as ontological - having to do with expression and acknowledgment - and fundamental to how art is understood and made, I'm interested how they relate to other claims made on behalf of criticism.

### **A and O and A and T**

Despite the wide gap in their publication dates 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) and the book *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980) can be productively paired up. What Fried means by 'theatricality' in 'Art and Objecthood' is aided considerably by how he explains it in *Absorption and Theatricality* and in this way the book functions as a long addendum to the essay. Fried references 'Art and Objecthood' directly in the book's introduction, making an argument about the project of modernism that spanned the two historical periods. And, perhaps closest to the point of this article, is that Fried's concern in *Absorption and Theatricality* with art criticism draws from his own experience as a critic. The permeability between historical and contemporary frames, and the license Fried takes in cross-referencing them, makes his art historical work unconventional. It also accounts for some

aspect of Fried's claim that 'When I wrote "Art and Objecthood" and related essays I was a Diderotian critic without knowing it' (Fried, 1998: 2). This I'll explore later on.

Fried explains that his interests in contemporary art and art history began around the same time, while in university in the late 1950s. He sketches this out in a biographical section of his book *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, and identifies a certain tension between the two from the beginning (Fried, 1998: 3-5). As things developed over the next decade his work was inflected by the patterns of two different worlds: monthly magazine publishing versus academia, one needing quick turnarounds and brevity the other extended periods of reading and research and longer forms of writing. Fried relates that at the time of writing 'Art and Objecthood' he was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts doing his doctoral work on nineteenth-century French painting and taking trips to New York City one weekend a month to write reviews for *Art International* and longer essays for *Artforum*. These were two not very compatible worlds: one comprised research, teaching and the occasional curating of museum exhibitions, the other involved being in the fold of a world of artists and critics in a very busy and increasingly influential global art capital (pp. 8-10). But the links between 'Art and Objecthood' and *Absorption and Theatricality* are several: they map a concern with 'unity' shared between eighteenth-century critics like Diderot and twentieth-century artists (or artist-critics) like Donald Judd and Robert Morris. There is the interest Fried holds in 'experience' which he certainly developed reading Diderot. There is the interplay between experiencing art and experiencing nature that Fried identifies in Diderot's criticism and forms a central point of argument in 'Art and Objecthood' (Fried, 1980: 87). Both also propose an opposition between the *tableau* (or portable painting) and art dependent on a larger context. In *Absorption and Theatricality* Fried describes art that is "environmental," architecture-dependent, often episodic or allegorical' which - because of its scale or other distracting factors - could not be experienced all at once, in a single moment and instantaneously (p. 91). (The echo in 'Art and Objecthood' is unmistakable:

‘Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work’ Fried, 1998[1967]: 153.) Fried continues in *Absorption and Theatricality* by claiming this to be a formative issue for modernity, whether in 1780 or 1970. He writes, ‘the articulation of that emphasis [the offering in non-environmental art] marks an epoch in the prehistory of modern painting (or perhaps I should say modern pictorial thought)’ (Fried, 1980: 89). He writes, ‘for Diderot pictorial unity was a kind of microcosm of the causal system of nature, of the universe itself; and conversely the unity of nature, apprehended by man, was, like that of painting, at bottom dramatic and expressive’ (p. 87). We can add there are strong connections between what Fried maintains is important for modernist painting in the 1960s and the way certain paintings of the eighteenth century were valued for ‘holding’ the viewer: ‘[Diderot] demanded persuasion not demonstration, determinism not logic’ (p.86). As the central concern of the book and its aim to characterise eighteenth-century painting, it’s also clear this had a bearing on Fried’s ideas about art that was contemporary to him, and moreover how to approach being a critic himself.

Because *antitheatricality* emerges later as a key term for Fried, I’ll pause briefly on *theatre*, one of the contentious ideas in ‘Art and Objecthood’ that is better explained in *Absorption and Theatricality*. (I won’t go into the accuracy of Fried’s account of theatre - readers of this journal can read Phoebe von Held’s and Daniel Rubinstein’s articles.) In *Absorption and Theatricality* theatre is explicitly linked to Diderot’s critical writings on both visual and dramatic arts and their development in the eighteenth century. Indeed, this is Fried’s point: the links Diderot makes across the two forms is the foundation of his formulation of a new kind of viewer for art. Diderot uses the term negatively, Fried tells us, to describe ‘mannerist’ paintings that appeal too obviously to the viewer through overt gestures or expression. Fried explains, quoting Diderot:

In that event the painting would no longer be 'une rue, une place publique, un temple' (a street, a public square, a temple); it would become 'un theater' (a theater), that is an artificial construction in which persuasiveness was sacrificed and dramatic illusion vitiated in the attempt to impress the beholder and solicit his applause. (p. 100)

Fried introduces the term theatre into 'Art and Objecthood' several pages after he's developed a distinction between 'pictorial art' and 'objecthood', the latter being 'the condition of non-art' (Fried, 1998[1967]: 152). Theatre, according to Fried in 'Art and Objecthood' is 'now the negation of art' (p. 153). In a passage on Morris, Fried writes:

The theatricality of Morris's notion of the 'nonpersonal or public mode' seems obvious: the largeness of the piece [of large-scale 60s sculpture], in conjunction with its nonrelational, unitary character, *distances* the beholder - not just physically but psychically. It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that makes the beholder a subject and the piece in question . . . an object. But it does not follow that the larger the piece, the more securely its 'public' character is established. (p. 154, emphasis in the original)

This is considerably clarified if one understands that he is writing about Diderot's interest in 'a more convincing representation of action than any provided by the theater of his time' (Fried, 1980: 77). Diderot argued against contrivance and artifice, against deliberate nods to the viewer. This is the basis on which Fried builds his main point in *Absorption and Theatricality*: that the value being cultivated for painting and theatre by Diderot and other critics at the time was that the viewer (or audience; Fried's preferred term is beholder) not be acknowledged by the artist. It doesn't stop here, however. What was at stake for Diderot (and, we presume, for Fried) is that such interest in the beholder 'getting it all at once' reflects a call for a more open accessibility. Fried (1980: 90) writes: 'radical intelligibility was a major theme of anti-Rococo criticism and theory'. This is a surprising basis for Fried's critique of Minimalism's 'obdurate presence' because on the face of it at least it would be a value shared by the artists associated with Minimalism.

**Cambridge to New York**

There is another instance of 'crossing' worth thinking about: the publication in a special issue of *Artforum* in March 1969 of Fried's Ph.D. dissertation, 'Manet's Sources: Aspects of His Art, 1859-1865'. It's of passing interest that this came about as a result of his close friendship with *Artforum's* editor Philip Leider (Fried assigns the idea entirely to Leider in a note at the end of the piece). More significant is how rare a thing it is that academic research appears wholecloth in a magazine of contemporary art, and here it was an text of more than 30,000 words with extensive endnotes and quotations in the original French. The ensuing controversy - and there was one - included attacks on Fried's 'formalism' and rivalry amongst writers at *Artforum* over Leider's favoritism. Fried himself wrote, '[n]o other editor would have dreamed of doing something so infuriating to the bulk of his readership' (Fried, 1998: 13). By way of explaining the decision Leider would say later, '[e]very time Michael published anything it gave a tone to the whole issue. It was just his brilliance that made it seem like the magazine was his' (Newman, 2000: 246). Some context is necessary: it was not - and still is not - uncommon that a contemporary art magazine features long essays on historical art, especially if the subject appears to bear on what's important to the present. And giving over an issue of a magazine to one writer was not unprecedented either, although it's rare in art magazines. In her social history of *Artforum*, Amy Newman wrote that Leider saw it as a form of innovative marketing and had in mind two models: the three-issue series of *The New Yorker* of 'Silent Spring', Rachel Carson's groundbreaking 1962 story on pesticides (later published as a best-selling book), and *Harper's* 1968 publication of Norman Mailer's 'The Steps to the Pentagon' (p. 275). For Fried, his thesis on Manet was linked to his reading of the art of the 1960s, but this needs teasing out because nothing in the magazine's issue frames it as such (except perhaps an in-joke: throughout the essay Fried refers to the 1860s as 'the sixties'). But, as fellow *Artforum* critic Max Kozloff recounted, the publication of 'Manet's Sources' was when Fried was characterised most strongly as a formalist and linked with Greenberg. He recounted to Newman:

Now Phil Leider publishes Fried's doctoral dissertation on Manet. And if you look at that, you'll see that Manet is assigned the position of an heroic, modernist artist who really starts it off, by accepting Michelet's idea of the universalism of French revolutionary thought. There's no way this could be proved, that there was any influence upon Manet of Michelet, that Michelet is to Manet as Greenberg is to, let's say, Pollock.

And now the baton is being carried as if modernism is some kind of historical relay race right into the 1960s. Fried's tome was supposedly an article about a nineteenth-century figure. In fact, it was a polemic about what was going to happen in the 1960s, if Fried had anything to say about it. (p. 285)

However, Fried claims he 'broke' with Greenberg earlier and that formalism had no relevance to his criticism after 1966 (Fried, 2011: 2 and 9; see also Meyer, 2012[2000]: 68, who holds that 'Art and Objecthood' was a 'declaration of independence from Greenberg'). From the essay itself and what we know about the fuller development of Fried's writings, we can see that Kozloff's reading of the Manet essay was both a simplification and a reflection of the terms in which it and 'Art and Objecthood' were received. Simply put, Kozloff wasn't right about Fried being a formalist but he correctly ascertained the exceptionalism that Fried creates for Manet. This point was also raised by Theodore Reff in his essay published four issues of *Artforum* later, 'Manet's Sources: A Critical Evaluation'. Fried's 'critic' is arguably too much for Reff's 'historian' to stand by when he queries Fried's conclusion that 'no painter since Manet has been faced with the need to secure the connectedness of his art to that of the distant past' (Reff, 1969: 40). Reff lists several other contenders, and the implication is that Fried's premise is ahistorical. This particular issue - Fried's characterisation of artists he writes about as singular and exceptional - will be explored later in relation to his critical method, but it needs stating that it continues to structure his art critical writings to this day. About the artist Charles Ray, for example, he writes: 'Ray is an artist of tremendous originality, one in whose seemingly unconstrained imagination the future of the art of sculpture is being reconceived' (Fried, 2011: 26).



Fried's commitment to thinking historically does not collapse into simple teleology, and his single-issue focus on the relationship between the artwork and the beholder, seen as a development of artistic practice in negotiation with history, is what drives all of his work. What strikes me as again necessary to ponder is the link between the project of an historian and that of a critic that is indicated (or one might say triggered?) by the publication of 'Manet's Sources' in *Artforum* and framed again when Fried published the book nearly thirty years later, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1960s*. In a move now typical of Fried, the essay was reprinted before he builds a more extended argument about Manet's negotiation of the relationship between painting and viewer. Kozloff's judgment is clearly too early and one driven by a different agenda (which I'll pick up a little later on). Stephen Melville's characterisation of Fried's project is more persuasive:

When he acknowledges, in the book's [*Manet's Modernism*] closing lines, that its mind 'remains divided' and adds 'no truly serious book on Manet could be otherwise,' he is registering its division as the very shape of its conviction, the form and substance of its attachment to the art of Édouard Manet. Or to put it objectively, Manet's achievement - an achievement that Fried characterises in terms of its ambitions to universality or totality, to 'facingness,' and to 'strikingness' - is itself, and precisely as achievement, 'provisional' or 'conditional,' terms Fried finds in the writing of Carle Desnoyers and willingly takes on for himself. (Melville, 2011[2000]: 98-99)

Melville's interpretation notwithstanding, Fried's 'conviction' and arguments for 'universalism' is what many find problematic.

### **Criticism, According to Fried**

Turning here to a discussion of what Fried understood, and understands, to be the project of criticism, two frames of reference are worth keeping in mind: the 1960s when Fried was actively writing art criticism and studying art history - and thinking across both - and the past twenty years when Fried started again to think about contemporary art. Expectations of critics have of course changed, whether we see this through the collapse in magazine

publishing or more generally, as someone like Bruno Latour contends, the way the project of critique to identify power and promote uncertainty is now a general condition of knowledge (Latour, 2004: 227-228). I still draw on Fried's dual role as writer of art's history on the one hand and on the other a critic with concerns on the present, albeit these are intertwined. In *Absorption and Theatricality*, for example, Fried makes several statements about the relation between the work of historians and 'the writings of critics contemporary with the art itself' (Fried, 1980: 1). The period in question, the eighteenth century, saw the advent of art criticism, with Diderot, La Font de Saint-Yenne, Melchior Grimm and others writing essays and reviews on art being shown in the salons, albeit for a very small audience and largely published in private newsletters (it's worth explaining, as Thomas Crow, 1985: 8-9, does, that this was not, as we might assume, elitism but rather the Academy's protectionism of the interests of artists). Another point Fried makes in *Absorption and Theatricality* is more significant: that he relied upon eighteenth-century criticism to a much larger extent than had any other historian to date. This claim is not a small one - Fried meant to signify this as a kind of shared authorship. These commentaries, he writes:

are allowed to direct our attention to features of the painting of their contemporaries which until now have simply never been perceived - or if such a statement seems extreme, have never since that period been construed to possess the particular significance which, on the strength of those commentaries, we are led to impute them. (Fried, 1980: 2)

He argues that he sees the criticism and the painting of this period as intertwined, each contributing to one's understanding of the other (pp. 2-3). Such a way of seeing things is a method-statement; he calls it:

a double process of interpretation by virtue of which paintings and critical texts are made to illuminate one another, to establish and refine each other's meanings, and to provide between them compelling evidence for the centrality to the pictorial enterprise in France during those years a body of concerns whose very existence has not been imagined. (p. 3)

This would appear to have a lot to do with Fried's experience of writing about the art of his time, and the tacit understandings he drew from it about the interactions of artists and writers and the influence they have on each other. An example that resonates here is when he argues in his 1971 essay 'Morris Louis', that Louis's painting helps us understand unnoticed aspects of Jackson Pollock's work. He writes:

there is an important sense in which Louis's paintings *create* the aspects in question - in which they give significance to Pollock's art that otherwise could not be experienced as significant, or has having that particular significance. (Fried, 1998[1971]: 129, emphasis in the original)

And looking back to the 18th century at models of criticism, Fried argues that with Diderot 'the issues which in his writings of the 1750s and 1760s are held to be central to the pictorial enterprise *actually were* central to the evolution of painting in France' (Fried, 1980: 3, emphasis in the original). I don't wish to make this an issue of Fried's self-interest; within the context of art history - for this is what *Absorption and Theatricality* is - it amounts to unseating the authority of the historian as much as the primacy of painting against its written exegesis.<sup>1</sup>

There is no such statement in 'Art and Objecthood' but we can look elsewhere. In May 1966 Fried participated in a symposium on art criticism that included critics Barbara Rose, Sidney Tillim and Kozloff and was published the following year in book form. Fried starts his speech by citing art critics of the nineteenth century. He begins:

One of the striking things about the history of nineteenth-century art - one of the facts that proclaims the art of that century as the beginning of the *modern* - is that certain men (men, moreover, like Baudelaire, Zola, and Nietzsche, whose claims to greatness do not rest on this alone) felt compelled to champion the few artists they believed in against a hostile public, an incensed journalism, and the ignorance and incomprehension of official opinion. And championing these artists not only meant defending them against charges of incompetence, unseriousness, and immorality: it also seems to have entailed abominating and arraigning certain other artists - along with other critics, the public, institutions of all kinds, even society itself. (Seitz, 1967, n.p., emphasis original)

This exceptionalism, as I suggested earlier, is a thornier issue than Fried's putative formalism. Named later in the talk as 'passionate exclusiveness', Fried argued that few critics wanted to 'rule anything out' and everyone wanted to 'accept everything'. By way of an anecdote where two critics write enthusiastically about the same artist but for different reasons, Fried argued they couldn't both be right: one critic either can't 'see the work' or can't see the artworks 'as paintings'. In other words one critic *doesn't know what art is*. He writes:

It is my conviction, based on, and limited by, my first-hand experience of contemporary painting and sculpture together with what I know of the past, that no more than an infinitesimal fraction of the art produced in our time matters at all, and that, in fact, this is one more respect in which the contemporary situation is different from previous situations. (Seitz, 1967: np)

First-hand experience matters because 'finding that [advanced] work involved relying on, being forced to trust, one's own experience even more radically and explicitly than ever before'. But this is not only an issue of looking and believing; Fried was developing criticism as the co-incident of two things: a 'theoretical model' alongside 'critical insights' (Fried, 1998: 39). James Meyer (2011[2000]: 86) notes that Greenberg thought Fried depended *too heavily* on theoretical arguments, whereas criticism was meant to be based on 'personal taste [and] direct encounter. ... The critic is an "eye" that describes, and judges, what is seen.' But for Fried, criticism loses its way without a theoretical model. Describing the demise of Greenberg's mode of criticism, which coincided with the end of the first period of his own writings on contemporary art, he writes:

no longer could the critic imagine that his or her words might intervene in the contemporary situation in the way in which, perhaps delusively, I had sometimes imagined my words intervening in it, no longer were there critical reputations to be made by distinguishing the best part of one's time from the rest or by analyzing that art with respect to its treatment of issues that were, in a strong sense of the word, 'inescapable'. .... and that with the growing eclipse of high modernism . . . the role of criticism became transformed - into cultural commentary, 'oppositional' position taking, exercises in recycled French theory, and so on. (Fried, 1998: 15)

### **A Very Curious Insertion**

As we've already seen Fried did start writing art criticism again, publishing a book on James Welling in 2000 which was followed by essays in books and exhibition catalogues on Richard Phillips, Stephen Shore, Charles Ray, Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Anri Sala, Stephen Wadell, and, back in *Artforum* once again, Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon's 2006 film *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*. Almost all of these writings refer back to 'Art and Objecthood' and they all centre on Fried's terms *presence* (and its cognates) and *antitheatricality*. But as my enquiry has been focused on the permeability between Fried's art-critical writings and his art historical ones, the most interesting example is an albeit short piece of contemporary art criticism (which also glosses 'Art and Objecthood') that appeared in an endnote in the middle of his book on the nineteenth-century painter Adolph Menzel. In it Fried collects some thoughts on the German artist Hanne Darboven and 'comes to terms' with her work. He also comes to a new account of the relations between the pictorial values of Modernism and aestheticised experiences of time, and this is interesting because Darboven is used to understand Menzel and Menzel to understand Darboven in a way that is both very odd and very compelling.

The note appears in a chapter entitled 'Time and the Everyday; Menzel and Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*; with a Postscript on Fontane's *Effi Briest*', which puts Menzel's striking practice of daily drawing and interest in things that might be considered beyond notice alongside a discussion of Søren Kierkegaard's writings on the representability of time and the commonplace, or, in Kierkegaard's own words, 'time in its extension'. (Fried, 2002, p. 147) Towards the end of a discussion of a small wood engraving Menzel was commissioned to make in the 1840s to illustrate the book *The Works of Frederick the Great*, Fried makes the supplementary comparison between Menzel and Darboven. The connection between the two, stretched as it is across time, medium, and gender, is based on both artists using drawing as a way of working through the daily experience of time and Fried's

desire to explain or exemplify Kierkegaard's idea of 'extensive time'. The comparison also has to do with certain notions of 'realism' that can be found in Menzel's choice of subject matter for his paintings and works on paper and Darboven's use of repetition as well as her orientation - as with many other artists of her generation - towards processes and materials that signify the everyday stuff of post-industrial life rather than the specialist world of art. It's tempting to see the note as anomalous but instead we can see Fried reaching for ways to work through linked ideas simultaneously. Just the page before, half a page is taken up by a footnote connecting his argument about Kierkegaard to an essay on Wittgenstein by Stanley Cavell. (Cavell, friend and colleague from his graduate studies, is a consistent interlocutor and tacit reference for the concept of theatricality in 'Art and Objecthood', and the subject of Stephen Melville's article in this issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*.) The Darboven passage by contrast is set away from the main text since the endnotes come at the end of the book, but it features something really unprecedented: illustrations of three works by Darboven, a selection of works carefully chosen to build the connection between her and Menzel.

Kevin Jackson in his book *Invisible Forms* (2000) described footnotes as 'a way of speaking in two voices at once' and deploying the spatiality of thinking outside the linearity of written words (and it's useful to know from him that a footnote from 1840 was 200 pages long) (pp. 143, 155). Fried has a general tendency to use footnotes to refer to things that he's not sure about. But here it facilitates his impulse to link history with the present, there even when the topic is ostensibly far in the past. It is interesting still that the bridge he uses to get from Menzel to Darboven is 'Art and Objecthood'. As described above, the note appears while Fried is discussing an engraving by Menzel that pictures a man, woman and young child sharing lunch on a building site. Both the title and the subject indicate the man is a bricklayer, and Fried is interested in the 'recurrent motif' in Menzel's work of labourers and construction sites, and/or 'waste land' and how these allegorise time and the everyday. Fried writes:

I mean [to stress] the way in which a bricklayer lays down one after another (one next to another) a large number of bricks, all of which are very nearly identical, in rows that are themselves very nearly identical and that in fact are laid down one upon another, in a repetitive process that in principle has no necessary terminus. (Fried, 2002: 153)

Almost like a thought crossing his mind, this description is what prompts him to digress, opening the endnote with this: 'My account of the repetitive, ongoing, temporally extensive operation of bricklaying may remind some readers of my analysis of the Minimalist or literalist art of the 1960s that I criticized sharply in my 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood"' (p. 283).

The statement appears at first both disingenuous and opportunistic, stemming at once from his own authorship of the text and by a tenuous link made a few lines later between Menzel's bricklayer and the Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre's use of bricks, stacked or positioned in rows, ('one thing after another'). More generously to Fried it may be a reflex, an internalisation of the criticism he regularly receives. Nevertheless several interesting and important things follow: we see Fried writing on an artist strongly tied to a movement, Conceptual Art, that was explicitly post-Modern and took aim at many of the things Fried valued about art and what it offers to viewers. And more to the point I'm trying to make in this article, taking Darboven seriously breaks with something about Fried's critical method. If the artists Anthony Caro, Frank Stella, Morris Louis and others were close to Fried generationally, he also developed his critical writings of their work through numerous occasions that included speaking with them, seeing their work first hand in studios and in exhibitions, and of course in writing about them, often many times. Darboven occupies a different position to Fried as an artistic subject. If this endnote can be taken seriously as an exemplary piece of criticism, it demonstrates something closer to the work of an historian than that of a critic: he reads her work through other writers and builds a case for his

interest through their arguments. A comment he makes at the very end of the passage is telling in this regard: he thanks the art historian Brigid Doherty 'for forcing me to recognize that Hanne Darboven is an artist to be reckoned with' (Fried, 2002: 286).<sup>2</sup> I think this comment needs careful reading. It's of course a self-critical gloss on his long allegiance to a small list of artists and an indication of the ways and means by which his thinking about contemporary art was shifting. But we need to see the 'force' as internal to him as well as imposed by another, and what he is resisting is giving up the need for a primary relation between critic and artwork. As we've seen before, in the 1960s Fried defined the task of criticism as 'finding that work involved relying on, being forced to trust, one's own experience even more radically and explicitly than ever before...' (Seitz, 1967: np). So is this also a breach of his concept of 'experience'?

Darboven is a curious choice of artist for Fried since her key motif of repetition might suggest the emptying out of the artist's gesture, the replacement of autographic with the mechanical, and a strong critique - via an anti-aesthetic - of the human being's loss of potential for meaningful and autonomous experiences. Following his conversations with Doherty and a piece of published writing by Lucy Lippard, Fried emphasises something rather different, and he names it *antitheatrical*. He quotes Darboven quoted by Lippard:

Each time I have to write, it becomes so calm and so normal. ... I feel myself not thinking what other people think, but what I think. I write for myself, there is no other way. This is for me. Going on is the enormous thing I do. (Fried, 2002: 284)

Apart from the connections that can be drawn between this and Fried's argument about pictorial art in *Absorption and Theatricality* - the resonance, that is, between Darboven and what artists like Greuze or Chardin painted - I want to argue here that Fried, in adopting Darboven, is also updating his understanding of 'duration'. In large part this could also be understood as the project of *Menzel's Realism*: to find a way of talking about a connection between the experience of a moment and the repetitive experience of (empty) time.



It's easy to see that Fried's reckoning with Darboven is different from how he describes coming to terms with other artists. Here he is on Caro:

...there was a gate, and as I stepped through it into the courtyard beyond I found myself in the presence of two of Anthony Caro's earliest abstract sculptures . . . I was alone with these for several minutes before Caro came out of the house. But that was long enough to experience the unshakable conviction that they were two of the most original and powerful sculptures I had ever seen . . . (Fried, 1998: 7)

And this is Diderot, quoted by Fried, writing on dramatic paintings by Vernet, Van Loo, Greuze, and others: 'First touch me, astonish me, tear me apart; startle me, make me cry, shudder, arouse my indignation; you will please my eyes afterward, if you can' (Diderot as quoted in Fried, 1980: 79-80). And here is Fried writing on Menzel, citing the difficulty gaining access to his work before the fall of the Berlin Wall:

I continued to assume, however, that in order to become familiar with the scope of his [Menzel's] oeuvre *and also to discover what I wanted to say about it* I would need to spend an extended period of time in Berlin, and for personal reasons that appeared not in the cards for years to come.' (Fried, 2002: ix, emphasis added)

Doesn't the endnote on Darboven show Fried in a state of less certainty than elsewhere? Is this on account of the way he acknowledges the contribution of other factors, namely people with other convictions, in the making of his mind? One might be tempted to say this represents a shift in Fried's thinking on the 'ontologically prior relationship, at once literal and fictive, *between painting and beholder*' (Fried, 1980: 76, emphasis in the original). Or because of the nature of Darboven's work (repetitive, reproductive), does his thinking not need to shift? It is certainly a reckoning with the limitations of criticism, and a renewal of his own interest in producing it.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Stephen Melville for his comments here and the reference to Fried's essay on Louis.

<sup>2</sup> As a point of comparison, in the introduction to his book *Four Honest Outlaws*, Fried describes first seeing Anri Sala's work in exhibition, then meeting him, then seeing more exhibitions, then writing an essay all before the one in the book. 'I already know that I shall have more to say in print about Sala's work in the future,' he remarks. And his rationale for being interested in Jeff Wall included the fact that *Absorption and Theatricality* had borne an influence on Wall's work, something he found out reading an interview with the artist before ever meeting him (Fried, 2011: 25-26 and 18 respectively).