**An ‘Automatic Escape’ or a ‘Beautiful Question’? Cinema and Experimental Film after Michael Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’**

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‘Sculpture is the art of objects but all the other mediums are objects too!’ (Michael Snow)

‘You have evaded the issue long enough. Now I propose to pin you wriggling to a definition of the plastic.’

(Carl Andre in discussion with Hollis Frampton)

‘…to say that an experience of sculpture can be similar to or influenced by the illusion in film – I’ve always thought that was nonsense.’

(Richard Serra)

In 1969, Robert Morris ‘set up two cameras in his apartment windows in Newport Beach, California, and directed them toward the gas station across the street.’ (Berger, 1989, p.89) The resulting film is in fact two films, screened side-by-side, that appear to present a recording of the same place made at the same time. The two reels are of equal length and are intended to run simultaneously. The camera on the left is fixed and does not move for the duration of the film. The camera on the right moves continuously, restlessly zooming in on figures and objects, scanning for some unspecified point of interest, as the ‘actors’ pass through the gas station, or rather, as they pass through the frame of the left-hand camera. In the opening moments of *Gas Station* we watch as a young male attendant wipes down a windscreen. The left hand camera shows, as it were, the entire stage while the right hand camera shows the attendant in close-up before following the path of another man, who disappears through a glass door into the office. At no point in the film is the camera acknowledged by those it records, creating the impression, as the action unfolds, that those who move under its gaze are *acting* according to the camera’s direction as they go about their task-oriented movements rendered all but automatic by the smooth pans of the telescopic lens.

According to Maurice Berger, *Gas Station* is one of six incomplete films made by Morris between 1969 and 1971 – the period immediately following the publication of Michael Fried’s attack on the theatricality of Minimalism (1967) in ‘Art and Objecthood’ and during which the discourse surrounding Minimalism solidified within publications such as Gregory Battcock’s *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1968) and exhibitions such as *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum in 1969. In this context it is not difficult to read *Gas Station* as a filmic exploration of a number of the issues that were very much alive within the debates surrounding Minimal Art, a debate in which of course Morris was a central protagonist. Within the fixed frame of the left-hand camera the Gas Station forecourt uncannily resembles the stage set of a theatre. In archaeological terms, a forecourt is an open or public space directly in front of an architectural structure such as a tomb, or a temple, a space that often ‘houses’ ceremonial practices, spaces in which power relationships are made visible and are memorialised in real time; what Morris would call a space which ‘seizes presentness as its domain.’ (Morris, 1995, p.175) This is perhaps what made the space so fascinating for Morris. At one point a mechanic appears from out of the shadows, dressed in white and spattered with oil and it is difficult not to see him transformed under the gaze of the lens into a Pollock-like parody of the post-war American artist of the type cast in Jim Dine’s Car Crash Happenings, or indeed, the gloved attendant who Morris himself performs alongside Carolee Schneemann in the documentation of his dance piece, *Site* from 1966. The gas station is both extraordinarily utilitarian, or functional, and at the same time a living theatrical space in which the present does not simply take place but is performed. If Fried attacked theatricality in ‘Art and Objecthood’, it is all but naturalised in Morris’s *Gas Station*.

Indeed, it is in the relationship between the two cameras – the two contrasting points of view – that Morris seems to re-perform his challenge to the gestalt perspective of modernist sculpture, defended by Fried, in which the object is immediatey knowable. Instead, as Morris writes, ‘it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work.’ (Battcock, 1995, p. 234) Certainly, there is the sense that the right hand camera acts within this space, in many ways as if it were a character in a film or play, or, more pertinently, a viewer moving through the visual field ‘activated’ (in Morris’s terminology) by the ‘presentness’ of minimal sculpture. Minimalism ‘takes the relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer’s field of vision.’ (Battcock, p. 232) As Ann Wagner points out, Morris’s field of vision, ‘in another context might well be called the gaze.’ (Battcock, p.14) Of course here the specific objects of minimalism are replaced by the specific objects of everyday space – petrol pumps, buckets, cars, the American flag. The camera appears to scan for a found geometry of accidental shapes – triangles, cubes, tubular forms. Often the camera lingers on negative space, the frames within the existing structure enclosing nothing but air, or patches of light. At one point the camera follows a series of found horizontals – a curb, a roofline, a canal in the distance, power lines. In this way the film appears to be improvised around a series of dance procedures, alighting on chance connections (that may or may not exist outside of the mise-en-scene). As Berger points out: ‘these films represent a codification of the most formal aspects of Morris’ dance sensibility.’ (Berger, p.89)

Yet the film is also, of course, heavily circumscribed or determined not only by the architectural structure which is both visible and invisible (according to the open-plan nature of the gas station forecourt) but also by the camera frame of the left hand over-view – lines that are largely invisible until they are mapped or traced by movement, that of bodies, objects, the ocean breeze (at one point Morris picks out a distant palm tree blowing in the wind and one can’t help wonder if this is an ode to DW Griffith’s dying words), or, in this case, the movement of the camera. The movements of the right-hand camera do not stray beyond the frame of the left-hand camera; or, if they do, they appear to settle on objects no further than the liminal space immediately beyond their visible border, revealing an entrance to the ‘mensroom’ on the extreme left and a rear exit to the garage on the extreme right but always stalking the borders of what is directly visible or known according to the frame established by the recording device. To this extent, Morris seems to be parodying Clement Greenberg’s complaint, as echoed in Michael Fried, that ‘the borderline between art and non-art had to be sought in the three-dimensional, where sculpture was, and where everything material that was not art also was.’ (Battcock, p.124)

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In an article on Richard Serra’s sculpture Yve-Alain Bois suggests that

‘all of Serra’s oevre is an implicit reply to Michael Fried’s text.’ (Foster, 2000, p. 82) While I’m not sure it is possible to say the same of Morris (he was making sculpture ten years before Fried wrote ‘Art and Objecthood’ and his work went through a series of transformations afterwards), certainly the small run of films Morris made in the lead up to his ‘Retrospective’ at the Tate Gallery in 1971 could be thought of as a reply, or indeed a series of replies to Michael Fried. While the films in question are varied and employ different techniques, they all explore the relationship between nearness and distance and the shifting nature of vision as described in Morris’s textual replies to Fried. If we take the five films made in 1969, *Mirror*, *Slow Motion*, *Finch Project*, *Wisconsin* and *Gas Station* the cameras record various actions from a certain distance and it is this distance, or this space of perception, which becomes both the subject and the object of the work.

In *Mirror* (1969) ‘the phenomenological implications of passage and vision were explored as Morris walked in a circle around a Wisconsin landscape, holding up to the camera a large mirror that reflected the surrounding trees, snow, and the shifts in the camera’s line of sight.’ (Berger, p. 104) As with *Gas Station*, the gestalt position of the camera is upset by the passage of a person through its field of vision (literally, in this case, a field of snow). This is doubled in the movement of the mirror, as it comes closer and closer to the lens, which reflects back at the camera the kind of mobile subjectivity that defined Morris’s spatial definition of sculpture. *Wisconsin* was something of an elaboration on *Mirror* and may have been shot on the same day. Based on earlier choreography works made by Morris and Yvonne Rainer, three cameras ‘captured the collective actions of a group of ninety-five people as they fell, ran, walked, and milled in a large field.’ (Berger, p.104) As Berger goes on to note: ‘Morris later intercut the three tracks in order to examine the individual events simultaneously from various angles and distances.’ (Berger, p. 104) *Slow Motion* (1969), was shot at an even greater distance by Morris as he read instructions down the phone to a cameraman and a performer in a different city. ‘In the manner of the photographer Edward Muybridge, a highspeed camera was focused on a shirtless, muscular male model as he ran into and finally opened a heavy glass door.’ (Berger, p.104) *Finch Project* was an equally interior work and was also made in response to the particular parameters of an exhibition, *Art and Proces IV* at Finch College Art Museum in New York. A camera placed on a turntable revolving at two revolutions per minute recorded ‘Morris hanging mirrors at one end of the gallery as a person at the other end tacked up life size photographs of faces. Projected onto the same gallery walls with a film projector that revolved on the same turntable, the presentation of the film reduplicated the de-centering point of view of the rotating camera and the circular path of the worker’s labour.’ (Berger, p.104)

Throughout these films there is a staging of Morris’ key concern with the position of the viewer and the way in which, of course, ‘the experience of the work necessarily exists in time.’ (Battcock, p.144, p.234) Fried derided this sense of ‘presence’ as ‘theatricality’, and as such, the ‘negation of art’, or at least the negation of a previous concept of art in which ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within it.’ (Battcock, p.125) Instead, according to Fried, ‘the experience of literalist art [Fried’s term for Minimalism] is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.’ (Battcock, p.125) In response, film (or at least a brief series of brief films, not strictly thought of by Morris as finished works of art made, as it were, on the margins of his practice) seemed to offer Morris something of a closing statement on the subject, or at least, a way to make it plain: ‘What I want to bring together in my model of ‘presentness’ [as opposed, is the implication, to that of Michael Fried] is the intimate inseparability of the experience of physical space and that of an on-going immediate present. Real space is not experienced except in real time.’ (Morris, p.177)

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It’s interesting that Morris would choose film in order to construct a series of replies to Fried (culminating I think in Morris’s 1978 essay, ‘The Present Tense of Space’ (Morris, 1995)). As Fried moves through the final muscle flexing of ‘Art and Objecthood’ in order ‘to make a claim that I cannot hope to prove or substantiate but that I believe nevertheless to be true,’ film, for a moment, takes centre stage (Battcock, p.139). At first it appears that, as with Morris, film (or what Fried variably refers to as ‘the movies,’ ‘cinema’ and ‘film’) may offer some sort of solution – it may be an ‘art’ with the power, ‘naturally’ it would seem, to overcome theatre according to Fried’s ‘Modernist sensibility.’ The passage is perhaps worth quoting in full:

There is, however, one art that, by its very nature, *escapes* theatre entirely – the movies. This helps explain why movies in general, including frankly, appalling ones, are acceptable to Modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music and poetry is not. Because cinema escapes theatre – automatically as it were – it provides an absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theatre and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge - more accurately the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theatre and not a triumph over it, absorption, not conviction – means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a *modernist* art. (Battcock, pp.140-141)

That is to say, I think, that film cannot be modernist because it already is – *automatically* – modernist. Meaning, in Fried’s terminology, that film cannot be bent into the shape of modernism by conviction, by the will of the artist, because film has already been absorbed into modernism – or more accurately, modernism has already been absorbed into film. As Tanya Leighton points out: ‘Part of the problem is… that film was the paradigm for Modernism in and of itself. There was no traditional lexicon of film which Modernism could reject or reinvent in formal terms; rather, film was formerly modern at the moment of its invention.’ (Leighton, 2008, p.28) How for instance, do you disentangle Modernism from Montage? In a footnote to his passage on ‘the movies,’ Fried glosses his discussion ‘the movies’ with a suggestive sentence that is also worth quoting in full:

Exactly how the movies escape theatre is a beautiful question, and there is no doubt but that a phenomenology of the cinema that concentrated on the similarities and differences between it and the theatre – e.g. that in the movies the actors are not physically present, the film itself is projected away from us, the screen is not experienced as a kind of object existing, so to speak, in a specific physical relation to us, etc. – would be extremely rewarding. (Battcock, p.140)

If we take the view that the question of whether or not film can be modernist is at worst hyperbole and at best a deliberate red herring deployed to throw us off the scent, this quite considered aside (informed, as with much of the essay, by Stanley Cavell’s then as yet unpublished writings on cinema) speaks more directly to the issues at stake and perhaps gives some hint at Morris’s decision to reply to Fried in film. Without knowing it, Fried’s footnote gleans an entire area of artistic activity overlapping, both historically and aesthetically, with the same sculptural debates that so vexed Morris and Fried. This was – namely – Structural Film, which was from the outset defined by modernist concerns with medium specifity and the possibility of film’s autonomous objecthood. It’s not clear if Fried was being wilfully obstinate here or if the question of film as an art medium was simply beyond his strict disciplinary boundaries (he was, after all, colleagues with Annette Michelson, the leading proponent within the given context of film as an art form). Certainly, within Battcock’s anthology *Minimal Art* it is ~~perhaps~~ instructive to note that film and cinema are hardly mentioned. Nonetheless, when they are we get a sense of how the debates overlapped. For John Perrault, the *Village Voice* art critic, it was quite clear that essentialist questions about the medium in minimalism were not limited to sculpture. In literature for instance it was possible to observe the ‘so-called elimination of psychology, character and traditional narrative’ within the writings of Alain Robbe-Grillet; while ‘in the Underground Cinema we have no-talking, no-acting, no-editing, no-motion motion pictures, loop films, strobe films and even films made without film.’ (Battcock, p.262) For Yvonne Rainer, whose writing was also collected in Battcock’s *Anthology*, the use of film was, as with Fried, an ‘escape,’ but this time it was an escape from the rhetoric of the modernist artwork ‘consuming its own tail’: ‘The alternatives that were explored now are obvious: stand, walk, run, eat, carry bricks, show movies, or move or be moved by some thing rather than oneself…’ (Battcock, p.269)

Indeed, the location and objecthood of film – as they are imagined by Michael Fried – were, during this period, being rendered uncertain by artists such as Rainer and Michael Snow – both influential friends of Morris and Richard Serra – as well as Paul Sharits, a figure often stranded in a virtual no-man’s land between the so-called New American Cinema and the Contemporary Art World of galleries, museums and magazines within which Minimalism was staging its object-based critique. The year before ‘Art and Objecthood’ was published in *Artforum*, Stan Vanderbeek, who shot Robert Morris’s earlier film *Site* for distribution in the conceptual magazine, *Aspen*, constructed his prototype for a multi-media environment, *The Movie Drome*, in upstate New York. In reply, as it were, Peter Kubelka opened his ‘Invisible Cinema,’ a screening room at Anthology Archives in New York City, built for the pure perception of the new essentialist cinema being made by the likes of Stan Brakhage, Sharits and Jonas Mekas where ‘cinema’, in the words of Sharits, can be ‘freed from showing anything beyond itself.’ (Sharits, 1978) Isolated within box-like seats each viewer was meant to view the film programme without any distraction, viewing the screen, as in Fried’s definition (if that’s not too strong a word for a footnote) of the cinematic image, as an autonomous object that does not exist in relation to ‘us’ but only in relation to itself. In both instances, the position of the viewer, the architecture or space of the ‘room’ and the presence of the object were thrown into question by the work and, as Fried would say, risked becoming the subject of the ‘situation.’ Fried quite rightly observed that Minimalism (like cinema and theatre, but not like structural film or modernist sculpture), relied on an architectural conceit: that the room or the space in which the object was experienced was as vital to the work as the work itself: ‘the concept of a room is, mostly clandestinely, important to literalist art and theory,’ Fried notes. ‘In fact, it can often be substituted for the word “space”.’(Battcock, p.134)

Meanwhile, Morris’s film project at the Finch College Museum in which the projection literally mirrored the process of recording as a form of what might now be thought of as a relatively early attempt at site specific expanded cinema, does exactly what Fried’s footnote demands. Or at least, Morris’s film agrees on the proposition – that the ontology of the film image should be explored – but disagrees on the outcome: that the projected image cannot be an autonomous object, but exists, instead, as a form of presence defined by the apparatus of its appearance. Equally, *Finch Project* directly addresses, or offers a reply to, perhaps, many of the concerns within the film practices of filmmakers such as Snow and Sharits who were experimenting with ‘sculptural’ film installations in gallery, or gallery-like, spaces. Certainly, for someone like Paul Sharits, the questions Morris (and Carl Andre) were asking about the ‘nature’ of an object in exhibition directly informed his thinking about the screen, the frame and the projector. In his theoretical-essay-cum-memoir, ‘UR(i)N(ul)LS:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:SECTION: - S:S:ECTIONED(A)(lysis)JO: ‘1968-70’,’ Sharits writes:

april 5, 1969 / as robert morris moves toward process as ‘product’, he ‘frames’ certain concepts at least morphologically related to newly realised form concerns in ‘cinema’. and carl andre: placing the ‘representation’ on the ground plane, where it would go if unaided, is an assertion of the probability that ‘it’ is ‘fitting’ that humanly generated forms and ‘ideas’ can be coincidental to their ‘natural’ locations. should ‘the screen’, let alone the ‘image projection’, be a wall or on a wall? it seems that to project an image onto a wall one must also project a parody of the assumption that it is viable to do so. or one could assume ‘the light frame’ is, in fact, a representation (and not a projection) of ‘the strip of frames’; then weight concepts fixed in the film’s emulsion would not be regarded as ‘heavy’ or ‘light-weight’ but as ‘under’ or ‘over’ exposed […] are splices too heavy to be projected on a wall? the projector itself, locationally speaking, is problematic as an image; an example of a confusing ‘case’ is placing the projector so close to a beaded screen that its light flares out around its normative framed boundaries, causing its own form to be defined by itself. (Sharits, 1978, p.11)

The terms with which Fried was uncharacteristically laissez-faire such as ‘film’ ‘cinema’ and the ‘movies’ (which for Fried referenced the same thing) were, within the writings of artists associated with Structural Film, no less scrupulously contested than those within modernist sculpture such as shape, surface or line. Many of these writings (or at least their proto-structuralist origins) had already been collected by Gregory Battcock in one of his other anthologies: *The New American Cinema*. These would be re-anthologised and updated (with frightening alacrity) in P. Adam Sitney’s *Anthology* edited by Annette Michelson who was of course an editor at *Artforum* when Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’ appeared and who was as versed as anyone in the modernist condition of film. In the wake of these anthologies a discourse around medium specificity would quickly grow, often with Greenbergian overtones. Indeed, Sharits for one made clear distinctions between ‘film’ and ‘cinema’ in order to explore filmic time (the abstract and material properties of film itself) as opposed to cinematic time (the illusionary time of visual representation). In distinguishing, by 1970, between painting, film and cinema Sharits suggested that:

new ontological approaches have been highly developed. ‘Self-reference,’ through both formal tautology (as in [Frank] Stella’s edge-referring internal surface division in his ‘striped’ paintings) and conceptual tautology (as in [Jasper] Johns’ early ‘target,’ ‘map,’ and ‘flag’ paintings) generate convincingly self-sufficient works. […] This is not to say that cinema should be, say, ‘non-representational.’ Film, ‘motion-picture’ and ‘still’ film, unlike painting and sculpture, can achieve an autonomous presence without negating iconic reference because the phenomenology of the system includes ‘recording’ as a physical fact. (Sharits, p.31)

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Strictly speaking, the films of Robert Morris are not medium specific. As Berger points out, they were incomplete, and are perhaps best thought of as sketches made in film – an attempt to observe a set of relationships or interactions in and through space and time. That said, the near sculptural use of the camera and the projector in *Finch Project* and the double screen of *Gas Station* come closest to a reflexive staging of certain filmic conditions; while each of the films, again according to Berger, ‘was intended to be edited with a “soundtrack of everyday sounds” and is said, by Morris, to explore the “alignment between the properties of actions and the **physical tendencies of a given media”**.’ (Berger, p.89) Rather than film as a medium with its own specific properties, however, Morris’ films appear to be an attempt to explore space as a medium – or at least the relationships between objects and people in spaces as a kind of media. Indeed, it is not clear whether Morris thought of film as anything other than two-dimensional. Certainly Richard Serra, in many ways Morris’ pupil at the time, had no sympathy for film as a sculptural object. ‘I’ve always thought,’ Serra said in a conversation with Annette Michelson, ‘that the basic assumptions of film could never be sculptural in any way, and to beg the analogy between what is assumed to be sculptural in sculpture and what is assumed to be sculptural in film is not really to understand the potential of what sculpture is and always has been.’ (Foster, p.25) Serra’s films, which are certainly an important part of his practice, were never projected in a sculptural way – certainly not in the fashion that Paul Sharits or Michael Snow set up early film installations. If the films had a structural look to them this was due, on the one hand, to the process-based nature of the set-up and on the other to the fact that they were often shot by Robert Fiore, who was concerned with the medium specifity of film, but who is now rarely mentioned as more often than not Serra is cited as the sole author of the work.

It is also worth nothing that works such as Serra’s *Hand Catching Lead* (1969), as with Morris’s films, were shown at screenings as part of gallery and museum programmes and not as installations the way they might be seen now. The films existed, as such, in a very fixed relationship with the sculptural practice they supported. Certainly, the films have more in common with the works of Joan Jonas and Yvonne Rainer who, as I have said, were an important influence on Serra and Morris and whose early film works were principally an attempt to document dance performances. In this way, the films of minimalist sculptors were an extension of Minimalist discourse. They were never thought of as three-dimensional objects with sculptural or even filmic properties of their own. Which is why, I think, Morris’s films work best as a set of replies to Michael Fried, as an extension, as it were, of Morris’s essay writing. The films are documents; the textual record of a correspondence – a symptom of the apparent need, at the time, to anthologise or archive, as it were, the art of the 60s in ‘real time.’ It is fitting then in the context of the anthologising editorial projects of Michelson, Battcock and Sitney, that experimental cinema in America began to circulate around Jonas Mekas’ Film Co-op with its most suitable of monikers given the feverish cataloguing of a real-time present: ‘Anthology Archives’.

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This feverish archiving of the present is played out (in a much more nuanced fashion, at least compared to the description I have given here) in *Nostalgia*, a film made by Hollis Frampton in the same year as Morris’s Tate retrospective, in which Michael Snow, posing as Frampton, describes a series of visual and textual reminiscences relating to a cast made up largely of sculptors and painters such as Carl Andre and Frank Stella. In *Nostalgia*, we watch a series of still photographs burn on a hotplate as the narrator, posing as Hollis Frampton describes not the image smouldering on the screen but the image we are about to see. Importantly, it is the story of a filmmaker turning his back on photography, destroying not just an archive of images but an archive of related biographical details – personal connections that link Frampton (and Michael Snow) to a host of art-world figures associated with the ‘narrative’ or ‘discourse’ of Minimalism. Speaking in regards to a portrait of Carl Andre, which Frampton (or the narrator) claims to have made ‘with the direct intention of making art’ and which he had ‘despised for several years,’ (and which in the film we are yet to see), we hear the line: ‘Carl Andre is twelve years older and more active than he was then. I see less of him nowadays than I should like; but then there are other people of whom I see more than I care to.’

Simultaneously of course, each photograph is anthologised, so to speak, within the consuming pyre of the film itself: each image is not destroyed but re-recorded, as it disappears, 24 times a second! Within this (theatrically staged) struggle between the still and the moving image it is worth pausing on the equally invisible presence of Michael Snow. Snow was very much a part of the Minimalist scene – his work was included in the *Anti-Illusion* show alongside Morris, Serra, Andre and Rainer; Serra attended screenings of his work throughout the period in question and carried Snow’s film *Wavelength* (made in the same year as the publication of Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’) on his travels to Europe at the end of the 1960s. ‘I showed it at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where it stopped the house. They knocked over the projector. I showed it in Cologne and Dusseldorf. In a period of a year, I showed *Wavelength* twelve times.’ (Foster, p.23) What Serra doesn’t mention is that Snow’s films developed out of or in tandem with a sculptural practice. In 1967, again, the year of ‘Art and Objecthood’, Snow showed *Atlantic*, a Judd-like assembly of metal boxes each housing a close-up of waves breaking on the Atlantic shore. *Wavelength* features one of the same close-up images of the ocean at the climax of its forty-minute zoom through a New York loft apartment. Between the two works, despite Serra’s dismissal of the idea, there is, I think, a cross-examination of the filmic and the sculptural, in which, again, we come up against a now-familiar concern with the ‘room,’ or ‘space’ and with the movement of perceiving bodies through a visual field. It’s worth noting that the two windows Morris used to shoot *Gas Station* – collapsing the camera, as he did so, with the room or indeed the architecture of the entire apartment building – take centre stage, as it were, during most of *Wavelength* before the focus of the lens lands upon the object of its attention – a motionless copy of perpetual movement.

Yet Snow is very rarely mentioned within Minimalism (if we take the fact that Minimalism was a discourse, or as Fried would say, an ‘ideology’). Snow is not included, for instance, within Battcock’s *Anthology*, but as we have seen, is mentioned in historical interviews. And this role of the double-agent coming in and out of focus, as it were, at the edge of the stage seems to be part of the point and is perhaps why in *Nostalgia* Snow acts (or speaks) as somebody else. When he does appear (visually) in *Nostalgia*, Snow does so as a kind of ghost reflected in a window doubling or re-performing the dematerialisation of still photography. ‘If you look closely,’ the narrator (Michael Snow) points out, ‘you can see Michael Snow himself, on the left, by transmission, and my camera, on the right, by reflection.’ I can’t help being reminded, once again, of Robert Fiore who has now become a ghost presence within the history of films made by Minimalists and whose actual presence is lightly traced by a one-line statement towards the back of the *Anti-Illusion* show at the Whitney: ‘In film, the object is its essence.’ (Tucker, 1969, p.53) Of course, Frampton and Snow seem to be quite openly performing a form of authorship that belies the ‘theatricality’ of Minimalist discourse. It is not by accident that the image of Michael Snow, which slowly burns in *Nostalgia* was made, according to the narrator, as a publicity shot for Snow’s (painting and sculpture) exhibition at the Poindexter Gallery in 1965.

Indeed, throughout the film Frampton’s role – or the role of Frampton as a photographer – and his relationship to the art world around him is purely economic. He is there to make photographic portraits for aspiring artists whom happen to be his friends. He is not there to create moving images, as such, but images that move – through discourse – to become present within the real-time space of what was then contemporary art. The most telling moment, for us, in Frampton’s *Nostalgia* is perhaps the passage relating to Frank Stella, a painter championed by Michael Fried. ‘Frank Stella asked me to make a portrait,’ the narrator says as we look at a sculpture made from plaster and modelling clay entitled *Cast of Thousands*. ‘He needed it for some casual business use: a show announcement, or maybe a passport. Something like that.’ When the next image appears we see a young Frank Stella framed by a black doorway blowing a smoke-ring; an ‘O,’ perhaps, for ‘Objecthood.’ Certainly, Frampton via Snow relates the smoke ring directly to sculpture (or at least, the inevitably photographic condition of sculpture): ‘Looking at the photograph recently it reminded me, unaccountably, of a photograph of another artist squirting water out of his mouth [Bruce Nauman’s *Self Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966], which is undoubtedly art. Blowing smoke rings seems more of a craft. Ordinarily, only opera singers make art with their mouths.’ Or perhaps the smoke ring is the sign of endless circulation through the media and mediums of art. Or perhaps, to photograph a smoke ring is to pin finally, if I can paraphrase, a definition of the plastic – to memorialise that myth of an endless present-tense, what Dan Graham would call, the ‘drug-time of the 1960s.’ (Graham, 199, p.117)

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Coming full circle, like Stella’s smoke ring or the looping, according to Michael Fried, of minimalist experience that is ‘endless the way a road might be: if it were circular,’ we return to the issue of the automobile, the automatic and the road. Precisely where we began, in a way, with Robert Morris’s *Gas Station*. Here I am referring to Tony Smith’s famous night drive in New Jersey and the death of Smith’s good friend, Jackson Pollock.

Arguably, the most important artist portrait ever to be taken – certainly an artists’ portrait that most impacted directly on the practices of art and its histories (the economy and culture of art and its discourses) – was the set of images (and a film) that Hans Namuth made of the painter Jackson Pollock in the summer of 1950. It was these images of Pollock dancing over his canvas, throwing, spraying and splashing paint (largely staged) that gave rise to what would be called Action Painting and the Happenings Movement – a collapsing of art and everyday life as responsible as anything else for bringing theatre into the realm of art. As if to underline Fried’s suspicions on this point, key protagonists within the Happenings movement such as Claes Oldenburg, Michael Kirby and Jim Dine, none of whom made minimalist work, were included in the pages of Battcock’s *Minimal Art*. For some observers, the photographic portraits made by Namuth, which helped make Pollock the most famous painter in America, contributed to the artist’s personal and psychological decline, culminating in his death in a car accident in East Hampton, Long Island in 1956. (Toynton, 2012) More to the point, the photographic theatricalisation of Pollock signalled a collapsing of the boundaries between art disciplines that were so precious to the likes of Fried and Greenberg, Pollock’s most ardent campaigner. Andy Warhol’s *Car Crash* pictures, for instance, not only speak directly to the physical fate of Pollock but they also dramatise the manner in which painting as a discipline with its own medium specificities was being subsumed into photography and the filmic, a visual discourse defined by reproducibility, circulation and mobility. It’s worth noting that Tony Smith, whose *Nostalgia*-like reminiscence of a night drive along an unfinished highway is central to Fried’s essay on 'objecthood’, turned to making art after he survived a car crash of his own and whose sculptural practice is, I think, deeply inscribed by the photographic or, should I say, filmic.

It should be noted then, that the most cinematic moment of ‘Art and Objecthood’ is not in fact when Fried references film directly but when he addresses what he would help to construct as being the foundational myth of Minimalism: Tony Smith’s New Jersey night drive. As Ann Wagner points out, ‘Fried imagined into existence a whole set of details that give it [Smith’s story] a quasi-cinematic verismo and excitement that Smith himself failed to provide: “The constant onrush of the road, the simultaneous reaches of dark pavement illumined by the onrushing headlights, the sense of the turnpike itself as something enormous, abandoned, derelict, existing for Smith alone and for those in the car with him”.’

(Battcock, p. 16) Wagner links Smith’s automotive epiphany with another car accident: ‘Reading this passage we might be in Marinetti’s motorcar hurtling toward the dark outskirts of Milan – only the muddy ditch is nowhere in sight.’ (Battcock, p.16) Like Smith, Marinetti’s near death experience at the hands of an increasingly automatic culture is, if we believe the *Manifesto*, the foundational moment within Futurism. In both cases, the experience becomes, as Fried notes, the object of the work. And yet the experience Smith describes is unaccountably cinematic. Smith’s story is based on his memory (as with Castell’s memory of movies past) of sitting in a dark box with other people (Smith’s students) looking at another world through a screen, a temporal and spatial image of a world generated by movement.

Smith extends the darkness of the car journey, it’s worth noting, into his sculptural practice. Most of the works he made during this time were plywood fabrications of large-scale geometric sculptures that he intended to build in metal. These wooden prototypes were painted with a water-resistant black paint commonly used to coat the underside of automobiles. The sculptures may have been spray painted, like a car and like the paintings of Jules Olitski which were so celebrated by Michael Fried. The act of spraying paint resembles film projection to the extent that Jules Olitski’s great dream, according to Annette Michelson (via Fried), was to spray colour the air. And it is possible I think to see the lead splashings of Richard Serra (as they are re-performed in the films of Matthew Barney) as a form of projection.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, Tony Conrad’s post-minimalist performance, *Sukiyaki*, makes the clearest link.

More to the point, few of Smith’s black sculptures have survived, made largely, it would seem in order to be photographed. When they did appear in public they did so briefly; any longevity that the works have achieved is due to their ‘presence’ in print. Take for instance this piece of reportage originally printed in *The Village Voice* before it was anthologised in Battcock’s book, along with the Sam Wagstaff interview: ‘The reason for Tony Smith’s sudden emergence as one of our most important sculptors can be seen these days behind the Main Branch of the New York Public Library in Bryant Park: eight plywood sculptures (painted black) based on modular principles of composition, all “Minimal”, all severly geometrical and all quite beautiful.’ (Battcock, p. 261) Of course the opposite is true. Smith’s importance was largely a construct of the time, one based on fleeting glimpses of the object (the clue here is the fragile temporality of ‘these days’). As Wagner goes on to suggest, Smith ‘emerges in these pages as the Minimalist ancestor, a still living household god,’ and his central position within Minimalism is based not on the experience of his work, but on its reading – or in Wagner’s more salient terms – ‘a misreading’’ that is ‘productive’ for the authors of Minimalism. (Battcock, p.14)

In Battcock’s defence, his editorial decisions (made at great speed) suggest that he may have been aware of what was happening. In another unlikely, but perhaps instructive, inclusion in Battcock’s *Minimal Art* we find Dan Graham’s ‘photographs’ (as they are titled by Battcock) of suburban housing developments, one of a series of magazine-based interventions made by Graham that critically examined the ‘site’ of art publishing. The critique (perhaps watered-down in Battcock’s process of anthologisiation) would be taken up in Jeff Wall’s early ‘cine-text’, *Landscape Manual*. Employing the same motif of the automobile – Smith’s view from within the moving (or in this case static) architecture of the car – could have been taken up by Wall in order to de-mystify the location of art within discourse as a filmic space, one based on moving images that circulate within an automatic system. As if to underline the metaphor, advertisements for galleries such as Castelli and Robert Fraser often employed automotive motifs (largely drawing on represented works by Ed Ruscha and Dennis Hopper) within *Artforum* during the period in which Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’ appeared.

Morris’s *Gas Station*, then, appears to be a play on all of this. While the right hand camera simultaneously records and constructs movement in space, the left hand camera imitates that static frame of a photograph. This is what Morris would later characterise, in his reclaiming of ‘presentness’ from Michael Fried, as a tension between ‘static and moving images.’ (Morris, date?, p. 178) Following Gregory Mead, Morris imagines a mobile subject moving through architectural space as a self divided between the ‘I’ of immediate perception and the ‘me’ of memory. As such, Minimalism was based on a conception of ‘real time’ experience similar to that advocated by experimental filmmakers who had come to prominence at the end of the 1960s: Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, Malcolm Le Grice. What *Gas Station* showed is that such a division inevitably breaks down; memory and perception, time and space, are inextricably bound up with one anther. Instead, in *Gas Station*, photography, cinema and space are collapsed into a generalised notion of the ‘filmic’ similar to that explored in the early films of Andy Warhol. Having said that, the series of filmic replies made by Morris in the years immediately following the publication of ‘Art and Objecthood’, suggest that the dream of Minimalism was not theatrical, in Fried’s sense, so much as it was cinematic. As with the ‘movies’, Minimalism was a space of reproducible images (and texts) that were mobile and continuously circulating. As such, the theatricality that Fried derided was not a function of art but a function of criticism (if the two could any longer be separated). As Robert Smithson put it in a reply of his own: ‘What Fried fears most is consciousness of what he is doing – namely being himself theatrical.’

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1. I had been struck at one point, by Jules Olitski’s statement, cited by Fried, that what he really wanted was to spray colour the air. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)