

journal of visual culture



Introduction: 50 Years of 'Art and Objecthood': Traces, Impact, Critique

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The idea of looking at 'Art and Objecthood' was prompted initially by the realization that it was coming up for a 50th anniversary. While we started with a plan to put together a 'critical history' or a reader of previous and new responses to the essay, we decided that what was at stake for us was to not consolidate what is canonical about the essay. Instead we wondered about where and when it was republished in parts of the world other than the United States and the Anglophone world, who assigned it and who read it, and on what kinds of thinking it may have had an impact. To put it another way, it seemed important to pry the discourse around 'Art and Objecthood' away from North America (and dare we say it, debates generated from or aimed at the journals *October* and *Critical Inquiry*), and away from how it sits within concerns about Modernism and its difficult cleaving into Postmodernism within the critical–historical writing about art of the last 40 or so years. We think this collection of eight newly written articles does this. None of the articles is a standard account of 'Art and Objecthood' or the more normative ways in which it has been debated within art history and criticism.

As colleagues at Central Saint Martins, we've been talking about Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' since we began to teach together around 2004. On the syllabus for the BA Fine Art students was a lecture on Minimalism and Fried's essay was required reading. It also featured in an assignment for which students had to choose amongst a selection of art writings and write a critical evaluation. As both of us had been assigned 'Art and Objecthood' on our undergraduate courses in the late 1980s – when it was already 20 years old – we wondered about its tenure in the mid-2000s. The local argument Fried made in 'Art and Objecthood' had in effect been lost, and in some regards any residual discussion over definitions of art in Fried's terms appeared foreclosed. The discussion had resolutely moved on. The dominant episteme was Postmodern or the 'post-medium', so in this

regard the essay worked (pedagogically-speaking) only as an opportunity to rehearse one example through which this happened. Nevertheless as a piece of art criticism, 'Art and Objecthood' held our interest.

To rehearse, albeit briefly, some of the background: the essay appeared in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum* magazine. This issue was remarkable in itself, as it contained – as well as Fried's essay and several other essays by critics – Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', Robert Morris's 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 3', and Robert Smithson's 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site'. That Fried's essay sat side by side with those by artists is part of why it registered so strongly when it was published. A small historical note is that this was the issue of the magazine, which had until then been based in California, that signalled its move to New York City, and thus from a relative backwater to the epicentre of the US art-world (Newman, 2000). The June 1967 issue, and the ones that followed, thus were part of a shift for *Artforum* and a play for relevance. Another note is that 'Art and Objecthood' was not the beginning of the argument that ensued. For at least a few years, the critics writing for the magazine – Fried, Barbara Rose (who was married to the painter Frank Stella), Annette Michelson and Max Kozloff – were starting to disagree sharply with each other, and artists were no small part of this. This is documented in Amy Newman's book about the history of the magazine, *Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962–1974* (2000). 'Art and Objecthood's' publication was one moment in a conversation that was running much longer, in print, in public talks, and in private.

Fried's essay was a critique of Minimalist sculpture and an argument for the principles of Modernist art that he thought were being negated by it. We will probably agree that his diagnosis was correct: Minimalism – at least how it was explained by some of the artists at the time – articulated an attack on the values for and definitions of art that Fried and others were committed to. But of course this is only the beginning of the story, because it is not ultimately about the specificity of this local debate, but what it stood for and what it impacted. Fried's main opposition was between 'art' and 'non-art', with Modernist art on one side and Minimalism – or what he also called 'Literalist art' – on the other. Minimalism, he argued, was not art, but a 'position', 'sensitivity' and 'ideology'. What was important to maintain was art's identity *as art*; 'Literalist sensitivity' constituted a negation of art. 'Objecthood', the term Fried used in the title of his essay and throughout is defined as 'the condition of non-art' (Fried, 1998[1967]: 152) The problem with Literalist art's embrace of non-art was that it was aggressive. He wrote:

[Literalist art] belongs ... to the history – almost the natural history – of sensitivity, and is not an isolated episode but a general and pervasive condition ... Specifically, literalist art conceives of itself as neither [modernist painting nor modernist sculpture] ... and it aspires ... to displace them. (pp. 148–149)

One of the things that Fried also perceived as important was a kind of 'bad faith' in the arguments made by Donald Judd and Robert Morris, or a kind of misdirection. Perhaps this is characteristic of all polemic and why Fried was so aggressive in return.

Against the claims made by the artists that Minimalism was different from the 'old' part-by-part abstract (and humanist) sculpture that preceded it, Fried argued that Minimalist sculpture defined itself in terms that resonated with bodies – human ones. Whereas Judd makes claims for Minimalism in a new, anti-humanist or post-Idealist philosophy, Fried counters that his ideas are rooted in *nature* (p. 156). He insisted that a 'latent or hidden naturalism ... lies at the centre of literalist theory or practice' (p. 157). He mentions Robert Morris's sculpture, *Untitled* (1966), illustrated in the article, writing, 'It is, as numerous commentators have remarked approvingly, as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life.' He describes this as an effect of the sculpture being 'a large ringlike form in two halves, with fluorescent light glowing from within at the narrow gap between the two' (p. 156). This, Fried writes, is 'blatantly anthropomorphic'. And this is what he calls Minimalism's 'theatre'.

Theatricality is the term Fried uses to describe the special – and for him, spurious – *effect* that Minimalism depends upon. For Fried, 'theatre' is all effect and no art. It is experience without an intelligent or intelligible framing of that experience. It is the world of objects (non-art) and not 'art'. 'Theater is context', he writes. Theatre is exactly 'the condition of non-art'. Theatre is also 'profoundly hostile to the arts' (p. 160). To re-iterate, this is also 'Objecthood', the state of being that anything has just in its very existence.

One might well wonder at this point what Fried defines as 'art'. In the main he refers to art in the essay as 'modernist painting and sculpture' (he is explicit elsewhere that he used these terms to acknowledge Clement Greenberg). He is also invested in the term *pictorial*, which he sees as the 'project' art has been involved with since the 18th century. And, of course, there are artists that he stands behind, including David Smith, Anthony Caro and Jules Olitski. He describes work by Caro and Olitski by illustrated examples (Caro's *Flax* and *London*, both 1966, and Olitski's *Bunga 45*, 1967) to explain how Modernist painting and sculpture may approach the status of an ordinary object but remain nevertheless unlike them. In other regards, Fried leaves the issue as strategically unspecified, and this is part of his argument. Art's identity *as art* is at stake, but this doesn't have to do with particular materials or shapes and the qualities or signification they may hold (an interesting point of comparison is where he describes Judd's reliance on new materials or materials not associated with art, and spurious claim that materials do not signify beyond their 'obdurate identity') (p. 165). Equally, for Fried, an artwork's *presence* is not important for art because everything already has presence. This is why he takes issue with the word Judd liked to use in his own criticism: 'interest'. Fried contrasts this with 'conviction'. Art, for Fried, has to elicit 'the conviction that a particular

painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt' (p. 165). And – in another opposition of terms – he contrasts Minimalism's *duration* with Modernist art's *presentness*. The former is endless and aggressive (he compares it to 'a road that is circular'). The latter – art – provokes an experience of 'no duration', where 'at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest' (p. 167).

We will not rehearse here the considerable discussions that developed against and out of Fried's essay (such as by Rosalind Krauss, 1972, WJT Mitchell, 1983, Caroline Jones, 2000, and so on), but we do wish to cite two immediate responses by two artists, one for and one against, both published as Letters to the Editor in *Artforum*. Explicitly taking Judd and Morris to task and implicitly aligning herself with Fried, painter Jo Baer (1967) raised the issue of art's changing identity. She wrote that Judd 'implies that any vacuformed plexi-bas-relief is automatically superior to any contemporary ideated marks on a flat surface'. This seems an interesting comment upon those who would reify Minimalist art's forms and materials and take it as a set of strategies. She continues, 'but ideas are ideas. Ideas and materials have a functional relationship, not an identity' (p. 6). Robert Smithson (1967), in contrast and in the form of a brilliant invective, accused Fried of trumping up the differences between Modernism and Minimalism. He called 'Art and Objecthood' a 'fictive inquisition' and quite acutely drew out Fried's moralistic tenor and put it back on him. He wrote:

The terrors of infinity are taking over the mind of Michael Fried. Corrupt appearances of endlessness worse than any known Evil. A radical skepticism, known only to the dreadful 'literalists' is making inroads into intimate 'shapeness.' Non-durational labyrinths of time are infecting his brain with eternity.

And Fried himself returned to 'Art and Objecthood' in the late 1990s when he published a collection of his 1960s art criticism. He included a long, biographical introduction to reflect on and contextualize the essay.

What remains clear is how thoroughly the scenario opened up by Judd, Morris, Smithson and Tony Smith and others, is now a given. The prevailing explanation for art is that it is not something apart from other things, but it actively seeks out situations and ways of participating in the world that are explicitly not set off in a place with other art. When Fried quotes Morris describing the way sculpture would be better if *not* sited in a space already structured for art – an 'Architecturally designed sculpture court' (p. 159), for example – we say, of course. Part of what's interesting about art – its currency and its power – is how it resists its own conventionality and exceeds the limits set on it. The point that bears reiterating is that Fried and the artists he was criticizing were looking at the same situation and agreeing on it for the most part. But – and this is tricky – they present different

versions of it. It's like there are two views, two frames, two narratives for the ongoing project for art, and these two views appear to negate each other but at other times they align disconcertingly. What we can say about Fried's essay is that criticism is at least as important as the art. Criticism, and art, had a large role to play in helping art find a way of being in society, and this was the ambition – for art to be both oppositional to and a sanctuary from a society that would otherwise subsume it. Art's power, Fried contends, is that it is intelligible as art. The part criticism had to play was to help articulate the historical and philosophical conditions that constitute art's engagement. And, looking back, there's little question that what he seems to have feared came true. Minimalist sculptures are read *as art*. This is incontrovertible. They seem, now, closer to Modernist painting and sculpture than they do to 'ordinary objects', although this is to see them in institutional terms, not necessarily philosophical ones.

Turning to the articles in this issue of *journal of visual culture*, all eight of them stake, in one way or another, an expanded reading of 'Art and Objecthood' out of its normative boundaries and into areas that we now consider to be those of visual culture. Stephen Melville set himself the task of tracking the relationship between philosophy, criticism, theory and history through the interconnected work of Michael Fried, Stanley Cavell and Arthur Danto. In his article "'Art and Objecthood", Philosophy', what emerges is the question of the object, the function of the object, and 'objectivity'. First within 'Art and Objecthood' and our understanding of 'objecthood' and then moving beyond, Melville opens up the question to the formation of knowledge and experience around an object, whether it be an artwork or not, within art history, visual culture, and the arts and humanities more generally. This enables the bold claim that: although 'we would rather know objects – would rather be "objective" about them – than ask about what it is to have an object at all', it is in 'the arts and humanities ... above all the places where that question insists on being asked – that's why our practices are as apparently simple as reading and looking at and making things; that's how we think, how we insist on the fact of the world.'

In 'From *Black Square* to Room Square', Margarita Tupitsyn compares theories of abstraction and objects in Suprematism and Constructivism and in the work and writing of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, thereby reframing the establishment of Minimalism from an alternative geographical and cultural position. Looking at these two 'moments of crisis' in Modernism suggests more was in play within Minimalism than Fried accounted for in 'Art and Objecthood'. Tupitsyn recounts that, although Judd writes about Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* in his review of the Russian's exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1963 he had in fact not seen it, as none of the four versions of the painting were included in the show. Rather, Judd's interpretation of Malevich's painting fell within terms already outlined in Russian Modernist aesthetic discourse. Using Fried's critique of Minimalism as a kind of guide, Tupitsyn offers a counter-story: Judd's invitation to

Ilya Kabakov to make an installation in a derelict barracks at his place in Marfa, Texas, which leads us into the ideological space of installation art. Tupitsyn's article places something else in the moments of Minimalism's genesis and apotheosis which realigns both the timing and topography of the 'end of Modernism'.

Phoebe von Held's article, 'Brecht's Anti-Theatricality? Reflections on Brecht's Place in Michael Fried's Conceptual Framework', examines Fried's annexation of Brecht's theatre into his anti-theatrical agenda for progressive art practice. Undertaking a close and nuanced reading of Fried's complex description of the beholder's relationship to minimalist art, Von Held demonstrates how the role of the spectator actually aligns itself with Brecht's understanding of theatre, specifically his idea of distanciation. Thus the ideological position of minimalist art, that Fried criticizes, is present rather than negated within the political stage of Brechtian theatre. What seems to be an analogous representation of the anti-theatrical relationship that the spectator maintains towards an artwork or play within Fried and Brecht's work shows itself to be otherwise.

In his article 'Failure to Engage: Art Criticism in the Age of Simulacrum', Daniel Rubinstein reads 'Art and Objecthood' against the development of mass media, late capitalism and hyperreality in the 1960s that, he suggests, Fried failed to attend to in his model of criticism. Rubinstein follows three threads: a review of theories of the Real and the Copy from Plato through Kant; a re-reading of Fried's appropriation of theatricality; and lastly he stakes a claim about the nature of art in a period of advanced and highly technological information systems. Arguing that, contra-Fried, the readymade offers an immersive experience equal to the authentic work of art, Rubinstein suggests that Fried paradoxically makes art into an object. Following Jean-François Lyotard in his *Libidinal Economy*, he explains:

This is not because art here is rejecting a reference to reality, but because reality itself is understood as mass-produced object, and for that reason indefinitely signified, continuously recurring, subject to the logic of technology and the perpetual reformulation of commodities for new markets.

Joanne Morra's article 'On Use: Art Education and Psychoanalysis' focuses on one of the key examples in 'Art and Objecthood' and departs from it decisively to explore the ways in which Fried's essay works in the teaching of fine art practice. Discussing the ways she has used the essay at different times, Morra describes art education as being constituted by moments of unlearning and destruction, re-use and unravelling, and delayed and non-linear understandings that she explains by way of Sigmund Freud's concept of 'after-education' (*Nacherziehung*). What is at stake is the value of a fine art education, whether or not a person becomes a practising artist. Describing what her students articulated about what motivates them and why they learn, she writes,

The education they desired was to relearn what it means to live creatively, pleurably, and that the rest would follow. It was as if without teaching them this psychoanalytic lesson about radical uncertainty, unlearning and living with pleasure, they had learned something *about* psychoanalysis and something *from* it. (emphases in original)

'Art and Objecthood' remains, for Morra, an essay worth engaging with precisely because it issues so many challenges, to reading, to the frames we use to describe art, and because it stakes so clear a position, whether or not you agree with it, and presses you to respond.

Victor Tupitsyn explores the co-occurrence of 'Art and Objecthood's' timing with the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle* in his article, 'Fried avec Debord: Theatricality by Default'. His is an argument to go well beyond arguments between universality and specificity, autonomy or situatedness. Tupitsyn proposes Fried and Debord be read together not for how they critique theatre or alienation, but for what they can do for present discussions of immaterial labour, the erosion of public space and public dialogue, or the effects of mass digitization. Tupitsyn asks:

Should this aesthetic configuration of thinking be extended to political actions and to the logic of their arrangement? Is it good for an artwork to switch places with critical and poetic narratives? If so, can 'spectacle culture' along with 'the condition of theater' make it look all-inclusive? Today art and politics are completely hung up on glamour. If it were possible to mount a glamour-free exhibition, it would still be glamorous by virtue of inversion – its unglamorosity.

Alison Green's article, "A Supreme Fiction": Michael Fried and Art Criticism' traces Fried's concern with 'Art and Objecthood' in and through his other critical and art historical writings. She proposes that the particular way Fried actively crosses between historical research and writing and that of the present, constituted in his model of art criticism, provides what is a relatively rare example to see a writer in formation over time. What she finds, in contrast to those who argue that Fried's terminology aims at universality, are dialectical relationships between artists and their prospective viewers, both conditioned historically. While Fried uses terms repeatedly, close readings show them to be things he works on and into while 'coming to terms' with what artists make and do.

In his article, 'An "Automatic Escape" or a "Beautiful Question"? Cinema and Experimental Film after Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood"', Duncan White attends closely to the artistic responses to the essay, moreover in the form of artworks. Looking at five films made by Robert Morris in a short span of time after the publication of the essay, White explores the shifting nature of vision, the construction of subjectivity through film and

versions of theatricality contrary to Fried's, that can be traced through each of them. Each of the films becomes an argument contra Fried about two things: the nature of viewership and art's duration over 'real' not virtual time. White's article provides an eloquent reading of Morris's work but moreover a strong argument for the way experimental film has been used as a tool to communicate an argument on its own terms. This speaks, as White observes, to a glitch in Fried's handling of late Modernism: in Fried's own words:

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 ... would be extremely rewarding.

White troubles this exemption with an account of experimental films that challenged the concept of art's autonomy, and a precise account of how Morris contributed to its development in the years directly following the publication of 'Art and Objecthood'.

Together these articles offer a set of alternative lenses through which to consider 'Art and Objecthood'. Tracing its impact outside its more normative frames of reference, this issue of *journal of visual culture* hopes to show, through an engagement with 'Art and Objecthood', the ways in which art history and criticism can travel quite comfortably into various disciplines such as philosophy, the formation of an authorial oeuvre, film studies, drama and theatre, cultural studies, education, and psychoanalysis to find its way into the field of Visual Culture.

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