

A Modernist Fiction

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REFERENCES

Fried, Michael. *Contre la théâtralité : du minimalisme à la photographie contemporaine*, Paris : Gallimard, 2007, (Essais)

- 1 In 1998, a comprehensive anthology of writings by Michael Fried (born in 1939), produced between 1962 and 1977, was published in the United States¹. The book recently put out by Gallimard brings together fewer writings, but the period it spans is longer: 1966 to 2006. This well-translated volume starts with Fried's heroes Morris Louis ("the last great painter [...] who did not have to face the risk of his canvases being perceived as objects"), Jules Olitski, Frank Stella (the analysis of the spread of the literalness of the medium and surface throughout the picture in the series of irregular polygons is outstanding) and Anthony Caro. Then comes the essay on which Fried built his career: "Art et objectité" (1967)². This article, one of the most famous in the critical literature of the latter half of the 20th century, was written to defend the values of high-modernism that were under threat from Minimalism, also known as literalism, because it aimed to produce pieces that were nothing more than what they were. Modernist art "may have assumed as a dictate the invalidation and suspension of its own objecthood" (the picture should be perceived as the medium of a pictorial form and not as an object in a given space), but literalist art sought, on the contrary, to glorify this objecthood. But "the way the literalist trend clung to objecthood was in fact just a plea for a new theatrical genre", because it "focused on the real circumstances of the encounter between the work [...] and the viewer", because Minimalism played with the exhibition space, lighting conditions, and the spectator's field of vision. "Literalist art is experienced as an object placed in a *situation* which, almost by definition, *includes* the spectator". Unlike the modernist artwork which fuels the ambition to be able to exempt itself from a presentation, the way that minimalist art

functions is stage-like. It could be compared with the actor acting in relation to the *décor* around him, his fellow actors, and the audience.

- 2 After writing off as theatrical the position taken by literalism of situating the work of art within the real space of our perception of it, the essayist comes to the issue of time. He quotes Robert Morris: "The experience of a work is of necessity situated in time". Through this aspect, too, the literalist aesthetic is theatrical, for "what is summoned by the theatre, essentially, [is] the feeling of a time-frame." Here again, literalism contrasts diametrically with modernism, because, with the paintings and sculptures that lay claim to this latter, everything happens as if our experience [...] had no time span" (what Fried calls "presentness").
- 3 By hiding neither the space surrounding the work nor the time involved by our perception of it, otherwise put theatrical, Minimalism must be fought. Now, as we all know, "the theatre today is the negation of art". This kind of assertion never fails to come as a surprise: for the contemporary sensibility, theatre has almost become the paragon of art—the stage being understood as the relatively autonomous place of a complex-free illusionism. But for Fried, the theatre is not really theatre. The proof of this pudding is that he never attacks the artistic gestures of the day which, more than the "specific objects" of Donald Judd, seem to hold up in the environs of the theatre: performance and happenings. In the Friedian doctrine, the theatre is just a synonym of art that is aware of having a spectator and being in the same space and in the same time as him. Art cannot accept this kind of overcrowding with the theatre of the world.
- 4 In the final lines of the essay, Fried specifies his motivations one last time, then he lets slip a confession: "And it is a sure thing that the inspiration for this essay came to me through the desire to distinguish between what seems to me to be the authentic art of our day and age, and the other works which [...] seem to me to have certain qualities associated with the concepts of literalism and theatre. I would nevertheless [...] like to underline that this sensibility and way of being that I here describe as corrupted and perverted by the theatre is something very current—virtually universal. We are all literalists, at each moment of our lives, or more or less". So only an illusion, Fried admits, can enable paintings and sculptures to seemingly exist outside the onlooker's time and space.
- 5 The volume ends with a 2006 essay, "L'autonomie aujourd'hui : quelques photographies récentes". Through an analysis of works of three contemporary artists, Fried tries to define the new strategies of anti-theatricality, which break "the [modernist] frame of the ontological fiction of the non-existence of the spectator". It may seem an established fact that, in Thomas Struth's photographs of museums, Fried considers the issue of the link between art and viewer, concluding with the indifference of the works shown therein to everything that exists outside of them, but on the other hand the assertion whereby Jeff Wall's photography aims at aesthetic autonomy would surely gain from being further discussed. Lastly, Fried comments on Douglas Gordon's tremendous piece, *Déjà vu*, which consists of three projections, gradually synchronized, on three contiguous screens, of a film by Rudolph Maté, *D.O.A.* According to him, because of the theatricalization due to the device chosen, the absorption of the lead actor takes on a new visibility. Now, as the absorption of the character in an activity denies the spectator's gaze and thus turns out to be anti-theatrical, Gordon's work means that with it theatricalization works to anti-theatrical ends. So one cannot help thinking that making anti-theatricality the sole

instrument for reading the aesthetic changes of the half century just elapsed may at times verge on blindness.

NOTES

1. Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 351 p.
2. This major text was, oddly enough, no longer available in its unabridged version in French.