

SPECIAL FOCUS

# MICHAEL FRIED

WHY PHOTOGRAPHY MATTERS

WORDS

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Next year Michael Fried, one of the world's foremost art critics, publishes his eagerly anticipated analysis of contemporary art photography. *ArtReview* caught up with him for a sneak preview of what's to come.

Though it did not end Michael Fried's activity as an art critic, 'Art and Objecthood', his 1967 polemic against minimalist art as a fundamentally 'theatrical' artform, and thus one at odds with the best that the modernist tradition had to offer, caused many to wish it had. That essay galvanised an entire generation of artists and critics who were done with the brand of Modernism – which is to say Clement Greenberg's Modernism – that Fried seemed to uphold, and their opposition was fierce. By the 1970s it was obvious that contemporary art was heading in a radically different direction, and for many, the art that Fried championed – the painting of Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, the sculpture of Anthony Caro – no longer belonged to the present.

Fried did end up turning away from writing criticism in the 1970s, but this had nothing to do with the perception that he'd become Modernism's whipping boy. Unconvinced by his opponents, Fried went to work establishing the historical trajectory of the Modernism at stake in 'Art and Objecthood', which he did through a trilogy of pathbreaking books: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), *Courbet's Realism* (1990) and *Manet's Modernism: or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (1996). A different pair of books – *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (1987) and *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth Century Berlin* (2002) – seemed to promise a second trilogy, but one now concerned with Realism, Modernism's conceptual 'other'. If this was indeed the case, then what would the final instalment look like?... like something few would have expected. In autumn 2008 Fried will publish *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (Yale University Press), a book that promises a blazing reentry into the criticism of contemporary artistic practice. This past spring, the journal *Critical Inquiry* published an early version of one of the new book's chapters, entitled 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', and I took that opportunity to ask the author a few questions about what is to come.

**ArtReview:** Aside from Jeff Wall, what other contemporary photographers will be treated in the new book? And are they to be paired with particular conceptual concerns, as Wall is with 'the everyday', for example?

**Michael Fried:** Most of the photographers I discuss are extremely well known: in addition to Wall, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, Candida Höfer, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Beat Streuli (his videos), Hiroshi Sugimoto, Jean-Marc Bustamante... also Luc Delahaye, Patrick Faigenbaum, James

Welling (an early work of his), Cindy Sherman (somewhat in passing), Stephen Shore (in contrast to Bustamante)... you get the idea.

As for conceptual concerns, yes, they play a big role in the book. My reading of the Bechers operates in relation to the notion of objecthood as it was first formulated 40 years ago in 'Art and Objecthood', for example. And in order to do that, I have to use as a framework Hegel on genuine versus spurious (or good versus bad) infinity in his works on logic. Also a key passage in Wittgenstein's early Notebooks. That sort of thing.

**AR:** Particularly with your book *Menzel's Realism*, and now with the direct treatment of Wittgenstein in the chapter on Wall, it seems as if you are engaging more directly with certain philosophers and philosophical positions that have been central to the philosopher Stanley Cavell's work. I know that Cavell has served for a long time as something of an intellectual interlocutor for you, but is this book on photography your own *The World Viewed* [1971; a meditation on Modernism in art and the nature of media – specifically photography and film – in which Cavell also discusses his debt to the works of Michael Fried]? Are you chasing after an 'ontology' of photography?

**MF:** As you say, my intellectual comradeship with Cavell goes back a very long way and continues to be extremely fruitful for both of us, I think. I'm not conscious of steering more into his territory than before, but that may simply be because his writings and Wittgenstein's have been acutely present to me since the 1960s. And as I say, my involvement in this book – at least in the key chapter on the Bechers – with Hegel comes in part out of a new close intellectual friendship, this one with Robert Pippin of the University of Chicago. And on another front, my general theoretical stance in *Why Photography Matters* is more or less identical with that of Walter Benn Michaels in his brilliant book of several years ago, *The Shape of the Signifier* [1967]. Nor do I think of this book as my version of Cavell's *The World Viewed* – I am involved, more or less continuously, with ontological issues, but I'm not aiming at an 'ontology' of photography. Rather, this book tries to give a detailed account of the present stakes – the 'deep' imperatives – of a particular body of art photography. In terms of genre, the book hovers for me somewhere between history and criticism, or rather it partakes of both at the same time.

**AR:** 'Absorption and theatricality' are the terms of a dialectic, or rather, of a functional opposition, with deep roots in the writing and thought of Diderot, which has served as something of a controlling interest in your work

ever since your days as a critic. More recently, though, another set of terms has surfaced out of the scholarly endeavours: 'mindedness' and 'facingness'. Are these extensions of that original pair of terms, or do they carry a conceptual weight and nuance that exceeds the Diderotian pair?

**MF:** I don't think of 'mindedness' in particular in that light. Again, it's a term that comes ultimately from Hegel and functions in a somewhat different register. In *Why Photography Matters* I have a lot to say about absorption again (or still), in relation to – sometimes in tension with – what I call 'to-be-seeness', which I want to distinguish from theatricality in the pejorative sense of the term. In other words, the basic conceptual machinery of my *Absorption* trilogy is still in play, under changed circumstances. Put more strongly, I argue in this book that serious and important art continues to be made and experienced under a version of the Diderotian regime or dispensation. And moreover that 'Art and Objecthood' continues to be a relevant guide to recent events, if the latter, and indeed 'Art and Objecthood', are rightly understood. These are, of course, extremely contentious claims, and it takes the whole of my book to try to make them good.

**AR:** If you are claiming a persistence in the present of what you call the 'Diderotian regime or dispensation', is this an implicit claim for the persistence (and continued relevance or necessity) of Modernism itself? And if so, does this require a new or reconfigured historical periodisation – ie, 'anti-theatricality' as transcending the limits of Modernism?

**MF:** That's a killer question, and the truth is I don't quite know how to answer it at this moment. It's significant, I think, that in *Why Photography Matters* I simply sidestep the whole issue of Modernism; what I mean is, in the course of writing the book, the claims I was determined to make concerned the persistence of the basic problematic of beholding and/or objecthood, rather than some further set of claims about the persistence of Modernism, which would have seemed... ideological, as if I had a theoretical axe to grind. Whereas the book as it stands in effect says, look, this is what I think is at stake in the work of 15 or so of the most important art photographers of the past 30 or more years, and if you don't like what I've done or you believe I'm wrong, you had better be able to offer superior readings of the art in question. I'm happy to leave matters that way for the time being.

*Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before will be published by Yale University Press in autumn 2008*