

MARTIN HEIDEGGER ALWAYS HELD THAT YOU CAN ONLY EVER HAVE ONE GREAT IDEA; and when it comes, it's best to stick to it (QED: *Being and Time*, 1927). So it is undoubtedly fitting that in his new book, Michael Fried turns to Heidegger to help illuminate what Fried identifies as 'a new art-photographic regime'. Because, for anyone familiar with Fried's corpus – from 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), his seminal essay on minimalist art and late Modernism, to his monographic tomes on Edouard Manet, Gustav Courbet, Thomas Eakins and Adolph Menzel – it will come as no surprise that *Why Photography Matters* takes its place within an art historical and intellectual edifice built entirely upon the foundations of just one such idea: the defeat of 'theatricality'.

Briefly, 'theatricality' describes a general aesthetic condition by which works of art, be they painting or sculpture, theatre, film or, now, photographs, make a point of their status as things to be beheld. At first glance, all works of art presumably fit such a notion of 'theatricality'. But during the eighteenth century, largely due to Denis Diderot, one of the period's great *philosophes*, and particularly as it related to his assessments of French painting and theatre of the *Ancien Régime*, there emerged a distinctly 'antitheatrical' impulse, where, by various different strategies, artworks were fashioned in such a way as to create, according to Fried, the 'ontological fiction that the beholder does not exist'. In securing such separateness from their audience, works of art might access their own autonomy, their own world, separate and distinct from that which is irrevocably tied to human sense and sensibilities. Perhaps the primary strategy by which this ontological fiction operated in works of eighteenth-century art was through depictions of figures thoroughly 'absorbed' in states of work or reverie. And indeed, Fried is at his best on pictures of such 'absorption' in contemporary photography.

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Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before

By Michael Fried
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Jeff Wall is the key figure here. The nucleus of Fried's argument regarding this 'new art-photographic regime' lies in a pair of chapters on Wall's large lightbox transparencies. Through masterful readings of works such as Wall's *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison*, the *Prologue* (1999–2001) and *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999), Fried demonstrates Wall's persistent adherence to the antitheatrical ideal that Fried has traced for his entire career. And it is Wall that gives Fried occasion to expand the philosophical reach of that project. In close readings of Heidegger (on the distinction between the 'present-to-hand' and the 'ready-to-hand', between a world of mere 'objects' and a horizon of not-so-mere 'things') and Wittgenstein (on the concept of the everyday, which also entails a distinction between *der Gegenstand* – object – and *das Einzelne* – individual thing), Fried recognises an affinity between these philosophers' ontological commitments and his own long-running conviction in the fundamental separation between art and mere objecthood.

If *Why Photography Matters* has designs larger than remaining a monographic study of Wall's work (as its title indicates it does), this points to a problem: Fried's readings of photographs by Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth, Bernd & Hilla Becher, Candida Höfer, Andreas Gursky, Rineke Dijkstra and others come off as exercises in self-recognition, occasions for the elaboration of certain strategies of antitheatricality – 'severing', 'transparency', 'to-be-seenness' – which are never as strong as they are in the case of Wall (apart from Fried's exceptional reading of Thomas Demand's photographs as 'allegories of intention'.)

What remains unanswered too is the greater significance of this antitheatrical impulse for history itself. Fried does well to answer the question of why photography found itself engaged with the problem of theatricality, but the question 'Why now?' is left open. Only the barest gestures are made at the digital transformation of the medium over the past 20 years. Showing why photography matters now as an art requires more than demonstrating that it matters in the way that certain paintings did in the eighteenth century, or that it exhibits deep connections to certain philosophical projects in the twentieth. And this is the key: photography matters now as an art, for Fried, because not only can he identify in it concerns that have been close to his own for some time, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because he can point to contemporary photographic practices as vindicating his own, much embattled perspective on what makes art what it is, which is to say, what makes it meaningful. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*





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