RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

RACAR
Revue d'art canadienne | Canadian Art Review

Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008, 409 pp., 70 colour and 90 black-and-white illus., cloth $55 U.S., ISBN: 9780300136845

Sharla Sava

Volume 36, Number 1, 2011

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066756ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1066756ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Sava, S. (2011). Review of [Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008, 409 pp., 70 colour and 90 black-and-white illus., cloth $55 U.S., ISBN: 9780300136845]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *36*(1), 71–74. https://doi.org/10.7202/1066756ar

Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008, 409 pp., 70 colour and 90 black-and-white illus., cloth $55 U.S., ISBN: 9780300136845.

American Idol will never be the same now that judge Simon Cowell has left the show. Many of you will recall those occasions when Cowell, who, after offering a particularly callous condemnation of a lacklustre performance, inspires a round of guffaws by audiences and contestants alike. Cowell, registering his indignation at being silenced, then cries out, "Just an opinion!" What is amusing, of course, is that Cowell's is not "just an opinion." His judgment of a performance counts—or did count—in a way that others' judgments do not; it is more influential, and more highly visible, than those of the contestants, the audience, and arguably even the opinions of fellow judges. It is in this vein that I see the introductory remarks of Michael Fried's book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, which, in their calculated indignation, strike a tone reminiscent of Cowell's: "[T]he chapters that follow constantly refer to my own earlier writings; I declare this up front, to preempt the facile criticism that I am excessively preoccupied with my own ideas…I know it is too much to ask, but it would be useful if readers impatient with what I have done were to feel compelled to offer superior interpretations of their own" (p. 2). Aside from the problems with assuming that art publishing is an equal opportunity playing field, this is an unfortunate tone to strike at the outset of a book. I am not the first to remark that Fried's cranky and defensive posture is bound to make the reader—*any* reader, but perhaps especially younger generations—less receptive to his project.[1] Fortunately the book as a whole soon turns to the business at hand, which is to say, art-historical analysis, and, in so doing, ultimately rewards the reader's investment in time and effort.

Drawing from his earlier investigations into modernism, Fried's book, *Why Photography Matters*, attempts to position contemporary, large-scale photography firmly within the modernist canon. As he explains in the opening pages, what led the him to take on this project was his discovery that the interrogation of theatricality once present in modern painting and sculpture has recently gravitated to the arena of contemporary photography. This is Fried's governing claim, and it serves to unify and justify the research and argument throughout the book. In so doing, it returns us to the subject we associate with Fried and his previous scholarship while also casting a net across a range of previously unconsidered art practices.

Canadian readers will be struck by Fried's pervasive reliance on the Vancouver-based photographer Jeff Wall, whose art and critical writing are referenced throughout the book. While Fried's theoretical apparatus draws from photography writings by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Jean-Francois Chevrier, with additional references to Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and to a lesser extent Hegel, Wall's ideas remain his central inspiration. As declared from the outset, it is the figure of Jeff Wall that most permeates Fried's thinking on photography. His friendship with Wall has been crucial to his understanding of photography, and forms a central part of the book's argument. In Fried's account, Wall's artistic and intellectual contributions demand our attention because they have salvaged the Western pictorial tradition and changed the course of contemporary art. As Julian Stallabrass has recently observed, Wall has been particularly influential in both picture and prose; that is, he has provided not only a substantial body of work but also a formidable argument about how his approach to photography should be positioned within the history of art.[2] Fried's undeniable fascination with Wall ends up being one of the structural weaknesses of the book: one wishes it was either monograph or survey, rather than a confusing mixture of both.

In chapter one, Fried outlines several of the issues that will inform the book's argument. One of these is the role played by cinema in the new art photography, as seen in works by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Wall during the late seventies. Rather than surveying the relationship between film and art, Fried shows how the cinematic modes engaged by these artists employ the theatrical in complex and contradictory ways. He emphasizes that these artists rely on cinematic photography to create viewing distance, steering away from the immersive or absorptive engagement experienced by an audience watching a movie. It would be erroneous, from this point of view, to assume that staged photography is automatically, or purely, cinematic or even theatrical. Rather, all three artists rely on photography as a way of avoiding the absorption offered by film, allowing for the issue of theatricality to surface. In other words, Fried stresses that the distinction between theatrical and antitheatrical photographs cannot be determined solely on the basis that staging or other cinematic conventions have been used to construct the picture.

In chapter two, "Jeff Wall and Absorption; Heidegger on Worldhood and Technology," Michael Fried uses Jeff Wall's picture *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Department of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992) as a way of introducing his views about the changing modes of absorption that have appeared in contemporary photography. Fried likens *Adrian Walker* to eighteenth-century French genre painting. Historically, Chardin and others portrayed figures absorbed in everyday activity to establish painting as an autonomous world, separate from the gaze of the viewer. In contemporary photography, however, the absorptive tradition of Chardin has been disrupted by overtly performative and theatrical conventions. Acknowledging absorption without attempting to revive it, artists including Wall

create pictures in which absorption is a motif, while also devising various means through which the performative and constructed nature of the picture is acknowledged. Fried adopts the (rather clunky!) term "to-be-seenness" to show the way that the visual representation of absorption has been challenged and revised since the eighteenth century by artists including Jeff Wall. "To-be-seenness" is used throughout the book to designate a complex condition somewhere between theatricality and absorption.

Fried's reading of art history as an evolution in the problematics of beholding helps to explain his enthusiasm for the new art photography. As he argued in his influential 1967 article "Art and Objecthood," the advent of Minimalism in the sixties made a radical departure from viewing conventions, changing the course of modernism by introducing an intensification of theatricality in art.[3] While the advent of Minimalism changed the course of high modernism, the new photography has re-opened the older problematic of beholding and has restored crucial pictorial questions posed by artists since the Renaissance. It is in this vein that readers can recognize Fried's foray into contemporary photography as the means of reworking the claims once advanced in "Art and Objecthood."

Fried opens chapter three by arguing that Jeff Wall's artistic development, from the staged and more political pictures of the eighties to a recent interest in documentary photography, shows an increasing concern with pleasure or beauty in the everyday. Fried is particularly fond of *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999), designating it one of Wall's "masterpieces" (p. 66), in part because of the simplicity of the image. The monumental photo, depicting the single figure of a window cleaner at work in the Barcelona Pavilion built by Mies van der Rohe, plays with interior and exterior space. The building, destroyed after the original 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona but reconstructed in 1986, thus signifies both the restoration and maintenance of progressive modernist ideals. By creating pictorial space that does not actively solicit the viewer's gaze, Wall's near-documentary photos represent an "anti-theatrical ideal" for Fried, recalling arguments made by Diderot with reference to theatre and painting in the eighteenth century.

Chapter four argues for the relevance of Roland Barthes's short book of personal reflections, *Camera Lucida* (1981), to the Friedian/Diderotian anti-theatrical tradition. Fried concentrates on the comparison between *studium* and *punctum*, used by Barthes to address the question of how we read photographs. For Fried, Barthes's *punctum* recalls Diderot and his defense of conventional theatre's fourth wall, where drama is performed as though the beholder or audience was not present. Fried's decision to align Barthes with the *tableau* or fourth-wall theatre championed by Diderot may seem surprising, however, given that Barthes's writings are explicitly wary, and at times downright condemning, of such theatre. In his 1972 essay "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," for instance, Barthes is particularly wary of the *tableau*, which he takes as a form of undesirable legislation and control.[4] During the course of the chapter Fried does admit that Barthes's notion of the *punctum* is radically anti-theatrical and its refusal of performance is even more sustained than that of Diderot. For the most part, however, Fried chooses not to engage with these intellectual contradictions, staying closely focused on *Camera Lucida*. It is not until the final paragraph of the chapter that Fried acknowledges that the consideration of theatricality in Barthes's work is beyond the scope of his own analysis. Given that Barthes offers a rich and enduring critique of theatre, including thoughts about Diderot specifically, it seems that Fried chose to miss a productive opportunity to work through existing debates about the place of theatricality in modernity.

In chapter five, Fried concentrates on Thomas Struth's well-known museum photographs, which are based on anonymous crowds viewing famous artworks in a variety of museums. Rather than interpreting the series as showing the correlation between painting and photography, Fried champions their ability to convey artistic autonomy. In portraying iconic paintings exhibited in the halls of a busy museum, Struth's photos convey the means by which the dramatic interior of the painted picture remains apart and fundamentally separate from its context of display. One of the most fascinating aspects of the museum pictures is, of course, their portrayal of museum viewers absorbed in the act of beholding. While the portrayal of absorbed subjects is relevant, Fried emphasizes that it is the demonstration of two separate worlds (painted, photographed) that places Struth in the anti-theatrical tradition.

In chapter six, Fried, through an examination of the *tableau* format, continues to argue for the link between modernism and contemporary art photography. As is widely recognized, the *tableau* is deeply intertwined with modern art history and, more precisely, with the painting of modern life and the advent of modernism. Building on the influential terrain initially established by French art historian Jean-Francois Chevrier, Fried champions the characteristic monumentality of the *tableau* scale, in both painting and photography, because it engages and even confronts the viewer, requiring a certain distance for viewing. Fried sees the advent of *tableau* photography, popular since the late seventies, as an explicit reaction against the conceptual and vanguardist experimentation of the sixties and seventies. In the chapter, Fried aims to show that, through the use of the *tableau*, artists such as Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Luc Delahaye, and Jeff Wall have been able to re-establish a means by which to engage with the aesthetics of the picture, thus also evoking modernist concerns.

The groundwork for this claim is the understanding that modernist autonomy was tied to notions of both medium specificity and self-reflexivity. That is, in the case of modernist painting, aesthetic distance was accomplished through careful attention to the material surface of the canvas and the application of paint. The difficulty with this logic, however, is the assumption that the *tableau* plays a similar role when it comes to the medium of photography. While Fried is able to make the case that *tableau* photography has changed the relation between the artwork and the viewer, he does not provide sufficient support to demonstrate that the *tableau* is, indeed, the essential or characteristic feature of the medium.

Organized around the topic of portraiture, and touching briefly upon issues addressed earlier in the book, chapter seven is a compilation of short essays on various artists. Fried outlines some of the problems inherent in portraiture, linking contemporary projects to questions posed by Diderot about the theatricality of self-presentation in eighteenth-century painting. It is worth noting that Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra, one of the few contemporary women artists addressed in the book, forms a central part of the chapter. Similar to Struth, Dijkstra creates large-scale portraits with viewers directly facing the camera. As with Struth, Dijkstra relies on her subjects as both unaware (of their pose) and aware (of the camera). Her use of the *tableau*, particularly because of its large scale, allows for an objective or neutral study of the human body, imposing a distance between subject and viewer. Fried also discusses *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), the feature-length film on French soccer star Zidane by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, as a play between absorption and self-consciousness. For Fried, the significance of the film is that it effectively captures a double-consciousness: Zidane is seen shifting from an intense concentration on the game to a spectacular awareness of the crowd's presence. The film marks a new phase of the anti-theatrical tradition, allowing for a better understanding about the complex relationship between absorption and beholding.

In chapter eight, Fried looks to the early eighties, a period when artists began to show an interest in revitalizing the genre of street photography. Key twentieth-century photographers such as Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander pushed the boundaries of conventional street photography by including, in the pictures themselves, traces of the relation between the photographer and the act of capturing events. Increasingly concerned with the ethics involved in photographing the public without consent, however, photographers during the 1960s turned to even more explicit strategies for foregrounding critical interrogation. Fried shows how contemporary artists such as Jeff Wall, Beat Streuli, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia confront these problematics, reinvigorating and updating the older conventions of street photography.

In chapter nine, Fried advances his argument about the anti-theatrical turn in art photography through an examination of the works of German photographer Thomas Demand (and, to a much lesser extent, those of Candida Hofer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Thomas Struth). For Fried, Demand's method—involving a selection of images found in the media or elsewhere, the production of three-dimensional models, and the subsequent creation of photographs of the models—is the means by which artistic intention and autonomy is maintained. In particular, the artist's decision to photograph models, rather than simply document events, is significant and meaningful because it serves to imbue photography with the kind of authorial intention once held by modernist painting.

German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher play an influential role when it comes to the art that Fried champions, and chapter ten represents an attempt to explain their contribution to the field as both artists and teachers. Part of the inter-war generation, born during the thirties, the Bechers spent decades committed to the systematic visual documentation of modern industrial structures using black-and-white photography. By photographing buildings rooted in place and context, yet separate from the viewer, the Bechers introduce an ontology of objects in which viewers experience a sense of place, inviting them to actively compare rather than passively observe. Their system of typological presentation shows the intelligibility of our interpretive process, and how we understand the object in a photographic field. It is also worth noting that the Bechers' students, many of whom have since become successful artists in their own right, include Andreas Gursky, Candida Hofer, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth. This chapter, the penultimate, provides both rationale and historical context for Fried's book, particularly given that many of the Bechers' students have already made their appearance, or have been discussed at length, in earlier chapters.

One of the issues left hanging in the conclusion is the means by which indexicality, the conventional ontological status of the photograph, has been transformed or diminished as a result of digitalization.[5] For Fried it is indexicality, the unique character of the photographic medium, compared to traditional artistic media, that makes the photograph critical to contemporary art. One of the pressing issues in contemporary practice, however, is the means by which digital editing allows photographers to replace the contingency of real-world documentation with their own intention, and, in so doing, to radically diminish the place of the index in photography. Although he mentions these issues in passing (that is, in relation to Barthes, and later, Demand), Fried's argument about the ontology of contemporary photography remains grounded in the notion of the index.

In constantly arguing for the value of strategies that problematize theatricality, Fried's book can be seen as a renewed at-

tempt to counter that range of largely postmodern criticism that has championed the resurgence of theatricality. One of the problems with the argument is that the author spends so much time defending various types of anti-theatricality or "to-be-seenness" that readers are left to guess what might be meant by its opposing tendencies. Understanding "why photography matters," in other words, demands both a thorough familiarity with Fried's previous writings, and an effort to extrapolate on the implications of his current attempt to cement the link between modernist painting and large-scale, museum photography.

Related to this issue is the sense that, in spite of the careful and thorough research, the book was written at a distance from current, and lively, debates in contemporary art criticism, whether in print or in the blogosphere. What are the larger ethical issues at stake in these monumental, made-for-the-museum artworks? Are these strategies progressive, or should these artworks be dismissed as nostalgic or overly conservative? Is the *tableau* a reaction-formation, as some critics have argued, an attempt to withdraw from the egalitarianism and confusion of a visual culture embedded in increasingly immersive social networking technologies? What ever happened to postmodernism or institutional critique? There is little in the book to suggest that Fried has been reading those critical explorations of photography that challenge his premises, or that he is interested in participating in an ongoing dialogue with those outside his intellectual circle. His writing does not lend itself to the restless mindset inspired by ubiquitous computing, or to an era where our attention spans are steadily eroded by status updates and tweets. Accordingly, it remains to be seen how younger generations will carry these issues forward. In spite of these limitations, and as I remarked at the outset, Fried's lengthy book is ultimately worthy of study and further reflection. But that, after all, is really just an opinion.

Sharla Sava
The Cooper Union

Notes

1 Robin Kelsey, "Eye of the Beholder," *Artforum* 47, 5 (January 2009): 53–58.

2 Julian Stallabrass, "Museum Photography and Museum Prose," *New Left Review* 65 (Sept–Oct 2010): 93–125.

3 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23.

4 Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," *Image Music Text* (New York, 1977), 69–78.

5 Stallabrass, "Museum Photography," 104–7.