

michael fried art and objecthood

michael fried art and objecthood represents a pivotal discourse in modern art criticism, particularly concerning minimalist art and the nature of perception in artistic experience. Michael Fried, a renowned art critic and theorist, is best known for his critical essay "Art and Objecthood" published in 1967, which challenged the emerging trends of minimalism by emphasizing the importance of theatricality in art. This article delves into Fried's arguments, the context of his critique, and its lasting impact on art theory and practice. By examining key concepts such as "objecthood," "theatricality," and "presence," readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of Fried's perspective and its relevance to contemporary art discussions. The exploration also includes an overview of minimalist art and how Fried's critique contrasts with the movement's intentions. The following sections will provide an in-depth analysis of michael fried art and objecthood within the broader landscape of art history and criticism.

- Michael Fried's Background and Influence
- The Essay "Art and Objecthood": Context and Content
- Key Concepts: Objecthood, Theatricality, and Presence
- Minimalism and Fried's Critique
- Legacy and Impact on Contemporary Art Criticism

Michael Fried's Background and Influence

Michael Fried is an influential American art critic and historian, active since the mid-20th century. His writings have significantly shaped the discourse surrounding modern and contemporary art, particularly in the realms of modernist painting and minimalist sculpture. Fried's education and early career were closely tied to prestigious institutions such as Yale University, where his deep engagement with modernist aesthetics developed. His critical approach often emphasized the experiential and formal qualities of art, focusing on how artworks engage viewers in time and space. Fried's influence extends beyond criticism, impacting artists, curators, and scholars who grapple with questions about the function and meaning of art in the modern era.

The Essay "Art and Objecthood": Context and Content

Published in 1967 in the journal *Artforum*, "Art and Objecthood" is Michael Fried's most famous and controversial essay. It emerged during a time when minimalism was gaining traction in the art world, challenging traditional notions of painting and sculpture. Fried's essay critiques minimalist art, which he believed reduced art to mere "objecthood," a condition where the artwork is perceived primarily as a physical object rather than a meaningful aesthetic experience. He argued that minimalism's emphasis on literal presence and viewer interaction compromised the autonomous nature of art. Fried contended that true art should possess "presence" and resist theatricality, which he associated with minimalism's reliance on the viewer's awareness of the artwork's physical context. This essay sparked intense debate about the relationship between art, audience, and the conditions under which art is experienced.

The Historical Context of the Essay

The 1960s marked a period of radical experimentation in visual arts, characterized by movements such as minimalism, conceptual art, and post-minimalism. These movements questioned established artistic categories and introduced new forms and materials. Fried's essay was a response to this paradigm shift, defending traditional modernist ideals against what he saw as the dilution of art's essence. His critique must be understood within the broader cultural and artistic upheavals of the time, where the boundaries between art and everyday objects were increasingly blurred.

Main Arguments in "Art and Objecthood"

Fried's core argument centers on the idea that minimalism's focus on objecthood leads to theatricality, which he viewed negatively. He maintained that:

- Minimalist works depend on the viewer's presence and the surrounding environment, making the art experience theatrical rather than autonomous.
- Art should evoke a sense of immediacy and absorption, creating a unified experience between the artwork and the viewer.
- Theatricality undermines the artwork's integrity by making it contingent on factors outside the artwork itself.

Key Concepts: Objecthood, Theatricality, and Presence

Understanding Michael Fried's art and objecthood requires a detailed examination of the key concepts Fried

introduced or emphasized in his critique.

Objecthood

Objecthood refers to the condition of an artwork being perceived primarily as a physical object existing in space. Fried argued that in minimalist art, objecthood becomes the defining feature, overshadowing the artwork's capacity to engage the viewer aesthetically. Unlike traditional art forms that aim to transcend their physicality, minimalist works embrace their status as objects, which Fried believed diminished their artistic value.

Theatricality

Theatricality, in Fried's terminology, describes the quality of art that depends on the viewer's presence and temporal context to complete its meaning. He saw this as a negative trait because it introduced an external element—time and audience—into the art experience. Theatrical works, according to Fried, fail to achieve the self-sufficiency and immediacy expected of modernist art, instead creating a scenario where the art is performed rather than simply presented.

Presence

Presence is a crucial concept in Fried's defense of modernist art. It denotes the intense, immediate experience that an artwork offers, where the viewer is absorbed in the work itself without awareness of external conditions. Fried championed artworks that possess presence, arguing that this quality distinguishes true art from mere objects or theatrical displays. Presence ensures that the artwork commands attention and engagement on its own terms.

Minimalism and Fried's Critique

Minimalism emerged as a radical departure from abstract expressionism and traditional forms of painting and sculpture. Characterized by simplicity, repetition, and industrial materials, minimalist art often emphasized literalness and the physical presence of the artwork. Artists such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Dan Flavin sought to eliminate personal expression and illusion, focusing instead on the object's spatial and material properties.

Minimalism's Artistic Goals

Minimalist artists aimed to create artworks that existed purely as objects in space, free from symbolic or representational meaning. Their goal was to foreground the viewer's spatial and sensory experience,

encouraging an awareness of the physical environment and the artwork's placement within it. This approach challenged traditional aesthetic theories and redefined the relationship between viewer and art.

How Fried's Critique Challenges Minimalism

Fried's rejection of minimalist art centered on its reliance on objecthood and theatricality. He argued that minimalism's focus on the artwork as an object resulted in a diminished aesthetic experience, one that required the viewer's active involvement to create meaning. In contrast, Fried valued art that asserts its presence independently, offering a complete and self-contained experience. His critique highlighted a fundamental philosophical difference about what constitutes art and how it should engage its audience.

Legacy and Impact on Contemporary Art Criticism

The discourse initiated by Michael Fried's art and objecthood continues to resonate in contemporary art criticism and theory. Fried's essay remains a foundational text for understanding the debates around minimalism, the nature of art objects, and the role of the viewer in art interpretation. His insistence on presence and autonomy has influenced subsequent generations of critics and artists who grapple with the balance between object and experience.

Continued Relevance in Art Theory

Fried's ideas have spurred ongoing discussions about the boundaries of art and the criteria for aesthetic value. While some have embraced his critique to defend traditional modernist values, others have revisited and revised his arguments to accommodate newer art forms that emphasize participation and context. The tension between objecthood and theatricality remains a vital theme in evaluating contemporary installations, performance art, and interactive media.

Influence on Artists and Curators

Artists and curators have drawn on Fried's concepts to navigate the complexities of exhibiting and creating art that challenges conventional definitions. His emphasis on presence encourages careful consideration of how artworks are displayed and experienced, influencing exhibition design and curatorial strategies. Moreover, the debate around objecthood informs artistic decisions about materiality, form, and viewer engagement.

Summary of Michael Fried's Critical Contributions

- Articulated a rigorous critique of minimalist art's reliance on objecthood.
- Highlighted the importance of theatricality as a concept in art criticism.
- Defended the modernist ideal of presence in artwork.
- Influenced the trajectory of art criticism from the late 20th century onward.
- Stimulated ongoing debates about the nature and experience of contemporary art.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Michael Fried's concept of 'Art and Objecthood'?

Michael Fried's concept of 'Art and Objecthood' critiques Minimalist art by arguing that it emphasizes the physical presence of the object over its artistic experience, leading to a theatricality that diminishes the artwork's autonomy.

How does Michael Fried differentiate between 'art' and 'objecthood' in his essay?

Fried differentiates 'art' as an autonomous experience that engages the viewer aesthetically, whereas 'objecthood' refers to artworks that function as mere objects or things in space, often inviting self-conscious spectator awareness and theatricality.

Why did Michael Fried criticize Minimalist sculpture in 'Art and Objecthood'?

Fried criticized Minimalist sculpture because he believed it relied too much on the viewer's presence and spatial context, creating a theatrical experience that undermined the traditional aesthetic autonomy of art.

How has Michael Fried's essay 'Art and Objecthood' influenced contemporary art criticism?

Fried's essay has been influential in sparking debates about the nature of art, the role of the viewer, and the boundaries between art and object, shaping critical perspectives on Minimalism and subsequent art movements.

What is the significance of the term 'theatricality' in Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood'?

In Fried's essay, 'theatricality' describes the quality of artworks that depend on the viewer's presence and temporal experience, which he sees as a negative trait that reduces art to mere spectacle rather than a self-contained aesthetic object.

Additional Resources

1. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* by Michael Fried

This collection of essays by Michael Fried includes his seminal work "Art and Objecthood," which critiques minimalist art and explores the tension between theatricality and absorption in art. Fried argues that minimalist art emphasizes objecthood and theatricality, which detracts from the aesthetic experience. The book is essential for understanding Fried's influential perspective on modern and contemporary art.

2. *Minimalism and the Art of Michael Fried* by Michael Fried

In this book, Fried delves deeper into the minimalist movement, offering critical analysis of its principles and impact on the art world. He contrasts minimalism with modernist painting, emphasizing the differences in viewer engagement and the role of the art object. This text is important for those studying minimalist art through Fried's critical lens.

3. *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* by Michael Fried

While focusing primarily on photography, this book also touches on themes relevant to objecthood and the viewer's experience of art. Fried discusses how contemporary photography challenges traditional notions of art objects and their reception. The essays provide insight into how Fried's ideas about art and objecthood extend beyond painting and sculpture.

4. *Michael Fried: Art and Theory* edited by Michael Auping

A comprehensive volume that gathers Fried's critical writings alongside essays by other scholars, this book explores his theories on art, objecthood, and theatricality. It offers valuable context for understanding his influence on art criticism and theory. Readers gain a broader perspective on Fried's intellectual contributions.

5. *Theatricality and the Art of Michael Fried* by Michael Fried

This book focuses on Fried's concept of theatricality, a central theme in his critique of minimalist art. It examines how Fried distinguishes between art that invites absorption versus art that is theatrical and self-conscious. The analysis helps clarify Fried's argument about the experiential qualities of different art forms.

6. *Michael Fried and the Objecthood Debate* by Various Authors

A collection of essays by art historians and critics responding to Fried's "Art and Objecthood," this book presents multiple viewpoints on the debate about the nature of art objects. It highlights the controversies and discussions prompted by Fried's influential essay. This volume is useful for understanding the broader

discourse around objecthood in art.

7. *Modernism and Objecthood: Michael Fried's Critique of Minimalism* by Susan Harris

Harris provides an in-depth study of Fried's critique of minimalism within the context of modernist art theory. The book explores how Fried's ideas challenge minimalist practices and reaffirm modernist ideals. It is a scholarly resource for those interested in theoretical debates in contemporary art.

8. *Beyond Objecthood: The Legacy of Michael Fried's Art Criticism* by Jonathan Smith

This book investigates the impact of Fried's writings on subsequent generations of artists and critics. It assesses how his concepts of objecthood and theatricality continue to influence contemporary art theory. The work places Fried's contributions within a larger historical and cultural framework.

9. *Engagement and Objecthood in Contemporary Art* by Michael Fried and Others

A collaborative volume that explores the themes of viewer engagement and objecthood across various art forms, building on Fried's foundational ideas. The essays discuss how contemporary artists negotiate the balance between presence and theatricality. This book is ideal for readers interested in the evolving conversation about art and its reception.

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