

AN ACCOUNT OF MICHAEL FRIED'S GROUP DISCUSSION WITH FLUL'S PHD STUDENTS FROM ART HISTORY AND THEORY OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The modernist Art critic and Art historian Michael Fried was the first invited speaker to the Lisbon Lectures in the Humanities, promoted by the School of Humanities of the University of Lisbon. Before presenting his conference 'Facingness Meets Mindedness: On Manet's Luncheon in the Studio and The Balcony' regarding two paintings by Édouard Manet, Fried was also present in a fruitful group discussion with PhD students from Art History and Theory of Literature. The Art History doctoral candidates were able to present their questions, prepared beforehand in work sessions with Professor Pedro Lapa, regarding Professor Fried's extensive body of work.

By focusing mainly on his views as a critic, these notes by no means exhaust the matter, and will surely be followed by more in-depth incursions of it. Many other matters came up during this discussion, such as Michael Fried's historical investigations into Courbet, Manet, Caravaggio, and others. This brief account intends to give notice of this session and share it with the academic community, divulging Michael Fried's coming to Portugal and his ideas.

KEYWORDS

Michael Fried | Art Criticism | Art History | "Art And Objecthood" | High Modernism.

For the first event of the 'Lisbon Lectures in the Humanities', Professor Michael Fried (b. 1939, New York) was the guest speaker, set to present 'Facingness Meets Mindedness: On Manet's Luncheon in the Studio and The Balcony'. Preceding the lecture on Manet's works, Professor Fried graciously agreed to a group discussion with PhD students from Art History and Theory of Literature courses who would benefit from asking questions regarding his work. Aside from art criticism, theory and history, he also published four poetry volumes¹ and studies on literature². The closing remark on the introduction to his book of essays summarizes the spirit of this meeting: "I have always believed that the poems, the art criticism and the art history go together, that they share a single vision of reality" (Fried, 1998: 54).

In preparation for this encounter, the Art History Phd students, supervised by Contemporary Art Professor Pedro Lapa³, met for work sessions to discuss and further understand Michael Fried's body of work. Each student then selected a specific set of issues associated with a book or specific essays that pertained to their own phd research. While discussing these matters with Professor Lapa some questions arose naturally, who then narrowed the inquiries' focus for the group discussion.

A remarkable art critic and theorist, Michael Fried reviewed exhibits, for ArtForum and Art International, and wrote exhibition catalogues from 1961 and 1977. In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (1998), some of the most relevant pieces are reprinted, including his most famous essay — which gives title to the book, originally published in 1967. Strongly advocating for "modernist" painting and sculpture, he focused on a small group of artists, such as Frank Stella, Kenneth Nolan and Jules Olitski (in 1965 he organized and wrote the catalogue text for the exhibit "Three American Painters") the British sculptor Anthony Caro, and a few others. For the art critic, the aspirations of good high modernist art were linked to value and quality, which would *compel*

conviction. Fried's convictions produced captivating phenomenological descriptions and evaluative judgments, with a quality of 'philosophical prose' that is rarely seen in today's art criticism.

It also led him to denounce the emergence of Minimalism as a threat to art, of "being assimilated to mere entertainment". With a certain moral urgency, he argued for the necessity to "defeat theatre" in his 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood". Minimalism's focus is in the exchange with the spectator, translated into its mere presence or interest. Whereas Modernist works are as they appear to be, an intentional object that exists independently from the beholder's experience of it. An accurate description of its relational properties (the internal relationship of all the parts) reveals its entire essence in an instant — this is what Michael Fried called 'presentness', as opposed to theatrical 'presence'.

This issue stayed relevant in Michael Fried's praxis, and in 1980 another contrary term was introduced, in the book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Establishing a new cycle in his writings, Fried turns his keen eye to French nineteenth century painting with Courbet's Realism (1990) and Manet's Modernism (1996). As an Art Historian, Fried's emphasis falls equally on critical observation and theoretical arguments, dissecting specific paintings with astonishing detail, while developing broad concepts. Still pertaining to the theatrical relationship between viewer and work, Fried argues that Courbet sought to completely absorb the beholder so as to transport them into the "illusionistic picture space"; while Manet's radical 'facingness' is a motor of development from then to the 60s, with "an increasing preoccupation with problems and issues intrinsic to painting itself". By recognizing and including the viewer in a unique and powerful way, the works do not simply collapse into theatricality, and instead pursue the norms and conventions essential to painting. Concerns of anti-theatricality are re-addressed in 2008's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, and *Four Honest Outlaws* (2011). In

1 Michael Fried published the following books of poems: *Powers: poems* (1973), *To the Center of the Earth: Poems* (1994), *The Next Bend in the Road* (2004), *Promesse du Bonheur* (2016).

2 *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, which combines both Art and Literature; *Flaubert's "Gueuloir": On Madame Bovary and Salammbô*, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012; *What was Literary Impressionism?*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018.

3 The session with Professor Michael Fried was attended by Contemporary Art Professor Pedro Lapa and Senior Researcher Rosário Salema de Carvalho, with the following Art History PhD students: Ana Pascoal, Inês Leitão, João Carvalho Dias, João Tomé, Margarida Grilo, Sílvia Diogo, Teresa Neto, Vasco Medeiros.

these volumes, Fried discusses the art practices of a few selected contemporary artists, and the solutions they came up with for countering Minimalism's grievances.

This brief account intends to feature a couple of key concepts, from the initial work sessions to Professor Fried's enlightening responses. This was a tremendous opportunity to delve into his body of work and thus

pertinent to share with the academic community. The discussion that took place was quite rich and these notes by no means exhaust the matter, hence further narratives from different perspectives will help divulge Michael Fried's coming to Portugal and his ideas. We resort frequently to Fried's own words from this encounter⁴, supported by other sources.

ART CRITICISM, HISTORY AND THEORY

In "An introduction to my art criticism", the preface of *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Fried gives an account of his early career, how his art criticism came about and the shift towards art history. This was also examined in the group discussion, as he spoke about meeting Frank Stella as an undergraduate student, their train travels from Princeton to New York so they could see a whole lot of contemporary art, and how this introduced him to many of the issues that led him to start writing art criticism, still in his twenties.

The most obvious difference between the two activities is that art criticism is always and very obviously evaluative: it involves making judgements of good and bad, on whatever grounds the person makes them. But the element of evaluation is so obvious. In art history — It's not that evaluation doesn't matter, but the point of the enterprise is more to try to understand what's going on, so the evaluation is more under the surface.

With his PhD on Manet, a crucial point came about: that this painter was not only the beginning of modern art, but *the climax of something*. This led into an investigation of art criticism's inception, in the mid 18th century France with Diderot. The French philosopher and art critic was deeply invested in the relation of the work to the beholder, which for Fried turned out to be an amazing discovery, since it set up a lot of the work he then developed⁵. So as an art critic, Fried intends to intervene in the current situation with 'oppositional' position taking, whereas art history allows to understand a specific set of concerns. By unpacking the dialectic of the relation between the

work and the *spectateur*, the issue of theatricality appears and reappears throughout the times.

And that never fully goes away, so we get a version of that. In modernism versus minimalism, and some of those issues are there today — again, to my surprise — in contemporary photography and in certain videos.

For Fried, a critic works with the conceptual tools at hand, which may change over time⁶. When asked about these, Fried spoke about Derrida, whom he met while in Paris and again later in Hopkins University. There was no Deconstruction theories in the 60s, and the surfacing of it, even if there is not an intention of strictly adhering to it — and even considering many aspects of Derrida's theory to be mistaken — still affected and influenced Fried. Theory broadens the horizons, either for art history or literary critical work, and it's fundamental for seeing and noticing more, and being able to withdraw more fruitful conclusions. By having *the maximum sense of intellectual possibility* after coming into contact with different conceptual tools, new ideas arise, as exemplified by an important reading of Anthony Caro's work from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essays on painting:

It was a revelation for me, reading Merleau-Ponty — what he's saying is a very simple thing. Namely, you have a body. But also, if you extend it to painting, a painting is not an image to be apprehended purely visually. It's a material artifact made by someone with a body, to be somehow experienced and processed by other people with bodies. And so, the fact of having a body becomes fundamental. [...] This is fundamental

⁴ These are italics, whereas words from his works or interviews are between quotes and cited.

⁵ The aforementioned titles: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), as well as the other volumes analyzing specific painters such as Courbet and Manet.

⁶ "A critic inevitably works with the conceptual tools at hand, what matters in the long run is not the inherent allure of the tools themselves, which is bound to wax and wane with the changes of intellectual fashion, but rather the quality of the critical or historical work that is done with them." (Fried, 1998: 23).

for thinking about painting or sculpture, it's one of the reasons of why when I first saw a sculpture by Anthony Caro I had these intense bodily feelings, and I trusted them, they were telling me something about how the sculpture worked.

Michael Fried also spoke about the philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose notions of medium (Fried,

1998: 18) deeply influenced Fried, as discussed further on. For him, the widening of the intellectual experience is paramount to constructing arguments, and to have read Merleau-Ponty, Diderot, Wittgenstein and coming into contact with Derrida and Cavell was *just unbelievably useful.*

COMPEL CONVICTION: INTUITION AND CRITERIA OF JUDGEMENT

Modernism is an *ongoing dialectical enterprise*, in constant change, seeking what might compel conviction. There are no fixed conditions in order to achieve it, nor it's something predictable across different works of the same author. Thus, the notion of intuition is crucial to Michael Fried — *If you're doing the kind of work that you are all doing, you have to trust your intuition* — as a first step, an hypothesis, towards building an argument. Intuition is supported by experience and theoretical knowledge, albeit fundamentally a gut reaction. "Experience is decisive, but not in Greenbergian terms, where it serves 'quality' and 'judgment'." (Vidal, 2007: 96). While Fried doesn't necessarily disagree completely with those theories, he wishes to widen and apply them individually to each work.

Clement Greenberg was one of the most important art critics of his time and an important figure to Michael Fried. He too defended a 'judgmental' approach to art criticism and a 'non-judgmental' stance on art history, championing High Modernism art. The Formalist aesthetician sought the 'infralogic' of modernism, an issue that went beyond 'what is art?' inquiries and instead focused on 'what is good art?'. For Greenberg, there should be specific criteria of quality for evaluating works: conception, invention, inspiration and intuition. Embarking on a cyclical critical process, he sought to come up with the 'irreducible working essence of arts': the timeless essence of painting is defined by flatness and the delimitation of flatness. Ultimately, as Greenberg himself concluded, this would lead to a piece of canvas tacked to a wall as being a painting, *although not necessarily a successful one.*

A painting is trying to discover what it has to be in order to compel conviction, it's not a matter of necessarily eliminating anything, it might involve adding things, it could be anything. So it's a certain kind of enterprise,

but it's not a reduction, it doesn't just involve doing away with things.

As Fried explains in the preface of his collected essays, the issue with reduction to the literal property of the support inevitably collapses into objecthood, and thus the delimitation of flatness leads to Minimalism, which Fried calls Literalism. Using fecundity as a criteria for quality also presented issues, as Fried laments Frank Stella's Black Paintings series being cited as a precursor to Minimalism.

In a 2004 interview with Carlos Vidal, Fried asserts that the basis of a problem is formed in the historical circumstances (Vidal, 2007:96). Supported by readings of Wittgenstein, Fried places the essence of painting and sculpture in a specific moment in time, and not as an ongoing, timeless, process. A new technique or process is only relevant when it appears — Jules Olitski incorporating spray paint into his paintings in the 60s has no relation to Giotto's concerns or techniques. This question was first raised in a brief note in "Three American Painters" exhibition catalogue text, where Fried considers that some problems intrinsic to painting have to do with a concept of a 'medium', though he felt at the time that he could not formulate his reasoning properly. Fried urged for more theorization, and for him Stanley Cavell's views on film's medium essentialism discussed in "The World Viewed" came to permeate that necessity (Fried, 1998: 18). Painters like Olitski and Morris pursued the essence of painting then, and now this issue has become historical to that specific point in time. And, in fact, essence was not important to Diderot as theatricality was. So while some issues may be left in a historical past, others can be brought up again, as recent photography work presents interesting answers to some of the same questions with absorption and theatricality.

And then, what was fascinating to me was after a long time, really, with figures like Wall and others, something new started to happen. Which was, as it felt to me, a certain kind of return to some of the values of high modernism, but not as if minimalism had never happened.

When Diderot writes about establishing the ‘fiction of the painting’, the task is to compel the viewer by creating the illusion that the viewer has not been taken into account. In “Why Photography matters are never before”, a book on the ontological state of current art photography, some works by Jeff Wall are viewed in this perspective. Wall does not seek the essence of photography or photography as a medium, but instead on the relation between painting and cinema through photography. The central notion is depiction, where the figures portrayed appear unaware, absorbed. As Fried explained in the session, the nature of the medium, photography, *is going to involve acknowledging, “well of course that it’s posed”*. This quality is what Fried designates ‘to-be-seeness’.

Speaking now as an art critic, the best experience you can have [...] is: you’re seeing something new, you don’t know what it is you’re looking at, but you are hooked, you are held, you are compelled, and you find yourself thinking, you try to understand — that’s what you want, you want to be surprised, you want to be held by something unfamiliar. That you then can think, “It’s great what Anri is doing, what Douglas is doing, there’s a relation to the kinds of things I have been thinking about”. But the key experience is the experience of encountering something new, strange, but compelling, gripping, in some sense convincing. So that’s what you want.

In “Four Honest Outlaws”, Fried explores how Anri Sala, Charles Ray, Joseph Marioni and Douglas Gordon continue absorptive tradition with highly original solutions. Fried spoke about Sala and Gordon, introducing these artists to students who might not be familiar with them, explaining how ‘to-be-seeness’ operates in their videos, and how being compelled and gripped by a work may be a surprising event.

In Anri Sala’s work, the actors appear so engrossed in their activities they are unaware of the camera, which of course, is a contraption that grips the viewer. In Gordon’s “Déjà-Vu” (2000), a three screen projection of a *Noir* film, where each projection and soundtrack is at a different frame rate per second, creating a rift between the narrative moments. This compels the viewer to attempt to make sense of it, who is *kicked out* of a regular Hollywood film experience into an intellectual exercise. With another Douglas Gordon piece, *Play Deal; “Real Time (this way, that way, the other way)”* (2003) — where an infant elephant gets up and down at the command of its (invisible, off screen) trainer — Fried recounted his experience in the gallery — that if someone had described the piece beforehand, he wouldn’t have gone in, assuming it would be theatrical —, and yet he did and was completely gripped by it. These artists are taking the materials of post-modernism, modernism and theatricality, *but using them in a different sort of way.*

This brief account mainly focused on Michael Fried’s views as an art critic, from the sixties to present time. Many other matters came up during this fruitful discussion, such as Michael Fried’s investigations into Courbet, Manet, Caravaggio, and others. Thus, this note intends to give notice of this meeting, surely to be followed by more in-depth incursions of it.



Fig. 01. A perspective of the room during the group discussion with Michael Fried. © Luísa Santos, FLUL – DREI, 2019. Rights reserved.



Fig. 02. Professors Michael Fried and Pedro Lapa during the group discussion. © Luísa Santos, FLUL – DREI, 2019. Rights reserved.

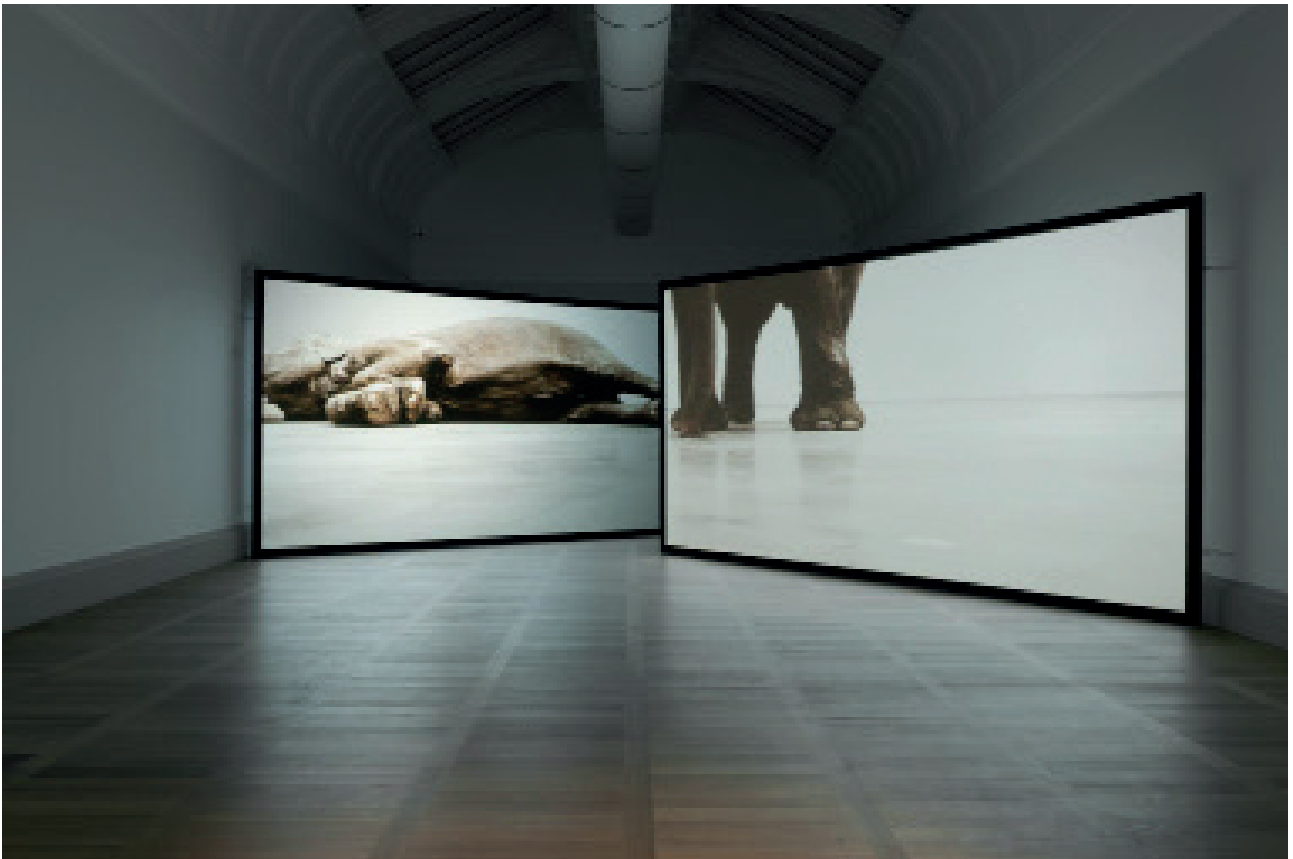


Fig. 03. Douglas Gordon, "Play Dead, Real Time (this way, that way, the other way)", 2003. © Douglas Gordon, via Tate Modern.

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