

michael fried art and objecthood

michael fried art and objecthood is a pivotal concept that reshaped the discourse on modern and contemporary art, particularly in relation to Minimalism and theatricality in artistic experience. Michael Fried, an influential art critic and theorist, introduced critical arguments that challenged prevailing notions of art's relationship to the viewer and the space it occupies. His essay "Art and Objecthood," published in 1967, became a foundational text that sparked intense debate regarding the nature of art objects and their interaction with audiences. This article delves into the key ideas behind michael fried art and objecthood, exploring Fried's critique of Minimalist art, his concept of "theatricality," and the lasting impact of his theories on art criticism and practice. Additionally, this comprehensive overview will detail the historical context, theoretical framework, and critical responses to Fried's arguments, providing a thorough understanding of this complex topic.

- Historical Context of Michael Fried's Art Criticism
- The Concept of Objecthood in Fried's Theory
- The Critique of Minimalism and Theatricality
- Impact and Legacy of Michael Fried's Ideas
- Contemporary Relevance of Art and Objecthood

Historical Context of Michael Fried's Art Criticism

Michael Fried emerged as a prominent art critic during the mid-20th century, a period marked by rapid transformations in artistic styles and philosophies. His critical practice coincided with the rise of Minimalism, a movement characterized by reductive forms, industrial materials, and an emphasis on the physical presence of artworks. Fried's writings were deeply engaged with the debates surrounding Abstract Expressionism's decline and the ascendancy of new art forms that challenged traditional notions of representation and expression. Understanding michael fried art and objecthood requires situating his critique within this dynamic historical context, where the boundaries between art, architecture, and sculpture were increasingly blurred.

The Role of Formalism

Fried was heavily influenced by formalist criticism, especially the ideas of Clement Greenberg, who championed the purity of art and its self-referential qualities. Formalism prioritized the visual and material aspects of artworks, asserting that the aesthetic experience should arise from the inherent qualities of the art object itself rather than external narratives or contexts. Fried extended and nuanced these ideas, particularly focusing on how artworks engage the viewer's perception and presence.

Emergence of Minimalism

Minimalism's emergence in the 1960s introduced a radically different approach to art-making. Artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre emphasized simplicity, repetition, and industrial fabrication, creating works that resisted traditional pictorial or narrative content. Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood" was a direct response to this trend, questioning whether Minimalist works could still be considered true art under his criteria.

The Concept of Objecthood in Fried's Theory

At the core of Michael Fried's art and objecthood lies the distinction between what Fried terms "art" and "objecthood." Fried argued that Minimalist art, by foregrounding the object's physicality and presence in a theatrical setting, risked becoming mere "objecthood" rather than genuine art. Objecthood, in this context, refers to the quality of an artwork being perceived primarily as a physical object existing in space, rather than as a self-contained aesthetic experience.

Definition and Characteristics of Objecthood

Fried described objecthood as a condition in which the artwork's identity is tied to its status as a literal object, emphasizing its spatial and temporal presence over any intrinsic artistic qualities. This condition relies heavily on the viewer's awareness of the work as a thing occupying space, which often leads to a theatrical or stage-like interaction between the art and its audience.

Art as Presence vs. Art as Object

For Fried, true art achieves "presence" by absorbing the viewer in a self-sufficient aesthetic experience, independent of external references or theatrical settings. In contrast, artworks characterized by objecthood demand that the viewer recognize their status as discrete objects, which Fried saw as diminishing the intensity and immediacy of the artistic encounter.

The Critique of Minimalism and Theatricality

Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood" is best known for its critical stance toward Minimalism, particularly its emphasis on theatricality. Fried accused Minimalist works of fostering a theatrical relationship between the artwork and viewer, where the artwork becomes a stage prop rather than a fully realized artistic experience.

Theatricality Defined

Theatricality, according to Fried, is the quality in art that makes the viewer conscious of their role as an observer in a staged environment. This consciousness interrupts the immersive experience of art and reduces the work to an object performing for an audience. Fried saw this as antithetical to the goals of Modernist art, which sought to create autonomous, self-contained works.

Examples of Fried's Criticism

Fried specifically targeted Minimalist artists such as Robert Morris and Tony Smith, arguing that their works invited viewers to move around and interact with the objects, thus foregrounding the theatrical nature of the experience. He contended that this interaction undermined the artwork's artistic integrity by making it dependent on the viewer's presence in a literal, physical space.

Fried's Advocacy for Modernist Painting

In opposition to Minimalism's objecthood and theatricality, Fried championed Modernist painting and sculpture that maintained a focus on "presence." He praised artists like Barnett Newman and Frank Stella for creating works that offered an intense, immediate aesthetic experience without recourse to theatrical effects or objecthood.

Impact and Legacy of Michael Fried's Ideas

The publication of Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" marked a significant turning point in the discourse on contemporary art. Fried's arguments shaped critical responses to Minimalism and influenced broader discussions about the relationship between art, space, and viewer engagement. His ideas remain central to debates on the ontology of art and the evolving definitions of artistic experience.

Influence on Art Criticism

Fried's essay sparked widespread debate among critics, artists, and theorists, prompting reconsideration of Minimalism's place within the art historical canon. His formalist approach underscored the importance of aesthetic experience over conceptual or contextual factors, reinforcing divisions between different critical methodologies.

Reception Among Artists

While some artists and critics embraced Fried's critique, others rejected it, viewing Minimalism as a legitimate and innovative direction in art. The controversy surrounding the essay highlighted fundamental disagreements about the role of the viewer, the nature of art objects, and the boundaries of artistic practice.

Continued Relevance

Michael Fried's exploration of art and objecthood continues to resonate in contemporary art theory, particularly in discussions about installation art, relational aesthetics, and the role of the spectator. His emphasis on presence and theatricality remains a valuable framework for analyzing how artworks engage audiences in physical and conceptual space.

Contemporary Relevance of Art and Objecthood

In today's diverse art landscape, Michael Fried's art and objecthood retains critical significance as artists and theorists grapple with questions of materiality, viewer interaction, and the boundaries of art. The dialogue initiated by Fried's essay informs current practices that challenge or embrace theatricality, interactivity, and the physicality of art objects.

Artistic Practices Influenced by Objecthood

Many contemporary artists explore the tension between objecthood and presence, often blending elements of Minimalism with new media, performance, and installation. These practices invite viewers to reconsider their relationship to the artwork, echoing Fried's concerns about theatricality while expanding the possibilities of engagement.

Critical Approaches to Viewer Engagement

Modern art criticism continues to debate the role of the spectator in constructing meaning and experience. Fried's distinction between art as

presence and art as objecthood provides a useful lens for evaluating how different works negotiate the balance between immersion and awareness.

Summary of Key Considerations

- The importance of aesthetic presence versus physical objecthood
- The role of theatricality in shaping viewer experience
- The ongoing negotiation between autonomy and interactivity in art
- The historical and theoretical context of Minimalism's critiques
- The influence of Fried's formalist perspective on contemporary art theory

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Michael Fried's main argument in his essay 'Art and Objecthood'?

In 'Art and Objecthood,' Michael Fried argues against the minimalist movement, criticizing it for promoting 'theatricality' and objecthood, which he believes undermines the autonomy and presence of traditional art.

How does Michael Fried define 'objecthood' in his essay?

Fried defines 'objecthood' as the condition where an artwork is perceived primarily as an object among objects, rather than as an autonomous artistic expression, leading to a sense of theatricality.

Why does Michael Fried criticize Minimalist art in 'Art and Objecthood'?

Fried criticizes Minimalist art because he believes it emphasizes the viewer's experience and physical presence, creating a theatrical situation that diminishes the artwork's self-sufficiency and internal coherence.

What does Michael Fried mean by 'theatricality' in

the context of art?

'Theatricality' refers to the quality of artworks that depend on the viewer's presence and interaction, making the experience resemble a performance or stage event, which Fried views negatively in art.

How did 'Art and Objecthood' influence the art criticism and theory?

The essay sparked significant debate about the nature of art, influencing discussions on Minimalism, phenomenology, and the role of the viewer, and remains a foundational text in contemporary art theory.

Which artists or art movements are primarily discussed or critiqued in 'Art and Objecthood'?

Fried primarily critiques Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre for their emphasis on objecthood and theatricality in their works.

What alternatives to Minimalist art does Michael Fried advocate for?

Fried advocates for art that maintains 'presentness' and avoids theatricality, emphasizing a direct, immediate relationship between the artwork and the viewer without dependence on context or performance.

Is 'Art and Objecthood' considered a supportive or oppositional text to Minimalism?

'Art and Objecthood' is considered an oppositional text to Minimalism, as Fried critiques the movement for its theatricality and challenges its claim to be a legitimate form of art.

Additional Resources

1. Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews

This collection features Michael Fried's seminal essays that explore the relationship between art and the viewer's experience. Central to the book is Fried's critique of minimalism and "literalist" art, which he argues reduces the aesthetic experience to mere objecthood. The essays delve into the nature of art, presence, and theatricality, making it essential reading for understanding postmodern art theory.

2. Michael Fried and the Ends of Art

This book examines Michael Fried's contributions to contemporary art criticism, focusing on his ideas about art's autonomy and its opposition to

theatricality. It situates Fried within the broader discourse of modern and postmodern art, analyzing his influence on debates about minimalism and objecthood. The text offers critical insights into Fried's philosophy and its impact on art history.

3. *The Return of the Object: Michael Fried and Minimalism*

Exploring Fried's critical reception of minimalist art, this volume discusses the tension between traditional aesthetic values and emerging art forms. It highlights Fried's argument that minimalism's emphasis on objecthood challenges the conventional boundaries of art. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the debates surrounding art, objecthood, and viewer engagement.

4. *Theatricality and the Art Object: Michael Fried's Critique of Minimalism*

This book delves into Fried's famous essay "Art and Objecthood," focusing on his critique of theatricality in minimalist works. It explores how Fried distinguishes between art that embodies presence and art that depends on the viewer's physical presence for meaning. The analysis sheds light on the philosophical underpinnings of Fried's argument and its relevance to contemporary art.

5. *Presence and Objecthood: Essays on Michael Fried*

A collection of essays by various scholars that engage with Fried's concept of presence in art. The book interrogates Fried's opposition to objecthood and theatricality, offering diverse perspectives on his theories. It serves as a critical companion to understanding the complexities and controversies in Fried's writings.

6. *Minimalism and Its Afterlives: Reconsidering Michael Fried*

This text revisits Michael Fried's critique of minimalism in light of contemporary art practices. It assesses the lasting impact of his ideas on art criticism and theory, particularly concerning the notions of objecthood and viewer interaction. The book encourages a re-evaluation of minimalism beyond Fried's original framework.

7. *Art, Objecthood, and Experience: The Legacy of Michael Fried*

Focusing on Fried's influence on art theory, this book investigates how his ideas about objecthood shape the understanding of art and experience. It discusses the balance between the artwork's material presence and its aesthetic effect on the observer. The volume offers insight into Fried's legacy in shaping debates on modern and contemporary art.

8. *The Limits of Objecthood: Michael Fried and the Critique of Minimalism*

This study critically examines Fried's arguments against objecthood in art, particularly targeting minimalist sculpture. It provides an in-depth analysis of the philosophical and aesthetic issues raised by Fried's critique. The book highlights the ongoing relevance of Fried's ideas in contemporary discussions about art and objecthood.

9. *Michael Fried: Modernism and Its Discontents*

This biography and critical study explore Fried's role in defining modernist

aesthetics and his resistance to postmodern tendencies like minimalism. The book traces his intellectual development and key writings, including “Art and Objecthood.” It offers a comprehensive look at Fried’s philosophy and its impact on art criticism and theory.

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