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Failure to Engage: Art Criticism in the age of simulacrum

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Abstract

In this article I explore the metaphysical underpinnings of ‘Art and Objecthood’ in order to tease out its reliance on several of the tenets of conservative art criticism: Plato’s theory of forms, Kant’s aesthetics and the unquestioning acceptance of subjectivity and representation. I argue that it is due to these investments that ‘Art and Objecthood’ fails to come to terms with the condition of art in the age of advanced technology and virtual (simulated) reality. This argument develops by means of clarification of three key concepts: simulacrum, theatricality, and truth.

Keywords:

Theatricality

Simulacrum

Representation

Readymade

Postmodernism

Truth

Bio

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Preamble

What is the place of art criticism in the world today? The discipline that was once concerned with the evaluation of visual art according to rational principles, relied for its operations on notions of artistic genius and its eternal bedfellows: talent, perception, interpretation and speculation, yet these attributes can today only mask the complex phenomena that underpin art in the age of advanced technology, mass media and

(dis)information. Since Hegel's influential *Lectures on Aesthetics*, academic art criticism (from *kritēs* – judge) embraced dialectical reasoning as the means for clarity and the explicit exposition of all the steps that lead towards a conclusion (Houlgate 2007). But implicitly art criticism feeds on the liberal fiction of universal communicability and transparency of thoughts and artworks. (Adorno 1966/1983) But for Theodor Adorno (1970/1997), for instance, the value of an artwork is not measured by how well it communicates, but on the contrary by how much it resists pre-given standards of judgement. In this view art is always an act of violence towards thought, truth and understanding, for no other reason than what art does is to rupture familiar, conventional forms of knowledge and power and their standard attributes: reason, negation, contradiction and lack (Foucault 1996), making it possible to inhabit the sense of 'something happening' (Lyotard 1984). The question for art criticism then becomes not how to identify genius, but how to account for strategies of experimentation, curiosity, and doubt that are capable of creating meaningful perceptions out of random and accidental bits of matter (Golding 2001). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980/2003) might say that the task of the art critic is to account for the way a plane of immanence is being built.

Introduction

In the opening lines of 'Art and Objecthood' Michael Fried (1998 p.148) says 'The enterprise known variously as Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures and Specific Objects is largely ideological'. But the fact is that Fried did not write a critical essay about minimal art; his essay is itself a piece of ideology. How are we to understand this form of writing, that criticises the critical function of art? And more importantly, what are we to make of the sad fact that this text still casts a long shadow on art criticism today? It is neither a question of criticizing or correcting Fried, nor of 'bringing up to date', rather it is a question

of proceeding by way of identifying the dualist oppositions and the ideological investments that establish the ontological significance of this text.

A number of scholars have already pointed out that 'Art and Objecthood' suffers from an amnesia of the effects of capitalism on art (Grudin 2016) which, together with the self-referentiality of Fried's later work (Wilson 2011) point towards an uncharitable reading of this text as in equal measure reactionary and narcissistic. However, in this article I will pursue another line of inquiry that questions the metaphysical foundations of Fried's criticism that cause him to believe in universal values such as 'conviction', 'absorption' and 'authenticity'. For Fried is not criticising the work of certain artists, but devising a universal method for distinguishing true art from 'objecthood', based on the assumption that (Fried's) consciousness can distinguish physical reality from art. The problem is that Fried's essay was written in 1967, which situates it within the age of advanced technology, modern science (quantum physics, relativity), mass-information, multinational capitalism and media culture, in which reality is augmented by hyper-reality, and consciousness struggles to distinguish the real from the imaginary. The 20th century created new forms of materiality that challenged, and sometimes obliterated the traditional distinctions between cultural and natural artefacts, and between perceptual and analytical domains that sustained much of the discourse of aesthetics since Immanuel Kant. This inability of consciousness to grasp the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and the subsequent collapse of the aesthetic model that was built on this paradigm, is a key concern for 20th century art and philosophy, but it has no place in Fried's ideas. As we shall see, this rejection leads him to adopt a conception of art that is hierarchical, analytical and traditionalist. Paradoxically, Fried's attempt to grasp what 'works' in a work of art by opposing authentic art to objecthood, not only distorts and sterilises the affective power of art, but also makes it into something stale and confined, in other words, it makes art into an object.

In what follows, I will show that explication of the role of Kantian dualism in the project of art criticism goes a long way towards clarifying the intentions and the commitments of Fried's essay, which are, broadly defined, to defend the Platonic conception of the image against the threat of simulacra and its contemporary rendition, the readymade. Simply stated, Kant's aesthetic theory posits an opposition between objective sensation that is conditioned by the *a priori* forms of space and time (*Critique of Pure Reason*) on the one hand, and on the other the subjective element of sensation (*Critique of Judgement*). The salient point for the discussion that will follow is that in order to maintain the division between 'art' and 'objecthood' Fried has to presuppose on the one hand the subjective identity of the self, and on the other, the objective identity of the art object, which this self is able to recognise. Fried's idea of what constitutes 'objecthood' is dependent on establishing the subjectivity of the beholder which adheres to the prototypical representation of the Albertian frame. The notion of 'authentic art' (as opposed to objecthood) is established by the fiction of the beholder's partial absence ('absorption'), and the lack of an exclusive singular view point. Nevertheless, the experience of 'authentic art' is dependent on a discriminatory gaze, that focuses the eye of the spectator on one part of the field of view (the artwork) which can only be achieved by ignoring everything else that happens to be within the field of view and demanding visual attention. Correspondingly, the artwork as seen by the selective and a-temporal gaze of the spectator becomes objectified, reified, fixated and deadened. (Nechvatal 2001) So Fried's notion of authentic art entails not the demolition of 'objecthood' but instead an assertion of a centring and selective gaze that legitimises certain viewing and political practices that cohere around the demand for objectivity, rigidity and hegemony. (Olkowski 1999, p. 25)

There will three points to consider: First, a remark on Plato's theory of forms, and the distinction it implies between images (icons) and reality (ideas), and more to the point, how

an embrace of this form of metaphysics leads Fried towards a rejection of another kind of image, which Plato considers an illegitimate monstrosity: the *phantasm* (simulacra). If one teaches, as Fried does, that an artwork has to resist becoming a ready-made, one has to accept at the same time the impossibility of art that is capable of transforming the very concept of art, and emerging as something entirely new. Second consideration: a remark on theatricality. Fried's own position is well known: he establishes a dialectic between seeing (absorption) and being shown (theatricality), in which 'authentic art' is meant to combat the tendency of the modernist artwork to dissolve into an object and become indistinguishable from it. 'Theatricality' in this set-up becomes a universal touch-stone, applicable in equal measure to French classical painting, American modernism and even Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. (Fried 2005) However in this article I will pursue a different genealogy of theatricality, that traces its links with contemporary philosophical thought that studies theatricality as part of the logocentric apparatus inherited from the Renaissance. The third consideration concerns the condition of art in the age of advanced technology and information. If we are indeed inhabiting an age of post-truth, whether in its philosophical version as the end of grand narratives (Lyotard 1984) or in its terrifying form of post-Brexit UK and Trump USA, then a question has to be asked about the encounter with art as the visual manifestation of the victory of the unthinkable over the acceptable and the concomitant disintegration of the nation state amid the gig economies of stars of reality TV, corporate interests, cyber warfare, online bullying, racial prejudice, mass migration, armed militias, privatisation and food banks. In this social, political and technological context, contemporary art – in its dual manifestations as an investment vehicle for the elites and entertainment for the masses (Palmer 2016) – seems to offer access to forms of subjectivity that are more apt in inhabiting this post-truth world than logic and reason alone ever could.

Simulacrum and objecthood

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the idea of simulacrum was reawakened in philosophy around the same time when minimalism made its claim on the body of contemporary art, as both have in common a rejection of universal value systems and ‘a paradigm shift toward postmodern practices’ (Foster 1996). The conception of ‘objecthood’ in contemporary art can be traced to Duchamp’s readymades which he created by selecting, modifying and rectifying mass-produced objects. In its various expressions, the culture of the readymade challenges the detachment necessary for the exercise of aesthetic judgements, which Duchamp associates with the ocular (retinal) traditions of modernist painting: ‘When you see what the Abstractionists have done since 1940, it’s worse than ever, optical. They’re really up to their necks in the retina!’ (Cabanne & Duchamp 1987).

In order to understand what this shift towards the readymade object entails and how it engenders a radical departure from the traditions and norms of earlier ages, we must turn to a brief history of the binary opposition between the real and the copy, as this opposition sustained much of the discourse in philosophy and in art criticism and practice at least since the Quattrocento. For despite the marked difference between the various schools and art movements (classicism, romanticism, impressionism, abstraction) they all share in the implicit acceptance of the image as that which stands over and against the real, whether by imitating it or by consciously rejecting visual resemblance.

As is well known, this opposition between the image and the real has its roots in Platonism, where the sensible world is produced as a copy of the world of ideas, and it is the task of reason to overcome the errors of the copy in order to arrive at the truth. The greatest contrast is between εἰκὼν (*eikon*) and εἶδος (*eidos*), as the image (*eikon*) by necessity presupposes the notion of the other, of that which is different from the reality of the thing

(*eidos*). However, for Plato there is another distinction, between images that are able to point towards truth and images that are inherently deceitful:

For example, we say that a painter can paint a cobbler, a carpenter, or any other craftsman, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter and displays his painting of a carpenter at a distance, he can deceive children and foolish people into thinking that it is truly a carpenter. (Plato 1997, p. 598c)

In *Aesthetics After Metaphysics*, Miguel Beistegui (2012) comments that this kind of deceitful image lacks self-awareness of its own imageness, because being purely phenomenological (sensual) it seeks not to point towards some higher truth of an idea, but to replace it with a fake, without however, acknowledging the fakeness of the fake. Let us quickly clarify that Plato was not opposed to images as such (the *fable of the cave* is an image *par excellence*), but he seeks to drive a wedge between images that help us grasp higher truth and images that deceive the senses. The touchstone for this distinction is whether the image declares itself to be an image (the fable of the cave is told *as a fable*) or whether the image pretends not to be one, disguising itself as an object. Since Plato established his theory of forms, the history of art is to a large degree a history of attempting to hide or discredit the simulacrum, the forgery that has the appearance of an object, by privileging and celebrating only those images that declare their imageness outright and position themselves as copies of the real. This is not simply an aesthetic preference, for as Deleuze (1968/2004 p. 333) has pointed out in *Difference and Repetition*, Plato's demand for 'primary distinction' between images and models is motivated by the moral need to protect the idea of truth from the dangerous world of simulacra. This is not only because simulacrum is a fake that threatens to undermine the truthfulness of all images, but because simulacrum undermines the idea of truth as such, relativising it and heralding the age of post-truth.

Fried's complaint against minimalism echoes Plato's rebuke of simulacrum in 'Book 10' of the *Republic* (597d-e), where poets and artists are barred from Plato's ideal city

because their craft (*technē*) dupes the audience into thinking that it can bestow true knowledge while in fact it is nothing other than optical illusions. Simulacrum is the unlawful image, a counterfeit that pretends to be a true copy and hides its illegitimate origin by falsely claiming to belong to the order of the real, while in fact it is nothing more than *trompe-l'oeil*, mirage, phantom, spectre or ghost. Like Plato, Fried rallies against artists who refuse to transcend the real in order to arrive at a higher plane of 'conviction', content instead with imitation of objects, and activity that can be described as the construction of virtual reality. Theatricality for Fried is precisely the 'theatricality of objecthood [and the] sheer persistence with which the experience presents itself' (Fried 1998, pp. 159-60). What Fried describes as the 'war... between the theatrical and the pictorial' (ibid 160), is the conflict between art that transcends the real in order to arrive at higher form of truth and art that rejects the very idea of universal values such as 'truth' and 'the real'. The artworks that Fried designates as 'theatrical' seem to have a common denominator: they strive to take over the real, to immerse and to overwhelm us by replacing the real with a readymade, and truth with simulacrum until we are no longer able to distinguish the artwork from the real, the referent from the sign, and the subject from the object.

According to Fried, only authentic art is immersive because it absorbs the onlooker rather than making her stand over against the artwork. Yet the readymade is also immersive: it immerses itself into the world, dissolving the boundary between the artwork and its environment. If subjectivity is at least partly formed through the knowledge of difference between images and things, as in Lacan's (1953) mirror stage, then the erasure of the boundary between artworks and objects is bound to have an impact on the construction of subjectivity. This might mean that new modes of subjectivisation, and therefore new sets of values and new ways to make true propositions become available when the artwork does not function solely as an 'image'. What if one was able to approach an entity ❁ without some

prior conception of its worth either as art or as an object. An encounter of this kind would register as something that ‘just happens’; an event of encountering without pre-given categories of function, form and aesthetic value. An encounter with ✿ would be experienced as an event of encountering, not because ✿ is imbued with meaning, but because the meaning is in the encounter itself.

Theatricality and its discontents

Fried (1998, p. 163) defines the task of art as the overthrow of theatricality, but what is meant by this, and more to the point, how can it be achieved? Theatre is understood by Fried in the triple sense as *a*) relationship with an audience, *b*) breakdown of the barrier between the arts and the world, and *c*) relinquishing questions of quality and value. The common thread to all three is that theatre introduces a distinction between things as they are and their representation on stage: a threshold or a dividing line that is required for the function of theatrical fiction to come into being. As Jean-François Lyotard (2004) has shown, the threshold is a pre-requisite for theatre’s ability to represent reality. There is no theatre without a clear and unambiguous distinction between the representation and the thing represented. It is this divide that for Fried constitutes the essence of theatricality. Yet, while Fried strives to rid art of all its traces, he does not seem to be able to rid his own discourse from the influence of the theatrical: ‘*The crucial distinction that I am proposing is between work that is fundamentally theatrical and work that is not.*’ (Fried 1998, p. 157) Distinction, as we have seen, is the essential feature of the theatre that makes it an enemy of art. Critical opposition to theatricality will not get one very far, as opposition itself is a theatrical requisite. Fried’s failure to escape the theatre by means of negation is not failure due to lack of trying but a

reminder of the extent to which theatre and theory are mutually dependant. This is not only thanks to the shared root, θεωρία (*theoria*) designating both contemplation (as in theatre) and speculation (as in theory), but also because like the theatre, theory is born out of the deep-cut that establishes the truth of a proposition according to the logic of separation between two poles of experience: rational and sensual.

This illusion of anti-theatricality, which for Fried is the requirement of ‘authentic art’ can only be sustained by clear and unambiguous separation between ‘authentic art’ and ‘theatre’. Yet, this is exactly the same separation that is at work between the performance that is taking place on the stage, and the audience, or the beholder – who passively observes the play. This drawing of a threshold is repeated again in the further separation between the theatre stage and the backstage, where the theatrical special effects are concealed from the view of the audience and where the actors don their theatrical personae before stepping onto the stage. The theatre sustains yet another theoretical limit, between the theatre itself and the outside world – the street, the town, the state. Both theatre and theory impose a view that places the subject on the other side of a threshold from the object, encouraging us not to experience the world sensually, emotionally and physically but to stay over and above it, contemplating it at arm’s length.

There are two sides to the problem of theatricality. The first is the question of representation: theatre here means a method of division. It manifests a will to draw sharp, non-negotiable distinctions between the ‘real’ thing and its image. As Lyotard explains in *Libidinal Economy* theatrical representation rests on the model of Plato’s cave as the analytical, conceptual division between images and ideas:

the Platonic division of the cave, which is effectively the theatrical division between a real outside and an inside *simulating* this outside [...] The thing stands for something else, and it is *less* than what it represents. In order that it be what it is, there has been a lack of being. What is given to us, insofar as it is not similitude itself, is *deficient in force*. The theatricality of representation implies this deficiency, this depression. (Lyotard 2004, pp. 68,71)

Theatricality implies deficiency because in striving to represent the real by putting it on the stage, the theatre is obliged to divide the stage from the audience, as the theatrical illusion can be sustained only if the staged act is perceived as an ‘act’ by the audience that observes the play without participating in it. Fried’s own strategy is to show that ‘theater and theatricality are at war today [...] with art as such’ (Fried 1998, p. 163) and that the imperative for modernist painting is to ‘*defeat or suspend* theatricality’ (ibid 160, emphasis in the original).

The picture Fried paints is of two ‘camps’ ‘at war’ (ibid 163), with each other, as the language of *attack* and *defence* (ibid 167) indicates, yet his attempt to mount an opposition to theatricality runs into a peculiar difficulty. The reason for this difficulty lies in the fact that ‘attack’ and ‘defence’ are themselves theatrical terms, whether they refer to a real theatre of war or to a fake war on a theatre stage, in either case they imply a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which is the condition of theatre.

However - and this is the rub - once theatricality is understood as representation, it becomes quite clear that it cannot be overcome simply by means of opposition, antagonism or ‘war’, because the only thing an opposition to the theatre can achieve is to re-create the conditions of the theatrical by re-establishing a deficiency that - as we have seen - is the precondition of the theatre itself.

In contrast to the fundamental opposition to theatricality that is at the heart of Fried’s argument, Lyotard (and Antonin Artaud before him) has put forward the notion of *pagan theatrics*. This is a strategy for escaping theatricality not by means of negation but by way of placing the theatrical itself on stage. In *Libidinal Economy* Lyotard proposed that the role of the artist is to lay bare the mechanisms of theatrical representation, to show that if there is

anything real about representation, it is because there also exists a fully real virtual domain constructed not from objects and things, but from intensities, desires and surfaces:

The representative chamber is an energetic dispositif. To describe it and to follow its functioning, that's what needs to be done. No need to do a critique of metaphysics (or of political economy, which is the same thing), since critique presupposes and ceaselessly creates this very theatricality; rather be inside and forget it, that's the position of the death drive, describe these foldings and gluings, these energetic vections that establish the theatrical cube with its six homogenous faces on the unique and heterogeneous surface. (Lyotard 2004, p. 3)

Here the antinomy to the 'theatrical cube' is being revealed not as anti-theatricality, but as an infinite movement of surfaces that continuously self-replicate and morph into each other. Art here survives not because it 'defeats theater' (Fried 1998 p. 163) but because it replaces the logic of Platonic forms with the evolving symmetry of fractal geometry that stretches across electronic screens and other media devices to form what Lyotard calls *The Great Ephemeral Skin*. This is not because art here is rejecting a reference to reality, but because reality itself is understood as mass-produced object, and for that reason indefinitely signified, continuously recurring, subject to the logic of technology and the perpetual reformulation of commodities for new markets.

The second aspect of theatricality is the mechanism of subjectivisation that relies on binary opposition for its function. Division situates subjectivity at the ground of the artistic experience, because theatricality appears to have a propensity to produce the subject through the doubling that is caused by negation and division. This is to say, the theatrical is thoroughly theoretical, optical and Oedipal model, attached to its past, to its phallogocentric traditions and subjective invariants that produces its staged representations through division, castration and lack. Because theatricality is coached in terms of inside and outside, it institutes subjectivity - by way of the primary division of the world into dualist oppositions – as the ground of artistic experience.

Theatre's greatest sin, Fried tells us, is dependence on the beholder: '[...] the situation itself *belongs to* the beholder - it is *his* situation.' (Fried 1998, p. 154). The relationship of the beholder to the work of art within the theatrical schema is that of the passive onlooker facing an 'object'. (ibid 155). If the origin of theatre is in negation, and if its operation is representational, then the deeper reason Fried can speak of a 'war' between theatricality and real art becomes clear. It is the old Platonic opposition between the sensible world and the world of ideas. Theatricality is the embodiment of the world of logic, reason and intellect. Fried says that theatrical works are merely interesting, while real works of art are convincing. Interest is a matter for the mind, while conviction is an experience of a different kind, more akin to a reverie. Anti-theatricality, in other words, implies that in order to be meaningful, accessible and 'true', the artwork has to inhabit some form of transcendental negation, or excluded middle or some other form of metaphysical ground. The difficulty is that this 'ground' can only be established logically, rationally and dialectically. The weakness of Fried's argument is not only that judgement is always already theatrical, as it proceeds along the lines of division, the same division that grounds the theatrical operation, but also that this 'ground' can only be established logically, rationally and dialectically, by treating the artwork as a signifier.

The problem of theatricality is that negation – *ipso facto* – cannot itself be made visible via the theatrical set-up, and for that reason remains hidden. Whether via the Lacanian notion of lack, the Freudian notion of castration, or the semiological divide between the sign and the referent, theatrical negation is ultimately establishing a form of a binary logic. It is precisely this embracing of negation, rationality and division that prompts Antonin Artaud to diagnose Western Theatre as anti-theatrical. As Jacques Derrida (2001 p 296) outlines in 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', the source of the disease is in the

‘theological’ nature of the theatre, that elevates the author (and the critic) to the role of god and places him against the ‘passive, seated public’.

So far, it might seem that Fried is arguing for the withdrawal of representation from art, as representation equates representation on stage. But the salient point about Fried’s thought is that by arguing against the dualism of theatricality and for the monism of ‘real’ art, he is unable to move beyond the very dualism he is trying to unsettle, as his thought is chained to the common-sense notion that representation is natural, ordinary, everyday occurrence. And this is only possible if representation is being detached from its connection to both ideology and subjectivity and re-appropriated as naturalised, normalised and sterile. Fried’s thought fails in its attempt to overcome theatricality because there is only one way to accomplish this task, and this is by means of theatricality itself. This is also why an art object can never stop being connected to its sacrificial, pagan roots. To claim, as Fried does, that there is a place where art can be free from the theatre, that there is a place that is prior to the beholder, to the staging, to the spectacle and the performance achieves nothing, for no matter how much one invokes presentness, conviction and instantaneousness it will still be impossible to deny that that there is any presence that is not from the start corrupted and eroded by representation, and this also means, by theatricality (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998, p. 117).

Truth in Art

Succinctly stated, Fried’s argument against minimalism (or as it was known in 1967, ‘literalism’) is an argument for art that has revelation at its heart. For Fried, an artwork is a vehicle of spiritual transformation and inner conviction which seem to be at odds with sensual aspects of existence. In order to achieve this ideal, Fried has to bracket out all aspects of the artwork that could be seen to bear on its social, cultural and political relevance.

The experience that Fried describes as the opposite of theatre, explicitly relates to the practice of holy ecstasy, manifested through a spiritual revelation. It is a solitary experience in which the work of art acquires an iconic, religious force.

It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the world in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.

Compare if you will with St. Paul:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (Corinthians 15:52)

The point is of course not only the stylistic parallels between the two texts, and the shared rejection of earthly life for the promise of a more enlightened ever-after (something that Freud might have called the death drive), but also the key idea that conviction, value, truth and everything else that constitutes the 'human condition' is grounded in a form of knowledge that receives its certainty 'from outside' so to speak, whether this 'outside' is the voice of god, as in the case of St. Paul, or if it resides in an encounter with 'authentic art'. In either case, this form of knowledge implies a change of belief and draws its authority and authenticity from on High. (Golding 2010)

When 'conviction' is the criterion of art, what is being taken as the ground of this move is not only the mediation between the onlooker and the art object, but also an affinity between conviction and truth. The truth of something can only be determined if there is a meta-discourse in which it is assumed that truth and conviction are not 'on the surface', that they are hidden and have to be uncovered. As a consequence, the authenticity of an artwork is linked to its truthfulness, that is to the conviction that the seeker experiences during spiritual revelation. Fried's claim (1998 p 168) that 'presentness is grace' further reinforces the notion that truth is both the object and the means of art. The deeper structure of Fried's argument is that true knowledge can transcend mere appearances and grasp their underlying presence. As

Luce Irigaray has shown, this framework is based on the notion of a stable subject that comprehends – like Rodin’s *Thinker* – a world that is also stable and unchanging.

It becomes clearer what kind of art Fried considers as worthy of its name: art that escapes the theatricality of the representational image, instead immersing the viewer in an experience, the truth of which cannot be intellectually known but can be grasped directly and immediately. In this context, Fried’s description of his first encounter with Anthony Caro’s sculptures is indicative of the otherworldly power of these works:

there was a gate, and as I stepped through it onto the courtyard beyond I found myself in the presence of two of Anthony Caro’s earliest abstract sculptures [...]. I was alone with these for several minutes before Caro came out of the house. But that was long enough to experience the unshakable conviction that they were two of the most original and powerful sculptures I had ever seen [...] it was thrilling to discover in myself so intense, spontaneous and convinced a response to work that I had come upon in this way (Fried 1998, p. 7) .

Everything in this passage points towards an experience of a mystical (or perhaps mythological) kind, burning bush meets conversion on the road to Damascus. The stepping through a gate, the finding oneself alone before the object of contemplation, the sudden and complete conviction in the truthfulness of the visionary experience and the spontaneous response to it, all these indicate that Fried describes something that transcends the everyday, and in so doing expresses the inexpressible. The main characteristic of this transcendence is that it constitutes an ex-stasis: a leap outside of time and outside of oneself. The reason that works of art like the sculptures of Caro are essentially authentic and anti-theatrical, is because they are extra-ordinary in the sense that they surpass the everyday. While theatrical works might entertain and help to pass the time, authentic art convinces the chosen few in its authenticity. This conviction is not for the faint-hearted: ‘those are hardly modes of seriousness in which most people feel at home, or that they even find tolerable’ (Fried 1998 p. 155).

What Fried has established is a rational-theological agenda for art criticism. To say that an artwork can give rise to conviction is to say that the forms, events and relationships within the artwork refer to objects, events and relationships contained in the mind of the viewer. Only if the universe is run on logical principles can it make sense to talk about a work of art as in itself convincing.

As we have seen, theatricality is an alienating force that draws a line through the whole of experience, forever divorcing the play from the spectator, and analogically the sensual from the intellectual, and the mind from the body. Worse still, theatricality exposes a logical framework through which to view the world. In this lies, according to Fried, the greatest danger: under the auspice of theatre art loses its spiritual, sensual and theological dimension. When art is stripped of its mystical, spiritual powers, of its direct link with experience through the unmediated connection with life, all that remains is the theatre: a pale re-enactment of the mysteries of the sacrificial ritual.

It would be a mistake to think that the way to get out of 'Art and Objecthood' is by giving preferential treatment to the object, compensating its dismissal by Fried. Putting the object first will not work because the opposition between art and non-art is itself the product of an ideology that asserts that there is a real world that can be taken up and represented as an image. The strategy pursued by a number of post-modern artists is not to fight for inclusion in the 'truth', but to reject the meta-narrative of truth. This is not done by opposing truth – as opposition is yet another logical category – but by including the meta-narrative of truth within the artwork itself. Never before was simulacrum more important to the understanding of contemporary life.

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