

Vocabularies of Appreciation: how to distinguish things which are art from things which are only things

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Abstract

It's just stuff , you know. It's not an artistic challenge. it's just stuff ... It's completely irrelevant. . . It's almost not art. I'm going to go as far as to say it's not art."

Anish Kapoor on Damien Hirst.

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This paper is concerned with the rhetorics of cultural entrepreneurship in the visual arts: the process by which 'things' are transmuted into art and vice-versa. Specifically it examines a well-known intervention in the appreciation of abstract art in 1960s New York by the critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.

Since the work of White and White (1966), we have become accustomed to the idea that new movements in art do not succeed through the unaided persuasion of the work itself. Nor do they do so through spontaneous movements in taste. Following the prototypical promotion of French Impressionism by the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel and critic-publicists such as the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, new movements in art have typically succeeded through alliances of interested dealers and critics: the so-called 'dealer-critic system'. Alliances of this kind work in part by the promulgation of new 'vocabularies of appreciation', new protocols for the viewing of art, that is, and new ways of thinking and talking about the encounter with it. These vocabularies are an important means whereby artistic movements know themselves, cohere as communities and differentiate themselves from outsiders.

Vocabularies of appreciation are precisely the medium of the critic, and there is much at stake. As in other fields of cultural production, there is an enthusiastic public for a limited number of 'important' artists but much less interest in the many who fall short of that level. And since it is through the vocabulary of appreciation that importance is created, it is fitting that the critic who has championed important artists should prosper along with them. At the time with which this paper is concerned, Clement Greenberg was an important critic because of his role in the triumph of American Abstract Expressionism, and it was from that position of influence that he was in a position to create a new vocabulary of appreciation.

The vocabulary in question was one which sought to create difference where formerly there had been continuity. Such vocabularies of differentiation arise from the stress on originality within the avant-garde ethic and the consequent tendency towards fission within artistic movements. It is at the moment of manufacturing just such a fissure that this paper catches Greenberg and Fried. Where once there had been a relatively unitary 'minimalism', practised in the media of painting and sculpture, the two critics, working in tandem, developed a vocabulary of appreciation which divided those things which were deeply meaningful from those which remained merely 'things', art from objecthood as it was expressed in the title of Fried's famous essay (1967).

The resulting ability to perceive difference where the uninitiated see little or none serves important social functions within the world of art appreciation. Firstly it legitimises the connoisseur's claim to a cultivated sensibility, the act of discrimination being its outward manifestation. Secondly it intensifies the dependence of that sense of connoisseurship on critical attestation, since the work itself, to those who have not

yet mastered the appropriate vocabulary of appreciation, offers little indication of where and whether difference should be found and of how that should be read.

Introduction: A Black Box and a Rectangle of Red Spray Paint

It is 1967 in the Art World of North America. Two objects are under consideration; a cuboid of welded steel finished in black oil, measuring 57.1 x 83.8 x 63.5 cm and a tall rectangular canvas sprayed with red paint locally smudged with vague darker patches. The first is Tony Smith's *Black Box* and the second is Jules Olitski's *Feast*. For most people outside the art world there is not much to choose between them. Simply, neither is very interesting, and the term 'Minimalism' which is beginning to be attached to both seems appropriate in this respect if no other. Inside the art world too, the two works are also enjoying something like parity of esteem, though in this case it is one of enthusiasm. According to the prominent critic Clement Greenberg (1968 [1993, p. 278), Tony Smith is enjoying 'the fastest big success I've yet witnessed on the American Art scene'. Greenberg does not approve. He regards Smith's success as 'ominous'. He is much happier with Olitski's growing reputation, having himself written the catalogue introductions to Olitski's 1963 exhibition in Saskatchewan and the Venice Biennale of 1966. Similarly gratified by the success of Olitski and alarmed by that of Smith is Greenberg's protégé, a young art critic called Michael Fried.

Vocabularies of Appreciation

The initiates of the art world do not see the black box and red rectangle as do lay persons. For the sophisticate, they are situated in a dense field of critical commentary within which they relate to other works either as enablement or negation. Although the conversation of this public typically insists on the primacy of 'the work itself', their viewing protocols are actually operationalisations of these discursive orderings of visual experience. Within their native language communities, discourses of this kind – which I will call 'vocabularies of appreciation' – communicate particular ways of regarding art, the experiences which are supposed to follow, and a value system within which these experiences are esteemed. Though they are certainly media of gallery conversation, these discourses are not, pretentiousness apart, simply ways of talking. In particular aesthetic communities their terms are operationally defined – anchored in visual experience that is – by exemplary applications to iconic works and artists. References of this kind, perhaps, are the acceptable rationale for the name-dropping tendency within art criticism.

Dealers, critics and markets

Since the work of White and White (1966), we have become accustomed to the idea that new movements in art do not succeed through the unaided persuasion of the work itself, nor do they do so through spontaneous movements in taste. Following the prototypical promotion of French Impressionism by the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel and the poet-critic Guillaume Apollinaire, new movements in art have typically succeeded through alliances of interested dealers and critics, the so-called 'dealer-critic system'. Dealers of the kind Boime (1976) called 'ideological' support promising young artists by buying-in stocks of their work whilst prices are still low. They then work to create a public for the new art through the agency of sympathetic critics (and, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, museum curators – Cockroft,

1992) with the dual aim of publicising a form of art in to which they have committed themselves and drawing a profit when its prices appreciate. The balance between the two aims, of course, varies with individual dealers.

When it works, the end products of this loose alliance of artistic production, accumulation and promotion are wealthy dealers, successful artists, respected critics – and new vocabularies of appreciation. How, then, do critics play their part in establishing these vocabularies? How do they go about destabilise existing habits of viewing so as to substitute their own sense of what is of value in new forms of art?

Greenberg on Olitski

For Greenberg as for Fried, a vocabulary of appreciation which places Smith's *Black Box* on the same level as Olitski's *Feast* lacks important dimensions of discrimination – and discrimination, situating works and making judgements upon them, is precisely the business of the critic. To this task, Greenberg brings considerable authority. Once the isolated champion of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, William De Kooning, Robert Motherwell et al. (Sandler, 1977, p. 212), Greenberg enjoys the prestige of having foretold the direction of history, not to mention that of the New York art market. As a result, he has become the sought-after adviser of both painters and gallery owners (Reise, 1992).

He has also been adopted as *Guru* by a group of Harvard postgraduates studying art history, Michael Fried amongst them. For the students, Greenberg possesses the charisma of a once-isolated prophet who has been proven right. For the critic, the young academics provide theoretical and historical backing for his aesthetic judgements. The consequence is an ossification of both; a dogmatism of judgement backed up by an increasingly doctrinaire version of art history (Reise, *ibid.*).

Greenberg's schematic history, as set out in his 1940 essay *Towards a Newer Laocoon* (Greenberg, 1992) begins in the mid Nineteenth century with the arts threatened with assimilation into mass entertainment. As a condition of survival, each of them had to develop so as to concentrate on the experiences it alone could deliver. In modernism, therefore, the defining feature and touchstone of authenticity in each of the arts is truth to its medium – in painting, the flatness of the canvas and the bounded frame. Thus each genuine avant-garde in painting has taken the form of a reaction to the exploration of these properties by previous avant gardes, with 'painterly' and 'flat' styles in dialectic alternation. Work which falls outside this pattern is to be regarded as mere fashion rather than an authentic forward move.

Greenberg's is an intellectually tidy version of art history which, as far as Abstract Expressionism is concerned, has the great merit of placing that movement in a direct line of descent from acknowledged masterworks. On the downside, it has two major demerits. Firstly, historical legitimacy is achieved through a very partial reading of these masterworks: Cézanne, for example is seen as pre-occupied with the dictates of the frame and Manet as a pioneer of 'flatness' (Greenberg, 1960). Secondly it is a history which has no place for such prominent movements as Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art (Reise, *ibid.*). Partly for this reason it generates intense controversy. In the view of Greenberg's most prominent critical rival, for example, 'current writing on art consist largely of opportunistic sponsorship of trivial novelties and of assertions of personal taste for which support is sought in pedantic references to art history. Mere technical recipes – e.g. shaping of canvases, ways of handling the "edge" of forms –

are heralded as if they were goals dreamt of by Giotto and Rembrandt but unattainable by them.’ (Rosenberg, 1976, p. 140).

According to Greenberg, the current direction of evolution is through ‘Post-Painterly Abstraction’, a cool flat-toned reaction to the explicit working of the paint characteristic of Abstract Expressionism. In the catalogue to a 1964 exhibition, fortuitously entitled ‘Post-Painterly Abstraction’, Greenberg has already prepared the ground for the new direction by showing his readers how to see cliché in the long, frayed-out brushstrokes employed by the latter-day practitioners of Abstract Expressionism, coining the dismissal ‘Tenth Street touch’ as a means of spreading the news that this particular game is up (Greenberg, 1964). As Becker (1962, p. 112) has observed, the critique of existing styles is an important moment in the formation of new taste. Having thus created a partial vacuum of credibility, Greenberg’s 1965 introduction to *The Artist in America*, identifies Jules Olitski with the Post-Painterly future (Greenberg, 1965) and in the catalogue of the Venice Biennale of 1966, he comments specifically on the spray paintings

‘In the first sprayed paintings linear drawing is displaced completely from the inside of the picture to its outside, that is, to its inclosing shape, the shape of the stretched piece of canvas. Olitski’s art begins to call attention at this point, as no art before it has, to how very much this shape is a matter of linear drawing and, as such, an integral determinant of the picture’s effect rather than an imposed and external limit¹. The degree to which the success of Olitski’s paintings depends on the proportion of height to width in their inclosing shapes is, I feel, unprecedented. Because they attract too little notice as shapes, and therefore tend to get taken too much for granted, he has had more and more to avoid picture formats that are square or approach squareness. He has had also to avoid picture formats that are long and narrow, simply because these tend to stamp themselves out as shapes less emphatically than formats that are tall and narrow do . .

The grainy surface Olitski creates with his way of spraying is a new kind of paint surface. It offers tactile associations hitherto foreign, more or less, to picture-making; and it does new things with color. Together with color, it contrives an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture’s surface; it is as if that surface, in all its literalness, were enlarged to contain a world of color and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manages not to violate flatness. This in itself constitutes no artistic virtue; what makes it that - what makes Olitski’s paint surface a factor in the creation of major art – is the way in which one of the profoundest imaginations of this time speaks through it.’

Greenberg, 1966

In these passages, we can see the making of a vocabulary of appreciation through which the critic seeks to disseminate his sense of Olitski’s work. We are to see the lack of feature within the canvas not as an absence, but as a ‘displacement’ of drawing to its edge, a feature emphasised, we are told, by the unusual tall, narrow shape.

¹ It may not be coincidence that Olitski’s catalogue statement for the same exhibition (1966) makes precisely the same interpretation of the edge of the canvas: ‘Outer edge is inescapable. I recognise the line it declares as drawing. This line delineates and separates the picture from the space around and appears to be on the wall (strictly speaking, it remains in front of the wall).’ The bracketed qualification suggests that Olitski was not a man not to be caught out in casual errors of interpretation.

According to Michael Fried writing in the same year, this lack of depicted shape within the literal shape of the canvas is actually central to the 'potency' of Olitski's painting of the period (Fried, 1966 [1998, p. 84]).

The sprayed paint, for those who have eyes to see, offers a surface which creates an illusion of depth which is yet wholly bounded within the surface. Both features, we are informed, are original and both are media through which we should sense the workings of a profound imagination. What to look at, what to see and what it should mean.

Notice too that Olitski's work is described in terms of Greenberg's conception of art history as a search for truth-to-the-medium, namely what the artist does with the frame, the flat surface and the pigment. Subsequently this tendency to equate art history and criticism will come in for adverse comment, but for the moment it serves to identify Olitski's work not just as interesting or enjoyable, but as something altogether more serious: as *important*.

Greenberg on Minimalism

But if Olitski's largely featureless canvasses are important, why aren't Tony Smith's totally featureless objects? Greenberg's 1967 'Recentness of Sculpture' confronts the issue of Minimalism in general terms, though not that of Smith's work in particular. In that essay we begin to see some of the rhetorical devices through which criticism seeks to attach adverse associations to forms of art which it believes to be enjoying unjustified esteem.

Intending to portray Minimalism as a search for the 'far out', conceived as borderline 'not art', Greenberg begins with a biographical account of his own journey into that arid territory. On first seeing an 'almost monochrome' painting, he tells us, his reaction was 'derision mixed with exasperation'. The next time, he was 'surprised by how easy it was to "get," how familiar-looking and even slick.' Thus domesticated, work in the once-challenging genre of the single-colour - or even unpainted - canvas 'automatically declared itself to be a picture, to be art.' In other words, the boundary of 'not-art' was no longer to be found anywhere in painting.

But the impulse remained. In Greenberg's telling, what the Minimalists had grasped was that 'the most original and furthest-out art of the last hundred years always arrived looking at first as though it had parted company with everything previously known as art. In other words, the furthest-out usually lay at the boundary between art and non-art'. Whilst this revelation was not exclusive to the Minimalists, they were distinguished by the consistency with which they followed its logic. Realising (like Greenberg himself) that the boundary of non-art was no longer to be found in painting, they began to work in the third dimension, 'a co-ordinate that art has to share with non-art'. Working therein at the boundary of non-art, 'The ostensible aim of the Minimalists is to "project" objects and ensembles of objects that are just nudgeable into art.' Using simple geometric forms in an attempt to approach the condition of non-art, 'Minimal works are [nevertheless, just] readable as art, as almost anything is today - including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper . . . Yet it would seem that a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment.' (Greenberg, 1967)

By this circuitous route Greenberg locates the sin at the heart of Minimalism: that it is work done to a formula. But 'ideation' turns up in the course of Greenberg's body-

search of Minimalism only because he has planted it there. Having done so, and having discovered it precisely where he expected, he now uses it as a stick with which to beat the artists concerned. Pronouncing the (italicised) anathema later picked up by Fried and many others, he adds, 'That, precisely, is the trouble. *Minimal Art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough of anything else.* Its idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered.' (Greenberg, 1967).

Even as he penned these passages, Greenberg acknowledged that his representation of Minimalist thinking was just that: a representation: '(I don't pretend to be giving the actual train of thought by which Minimal Art was arrived at, but I think this is the essential logic of it)' (Greenberg, 1967). Just as with his attribution of 'ideation', he imagines the motive, he *thinks* that he has the logic, but then gathers enough confidence to write off an entire artistic movement on the basis of what he himself has projected onto it. And this because what he projects is disreputable in terms of his own value system. The basic sin is that of non-visual thinking; art which is done to a formula instead of being 'felt and observed', the (cynical?) assumption that the future direction of the avant-garde is to be thought out by locating the current boundary of non-art.

So far, so good. Depending on the credulity of his readers, Greenberg has probably done enough already to sour their initial experience of Minimalist art. But will it stick? The problem with relying on attributions of motive to dismiss works of art is that they run up against the doctrinal hangovers of Edwardian aestheticism, the notion that the work should be experienced for itself, that we should approach it without preconceptions, and so on. To put the matter another way, if 'ideation' is a sin, as Greenberg holds, then so is his own critical practice, so are his attempts to influence the ideas with which his readers approach works of art. In order to break out of this performative contradiction, he needs his readers to experience for themselves something in Minimalism which will justify his dismissal of it. To this end, he argues that the simple forms of minimalism contain 'hardly any aesthetic surprise', hardly any, that is, beyond the claim that they are works of art at all. Secondly, he suggests a connection between these forms and the 'conventional sensibility' of modernist 'Good Design'². Thirdly, in a characteristic trope of avant-garde dismissal, he encourages his readers to see minimalism as derivative; 'wraiths of the picture rectangle and Cubist grid haunt their works.' (Greenberg, 1967). As compared to his earlier attribution of formulaic motive, each of the three new accusations shows a clear gain in robustness because they all relate to an attribute of Minimal art which Greenberg's readers can be trusted to see for themselves: that its preferred forms *are* simple and predominantly rectilinear. Whilst this does not mean that Greenberg's *reading* of these forms is inevitable, it is at least a reading *of* something. From this point the mechanics of Greenberg's dismissal of Minimalism exactly parallel those of his sponsorship of Olitski. He offers his readers a new vocabulary of appreciation, this time one through which the surface attributes of Minimalism can be apprehended as boring, conventional and derivative. The implication is that Tony Smith's Black Box is all of these things, and is to boot the product of a formulaic – and possibly cynical – search for the 'far-out.' Olitski's rectangle of red spray paint, on the other hand, displays, as

² It is a moot point whether Greenberg's taunt was made in the knowledge of Smith's background as clerk of works on several Frank Lloyd Wright projects or whether it was a response to his praise of Le Corbusier as 'greater than Michaelangelo' (Wagstaff, 1995).

we have seen, new treatments of drawing and colour through which speaks 'one of the profoundest imaginations of this time.'

And so, guided by the critic, we begin to distinguish the meritorious from the meretricious, the avant-garde from its deceptively camouflaged simulacrum, the 'neo-avant garde' (Kuspit, 1993, p. 15). In the process, we achieve the beginnings of credibility as connoisseurs, since connoisseurship at the public level at least is not just a matter of liking modern art, or even understanding it, but one of demonstrating the ability to *discriminate*. It was in exactly this manner that the young Michael Fried established his credibility with Greenberg. Whilst still an undergraduate at Princeton, Fried wrote to the senior critic expressing his admiration. There followed an invitation to visit, in the course of which Greenberg asked Fried's opinion of Theodore Roszak's sculpture. Fried didn't like it, thereby demonstrating to Greenberg that 'He sees through Ted Roszak'. Greenberg furnished him with a letter of introduction to the editor of *Arts Magazine*, through which Fried found the first outlet for his critical writings (Fried, 1998, p. 4-5).

But in the cases of Olitski and Smith, the act of discrimination has already taken place. What one wonders, can Fried the pupil add to the judgement of the master?

Michael Fried: Object as Theatre

In a word, extremism. Where doctrine rules, devotion must find its outlet in the addition of venom. For Fried, Minimalism is not just a mistaken direction taken by second-rate artists, nor even a fraud which has captured some of the attention which should go to serious art. It is nothing less than a threat to Art itself. This is a considerable accusation to make against a black box and making it stick will demand all of Fried's argumentative ingenuity. With Greenberg's *Recentness of Sculpture* fresh in his mind, he sits down to write what will become one of the most influential, widely-quoted - and vilified - essays in the whole of art criticism: *Art and Objecthood* (Fried, 1967 [1998, pp. 148-172])

He begins with a word: 'Literalism.' As has been pointed out by Frascina and Harris (1992, p. 171), the process of naming genres and movements in art is inseparable from ascriptions of meaning and value. At the time of Fried's writing, the indiscriminate use of the term 'Minimalism' tended to be attached both to the kind of 'advanced painting' he favours (such as that of Olitski) and the three-dimensional work (such as that of Smith) which he has come to see as anti-art. Since his intention is precisely to create a means of distinguishing the one from the other, and to argue that they should be very differently valued, he needs to name and isolate his target. He finds a warrant for his preferred term in the writings of the Minimalist sculptors Donald Judd and Smith himself, since both are on record as intending their works to be seen as the objects they are, not as representations of something else. 'Literalism', then, and the Dark Side of Fried's title, 'Objecthood'.

Fried's principal charge against Literalism is that it is *theatrical*, a damning one in his eyes since he also believes that theatricality is profoundly inimical to art. On the face of it, theatricality is not the most obvious attribute to discover in a box of blackened steel - unless, that is, it is imagined to contain a string of coloured flags, a rabbit or a spring-loaded Jack. But not so; later in his essay, Fried tells us that he, like other critics, experiences the forms of Minimalism as *hollow* (his italics). Supposing his readers are able to follow him thus far, he asks in addition that they experience this quality of having an *inside* as 'almost blatantly anthropomorphic' and therefore (one

final step) theatrical. As blatantly arbitrary in relation to the object itself, this tortuous reading may nevertheless work as a way of making something of Literalist objects. It is possible to think of them as hollow, and, with a little mild self-hypnosis, to convince oneself that hollowness leads to theatricality by the route mapped out by Fried. Though far-fetched, Fried's reading thus qualifies as a vocabulary of appreciation. Sensing that it does so only at the level of a bare pass, perhaps, Fried also discerns anthropomorphism (and therefore theatricality) in the obtrusive 'presence' of the objects of Literalism, in the fact that they are sometimes more-or-less the size of the human body and in their tendency towards symmetry – all readings which are similarly arbitrary, but all possible for those who wish to be convinced – or for those short of something to say about a Black Box.

That said, most of Fried's critique, like that of Greenberg before him, is aimed not at the work of the Literalists, but at their intentions, and this despite the supposed injunction on the modernist critic to write only of that to which one can point (Krauss, 1972). Unlike Greenberg however, who simply imagined these intentions in a form susceptible to attack, Fried at least goes through the motions of extracting them from the writings of his 'Literalists'.

Fried on Robert Morris

For this exercise, Fried confronts the writings of Robert Morris, a representative of the minimalist tendency whose 1966 *Notes on Sculpture* implied an extensive vocabulary of appreciation in its own right. Quoting extensively from Morris, Fried has no difficulty in establishing that the artist is pre-occupied with the relationship between the observer and the work. For Fried, this in itself is enough to imply theatricality. Aiming to reinforcing his point, he also seizes on a phrase which occurs in Morris' discussion of scaling. Making the work large relative to the body of the observer, says Morris, implies a greater distance between the two and this 'structures the nonpersonal or public mode.' Comments Fried (1967a), 'The theatricality of Morris' notion of the "nonpersonal or public mode" seems obvious.'

Aside from the fact that Fried is clearly reading theatrical intent into passages which are open to quite different interpretations, he simply ignores Morris' own explanation of his focus on the relationship between the observer and the work. Although he quotes some of the relevant passages, he is too much concerned to read theatricality into them to see how they might add up to a rationale for Morris' artistic practice.

Morris' declared aim is to produce work in which all the properties of a three-dimensional object, colour, texture, mass, and so forth, are bound to a unity of shape which can then be experienced as a single gestalt. This is why he works with 'unitary forms', simple shapes which resist any tendency on the part of the observer to decompose them. If this is achieved, the single gestalt can be experienced through the changes of light and context as the spectator moves around it: 'the known constant and the experienced variable.' as Morris puts it. It is this aim, not some kind of disreputable showmanship, which lies behind Morris' attempt to take relationships between shapes out of the work itself and re-locate them in the space between the observer and the work. The key passage in which Morris sets this out, a passage ignored in Fried's reading of his intentions, reads:

Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them. If the predominant, hieratic nature of the unitary form functions as a constant, all those particularizing

relations of scale, proportion etc., are not thereby cancelled. Rather they are bound more cohesively and indivisibly together. The magnification of this single most important sculptural value – shape –together with greater unification and integration of every other essential sculptural value makes, on the one hand, the multipart inflected formats of past sculpture extraneous, and on the other, establishes both a new limit and a new freedom for sceptre.'

Morris, 1966

This might be wrong-headed, or even silly, but it is not theatrical in any normal sense of the term. And although seeing the work as Morris intends might demand rather more interpretative work than most observers would be prepared to put into the basic forms of solid geometry, he does offer a vocabulary of appreciation which is as convincing (or unconvincing) as that offered by Fried. It is also as convincing as that through which Greenberg and Fried are simultaneously urging us to see Olitski as a major artist. Seen in this light, Fried's reading of Morris' text is of a piece with his reading of the work itself. The theatrical intent he discovers is one imagined by himself.

Fried also finds theatricality in what he calls 'the Literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the *duration of the experience*.' (Fried's italics) This he importantly contrasts with what he calls 'presentness' – a simultaneous apprehension of the work in toto, an *instantaneousness* of experience (Fried again) evoked by the best modernist work (such as that of Olitski). Leaving to one side the matter of why duration should be a property peculiar to theatre, one of the two texts in which Fried discovers a Literalist preoccupation with duration is Robert Morris' *Notes on Sculpture*. Morris' passage is below, with the extract quoted by Fried in italics:

'... the major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon this autonomous object and exist as unfixed variables that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator. Only one aspect of the work is immediate: the apprehension of the gestalt. *The experience of the work necessarily exists in time.*'

Morris (1966 [1995, p. 234])

Quite clearly Morris is interested in time because the spectator's shifting experience of the work necessarily takes place in time, *not* because he is preoccupied with duration as such. According to Morris, moreover, the gestalt against which this experience works *is* apprehended in an instant, just as is Fried's 'presentness', though without the exalted overtones.

Another major text of Literalism which comes in for Fried's treatment is the sculptor Tony Smith's widely-quoted account of a night ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike:

'It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.'

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognised. I thought to myself, it ought to be pretty clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There's no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. . . . Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe – abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition. Artificial landscapes without cultural precedent began to dawn on me. There is a parade ground in Nuremberg large enough to accommodate two million men. The entire field is enclosed with high embankments and towers. The concrete approach is three sixteen inch steps, one above the other, stretching for a mile or so.'

Wagstaff (1995, p. 386)

Smith offers this account as a part-explanation of what led him to make objects intended to be experienced *as* objects, rather than as representations. Fried's discovery of theatricality in this text is nothing short of a tour de force:

'But what *was* Smith's experience on the turnpike? Or to put the question another way, if the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground are not works of art, what *are* they? – What indeed, if not empty or "abandoned" *situations*. And what was Smith's experience if not the experience of what I have been calling *theatre*? It is as though the turnpike, airstrips and drill ground reveal the theatrical character of Literalist art, only without the object, that is *without the art itself* – as though the object is needed only within a room.

Fried (1967a)

But what *is* Fried's 'theatricality', and why is it such a threat to art? In *Art and Objecthood* itself, Fried leaves his key term of excoriation undefined, perhaps because it sticks better that way, and can also carry a greater weight of negative association: theatre as vaudeville, as bombast, and so on. Nor is there much illumination to be gained from the lengthy discussion in the 1998 introduction to his collected criticism. Fried's main concern there is to dissociate its use in his criticism from the sense of theatricality in which the figures in a painting are depicted as relating to the spectator.

His 1967 text does, however, offer a clue. In an extended discussion of the incompatibility of theatre and art, 'which I cannot hope to prove or substantiate but that I believe nevertheless to be true', Fried tells us that the one art which offers automatic refuge from theatre is cinema, and this because the work itself is independent of the audience's reaction to it. The Literalist work, in contrast, is incomplete without the spectator, the experiences it offers depend on her and are, to that extent, created by her. In 'high art', according to Fried, there is none of this. Like cinema it offers only absorption. In one of his favourite phrases, it 'compels conviction' so that '... one's view of [Caro's] sculpture is, so to speak, eclipsed by the sculpture itself . . .'. From this discussion it is clear that what Fried means by theatre is indeed the relationship between the work and the spectator described by Robert Morris. In those terms, Literalism *is* theatre, but only because Fried defines theatre as any experience which modulates according to the (real or metaphoric) standpoint of the spectator. In this respect, much of *Art and Objecthood* is a vastly expanded tautology. It is, nonetheless, one which carries a rhetorical charge. Having attached the label of theatricality through a trick of definition, Fried can then discuss the theatricality of Literalism relying on whatever negative associations the word calls up. At the same time, it is a rhetoric which leaves his own conception of the aesthetic

experience starkly exposed. Is it ever possible that that the experience of Caro's sculpture, Olitski's painting or any other work of art is 'eclipsed' by the work itself. If the metaphor of eclipse means anything at all, what is the point of the art critic?

Michael Fried: Olitski, Time and Theatre

In 1965, two years before the publication of *Art and Objecthood* and whilst he was still in his second year of postgraduate studies at Harvard, Fried was invited to organise an exhibition of contemporary art at the Fogg Art Museum. In his lengthy catalogue essay for this exhibition, *Three American Painters* (Fried, 1965), he has many sumptuous things to say about the work of Jules Olitski. Two particular virtues which he finds in Olitski overlap in interesting ways with the terms of his 1967 indictment of Literalism.

Fried sees Olitski primarily as a colourist, one driven by two major ambitions, 'to make the beholder see individual colors more intensely than ever before and to prove that literally any colors can be combined successfully' (Fried 1965 [1998, p. 247]). This can be done, argues Fried 'if the beholder can be made to see them one at a time, sequentially, in time, and not all at once as in an instantaneously perceived format or design.' He elaborates:

'... most of Olitski's paintings executed since 1963 that I have seen virtually demand to be experienced in what may perhaps be called visual time. Again the nearest equivalent among the paintings of the past to this aspect of Olitski's work is provided by Van Eyck and the Northern Renaissance painters in general [!] . . . just as the miscellaneous objects represented in a painting like Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* [!] participate in an experiential unity different in kind from the instantaneous compositions of the Italian renaissance, so the colors in individual paintings by Olitski hang together, but not in a chromatic and compositional ensemble that can be instantaneously perceived and enjoyed.'

Fried ,1965 [1998, p. 247] Exclamation marks added

Not an incidental feature of Olitski's painting, but one right at its heart according to Fried, is the reconciliation of colours by the fact that they are experienced sequentially, in 'visual time' as he puts it. But when the Literalist Morris asks for his three-dimensional work to be similarly experienced in time, that is theatre. In terms of his own reading of Morris, Fried might claim that Morris' pre-occupation with duration is quite different from the movement of perception called for in Olitski's painting, but as I have shown above, Fried's reading of Morris on this point is tendentious. Morris is interested in time for exactly the same reason that Fried brings it into his 1965 reading of Olitski: because it is in time that the viewpoint of the spectator unfolds. By 1967, however, visual time no longer figures in the Olitski experience. Its absence, indeed, has become a defining feature of the 'presentness' which Fried believes to be 'grace': 'It is as though one's experience of [modernist painting] *has no duration* – not because one *in fact* experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski . . . in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*' (Fried's italics, 1967a).

There is the same inconsistency in Fried's attributions of theatricality. In *Art and Objecthood*, work created in the consciousness of its relationship with the spectator is theatrical by definition. In opposition to theatre is the best of modernist art (represented by the sculptor Anthony Caro in this instance) art in which; 'one's view

of the sculpture is, so to speak, *eclipsed* by the sculpture itself . . . 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 work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.’ (Fried, 1967 [1998, p.])The art object itself absorbed the spectator, defined the experience. But back in 1965, Olitski’s paintings were both the best of modernism *and* to be experienced ‘as if’ the spectator was making them in the act of perception:

‘It is as if his paintings make themselves under one’s gaze; or again, as if the beholder makes the paintings by perceiving them; or perhaps more precisely, as if the act of perception itself makes the painting by entering, as it were empathetically, into the alien, impersonal, yet incomprehensibly moving life of the colors within them.’

Fried 1965

The ‘as if’ of 1965 does not soften the inconsistency since Fried is talking about experiences in both cases. ‘As if’ applies to the instantaneousness and absorption of 1967 as well as to the 1965 experience of sequence. In any event, could there be any clearer instance of what Fried has called theatricality than a painting which offers the spectator the illusion of taking part in its creation?

Time and Theatre are not the only virtues which Fried finds in Olitski which, in the work of the Literalists, appear as vices. In his 1966 essay, *Shape as Form*, he praises the lack of internal feature in Olitski’s early spray paintings for an anthropomorphism remarkably similar to that which in 1967, he finds theatrical in Literalism:

The narrow vertical format somehow keeps this [sense of the frame as defining an empty pictorial space] from happening, not by denying the illusion but, so to speak, by making it self sufficient, *a presence, like that of a human figure*, instead of a void waiting to be filled.

Fried, 1966 [1998, p. 85] – italics added

But when Fried quotes Tony Smith in *Art and Objecthood*: “I didn’t think of [my work] as sculptures but as presences of a sort.” this turns out to be the wrong sort of anthropomorphism, the theatrical sort.

Literalism: The Nature of the Beef

There can be no doubting the sincerity of Fried’s loathing of the forms of art he calls Literalist. *Art and Objecthood* is littered with phrases of denunciation, such as ‘theatre’s profound hostility to the arts’. And yet, as I have shown, the readings offered in justification of this loathing are both feeble and flimsily attached to their objects. Most of them, indeed, are of characteristics and intentions projected into ‘literalism’ by Fried himself. The disproportion between the violence of the emotion and the weakness of the pretext suggests that we have not been given the real charge-sheet against Literalism. Other writings by Fried suggest two main indictments.

In conversation shortly after the publication of his collected criticism in 1998, Fried recollected his initial sense of a wrongness in Literalism. Notice that the intuition of quality preceded the discovery of reasons:

"When you went into a gallery and saw a show by Donald Judd or Bob Morris, there was a definite buzz that got set up. I would walk in and think, 'There's something wrong with this buzz. I'm suspicious of it,'" said Fried. "It had to do with a total control of the *mise-en-scène*, and of making that situation the primary thing, as distinct from the work itself. What's happened in the 30 years since is the most massive infusion of theatricality that one could ever imagine."

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This is the sour psychology of the party-pooper. People are appreciating things they shouldn't, enjoying them moreover in the deluded belief that they are high art. Mediocre artists are achieving an undeserved success through 'sure-fire and therefore inartistic' techniques of 'theatrical' presentation (Fried, 1998, p. 40) - as if the gallery, 'the sanctuary of art' as Moulin described it (1987, p. 63) were not just as much of a *mise en scène*.

Notice that Fried's initial reaction was not against the work itself but against the nature, and perhaps the quantum, of the attention which it was receiving. In Fried's order of things, the 'buzz' (of conversation?) is a different, and lesser, experience than the 'timeless instant' of contemplation evoked by the 'continuous and entire presentness' of the true work of art. From this spontaneous distaste, the project of Art and Objecthood followed: to rationalise his suspicion, to differentiate the 'buzz' from the true contemplation of art, to devalue the one against the other.

Fried's retrospective acknowledgement of the 'overtly theological cast' of his essay suggests that his intuition of wrongness was also spiced by the scent of heresy (Fried, 1998, p. 46). As was later pointed out by Foster (1986, p. 171) and later still by Fried himself (1998, p. 36), there were no truer followers of Greenberg during the 1960s than Robert Morris and Donald Judd. They too saw the advance of modernism as a stripping-back of painting to its definitional essence; a flat surface of illusionist space bounded by a literal edge. In his 1966 essay, *Shape as Form*, Fried had found great power in Olitski's representation of edge within the picture in tension with this literal edge (Fried, 1966 [1998, p. 86]). But if modernism was moving towards this kind of acknowledgement of the literal, why not produce works which were *wholly* literal (Lawson (1985, p. 148)? Inasmuch as it followed this logic, 'the Literalist sensibility is itself a product, or a by-product, of the development of modernist painting itself.' Fried, 1966 [1998, p. 88] Logic, however, is a well-beaten path to heresy. What appeared to be a natural outcome of the laws of motion governing modern art turns out, under the scrutiny of the subtle casuist, to be 'a misreading of its dialectic', a yielding to its 'inner temptations' (Fried, 1998, p. 45). The literalism of the edge of pictorial space, we are instructed, is quite different from the literalism of the literal. Whereas the first is an *acknowledgement* of the literal, the second is an *hypostasization* of it - an objecthood (finally!) against which it is the mission of true art to strive.

What makes heresy so deadly in the eyes of the zealot is not the elements of dissent, but those of agreement. Precisely because the 'Literalists' were the true followers of Greenberg in so much, their deviation needed to be exposed for the seductive anti-art it was. And this, perhaps, is what accounts for the tendency towards drama - theatricality even - in Fried's prose style. Most of our lives, he thinks, we are 'corrupted or perverted by theatre'. Only in art lies the Presentness which is Grace, and that too is now threatened by an enemy within.

Implications: the Critic as Cultural Entrepreneur

The pragmatist philosopher David Carrier has suggested that there is no longer much point in arguing the toss with Michael Fried. Fried, he says, has not supported any new artists since the mid 1960s and so counts only as a figure in the *history* of criticism (Carrier, 1985, p. 204). This is either a telling comment on a pragmatism which can see nothing more in criticism than marketing, or it is one on the febrile state of the visual arts and the extent to which criticism has been subsumed within the dealer-critic system. Is it really true that the major function of criticism now is to promote new artists?

Either way, I suggest the writings of Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg are still relevant, not so much as a means of comprehending current directions in art itself, but to the manner in which critical writing continues to work on the vocabularies of appreciation through which these are apprehended. As is shown in Crane's (1987) study of post 1940s avant-gardes, artists and movements are still succeeding through the dealer-critic system, albeit one now modulated by the influence of museum curators. Criticism, working its way into the vocabularies of appreciation of the art-going public, is still the medium of that success and if the volume of subsequent debate is any guide, the writings of Greenberg and Fried exemplify art criticism at its most influential. Although Fried's attempt to arrest art history at the point of high modernism turned out in retrospect to be a failure, *Art and Objecthood* had an enormous impact on its publication and continued to structure debate on modernism well into the 1970s (Krauss, 1991, p. 87).

What strikes the reader first of all, is what might be called the priority of judgement. The quotations from Fried which follow are separated by nearly thirty years, but in both it is *judgement* which is said to be grounded in experience, not the matter which one would have thought to be prior to judgement; that of *comprehension*. Like Pirsig's maintainer of motorcycles (1974), the critic seems to apprehend quality as such, in advance of any concrete attributes of which it might consist. In the second (1998) quotation in particular, these attributes are thought of as a means of justifying an intuition of quality, rather than the raw material on which judgement might be based.

The second striking feature is the disparity between the subjectivity of the readings on which these critics are prepared to base their judgements and the conviction with which they are asserted. Donald Judd's forms *are* hollow, objects of about the size of a human body *are* implicitly figurative, the absence of line in Olitski *is* a displacement of drawing to the edge, and so on. As Greenberg's major antagonist, Harold Rosenberg put it, 'current writing on art consists largely of opportunistic sponsorship of trivial novelties and of assertions of personal taste for which support is sought in pedantic references to art history.' (Rosenberg, 1976, p. 140), not that Rosenberg himself is innocent of these tendencies. As is the case with many critical writings, this foundation of judgment in personal taste is partially obscured by an otherwise curious trope; one which might variously be called 'the intransitive coinage', or 'the death of the predicate'. Phrases such as 'this painting convinces' or 'that sculpture delights' avoid the embarrassment of repeatedly adding the exposed first person singular: 'me' in all its naked human fallibility. By re-locating the effect on the critic in the work itself the reader is made to feel that the reproduction of that effect in her own psyche is nothing less than a test of her sensitivity to artwork as such.

In the earliest of his mature criticism³, Fried was conscious of this issue of the subjectivity of judgment but believed in the possibility of making some distinction between intuitions which could at some level be objectified, and ‘private enthusiasms’ which could only be defended by ‘formalist rhetoric.’

‘It is worth noting that there is nothing binding in the value judgements of formal criticism. All judgements of value begin and end in experience, or ought to, and if someone does not feel that Manet’s *Dejeuner sur l’herbe*, Matisse’s *Piano Lesson*, or Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* are superb paintings, no critical arguments can take the place of feeling it. On the other hand, one’s experiences of works of art are always informed by what one has come to understand about them, and it is the job of the formal critic both to objectify his intuitions with all the intellectual rigour at his command and to be on his guard against enlisting a formalist rhetoric in defense of merely private enthusiasms.’

Fried 1965 [1998, p. 215]

Reflecting on these remarks from the vantage point of 1998, Fried discards the appeal to objectivity as a ‘red herring’, but in the process he loses his distinction between ‘intuitions’ and ‘merely private enthusiasms’. The ‘intuitions’ of 1965, presumably, were those enthusiasms which he believed would be shared by others of a similar sensibility (c.f. Burgin, 1986 p. 151). That they disappear from his thinking of 1998 suggests that he had lost faith by then that there were many such others. The resulting sense of isolation exposes his critical practice as an openly rhetorical, and perhaps opportunistic, propagandisation of personal taste:

‘What matters is that, as I remark, “all judgements of value begin and end in experience”; the task of the critic is, first not to flinch from making such judgements, which are nothing less than the lifeblood of his enterprise, and second, to try to come up with the most telling observations and arguments on their behalf. What these observations and arguments will turn out to be, what features of the works in question they will focus on and what sorts of issues they will involve, is in principle unknowable in advance, and in any case, as I rightly insist (following Kant in this if in nothing else), the arguments themselves will not be binding, which is what it means to say that judgements of value end in experience as well as begin there.’

Fried 1998, p. 18

Criticism on this model, then, amounts to a justification of the critics’ intuitive judgements of value by whatever rhetorical means fall to hand. This would be well enough if critical writings duly acknowledged the uncertainties of understanding which underlie their judgements, but they do not. At the same time as the disclaimer ‘nothing binding’ serves as a justification for judgements based on personal readings, the space allowed for disagreement turns out to be an internment camp for the visually disadvantaged: those who cannot relate to Manet, Matisse or Pollock in Fried’s 1965

³ In her 1972 essay, ‘A View of Modernism’, Rosalind Krauss, also a former protégé of Greenberg’s, offers an interesting glimpse of Fried’s demeanour as a critic-in-the-making. At the 1965 exhibition *Three American Painters* which Fried curated, a fellow Harvard student asked him what was so good about a one of the ‘stripe’ paintings by his friend Frank Stella. Fried explained that what Stella wanted to do above all was to paint like Velázquez, but that this was not an option open to him, ‘so he paints stripes’. Krauss’ memoir continues, ‘Fried’s voice had risen, “He wants to be Velazquez, *so he paints stripes*.”’ [italics in original]

quotation (*supra*), or those sceptical of Olitski's claim to rank alongside them in his 'New York letter' of 1964 [1998, p. 316]:

'If it is hard to know how to talk or write about paintings such as those currently exhibited by Jules Olitski at the Pointdexter Gallery, this is a sure indication that it is also hard to know how to look at them. And it is no real solace for one's lack of certainty on this point to think that one is at least doing better than those who fail to see that Olitski is one of the finest painters working today.'

Hard to know how to look at the work, hard to know what to say about it - though the critic shares our uncertainties on these matters, he does not feel what to most of us would be a consequent uncertainty; that of the work's stature. Of that he is convinced, the only issue being how to persuade us to share that conviction. Once more the judgement is prior, whilst the perceptions which might justify it are downgraded to a tactics of persuasion.

Broadly speaking, these tactics take the form of projection. Via anthropomorphism, Fried imagines theatricality in the inscrutable surfaces of Literalism and sensationalism in the writings of its artists. Having done so, he duly rediscovers these attributes as properties of the works and artists themselves. This rhetorical opportunism is at its most evident when we compare the supposed symptoms of greatness in Olitski with those of anti-art in Literalism. Two of them, the sense of involving the spectator in the work and the fact that it is to be read in time, are exactly the same. But what in Olitski is claimed to be the medium of a profound imagination, in Literalism is the rancid spoor of 'theatricality'. The attachment of value to the critic's readings is just as arbitrary as the attachment of the readings to the work itself. Thus: Olitski's colours are reconciled sequentially *and* this is profound; Smith's Black Box is experienced in time *and* this is 'theatrical'.

In their response to the radical indecipherability of abstract art there is a fundamental difference between the critic and the rank-and-file spectator and in that difference lies their complementarity. For the majority, Harold Rosenberg's 'Anxious Object' is just that (Rosenberg, 1964). It may 'shock us out of our collective trance, with its automatic and reflex responses' (Gablik, 1984 p. 37), but we then have the worry over what to make of it. Like entrepreneurs in other fields, in contrast, the critic responds to uncertainty by projecting his own reality onto it. If it is the function of art to destabilise certainties, that is an opportunity for the critic to restore them:

If we think here of the role of the 'critic' we can see that it has been extensively to put an end to doubt concerning a work's meaning, and therefore its worth – to offer the reassuring security of an *explanation* and an *evaluation*; in short to return the reader from the uncomfortable and precarious position of producer of meaning to the easier position of *consumer*.

Burgin 1986, p. 33

According to the critic Harold Rosenberg, the critic's infusion of meaning deserves to be recognised as a creative contribution in its own right:

The art critic is the collaborator of the artist in developing the culture of visual works as a resource of human sensibility. His basic function is to extend the artist's act into the realm of meaningful discourse. Art in our time is itself criticism. . . Into this dialogue in pigments the critic interjects a vocabulary of words. Having thus put himself into the act (not, he needs to remind himself, at the invitation of the other

performers), he assumes the role of responding with a trained rhetoric to the pantomime of the artists.'

Rosenberg 1976, p. 142

It is through this 'trained rhetoric' that the critic offers his own projections into the work as a means of resolving the anxieties of the art-going public. If we can only train ourselves to see what the expert sees, to value it as the expert does, we can begin to feel about us the security of a community of understanding. Armed with what amounts to a protocol for viewing, we can stand in front of a work of art knowing what we ought to be looking at and what we ought to make of it. And at the level of conversation, we can talk about these things, venturing opinions and giving reasons for them, as is required in the rubric to the tacit examination in basic connoisseurship.

In the market for the accreditation of taste, critics who set out to disparage certain artists and schools - such as Greenberg and Fried - possess a decided advantage over those who aim simply to disseminate enthusiasm for the work they like. The critic with a mission to judge offers a means of *discrimination*. The very word conveys a sense of participation in the important work of separating great art from the not-so-great, thus adding both substance and gravitas to the act of looking at art. A vocabulary of appreciation which offers a means of sniffing out the second-rate provides much more for the spectator to do and to talk about than one which requires of them simply that they look and feel as instructed. And at the level of conversation, discrimination is a far more convincing demonstration of connoisseurship than mere appreciation.

As the surfaces of modern art becoming progressively more bland, rebarbative or hermetic, both artist and spectator become progressively more dependent on the readings projected into them by the critic. Over thirty years ago Joseph Kosuth made the point with reference to the artists favoured by Greenberg and Fried, 'The conceptual level of the work of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Morris Louis . . . is so dismally low that any that is there is supplied by the critics promoting it⁴.' (Kosuth, 1969 [1992, p. 849, n 7]) If these meanings are to be read out of the work again, the spectator too must find them in the writings of the critics. Since then the dependency appears to have intensified. Sandler (1996) writes of post-modern art, 'Nowadays the expert's certification powers have grown to such an extent that it almost seems as if the critic is more important than the artist, or as if the critic is the real artist and the painter just the person who supplies the raw material.' (Quoted in Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000).

Conclusion

Once a formidable statement of position, *Art and Objecthood* today has the air of an abandoned fortification, its rooms of state crumbled to the same state of disrepair as its oubliettes and torture chambers. Many of the directions of subsequent history have turned out to be precisely through 'Literalism': via its consciousness of setting towards the Installation and via 'ideation' through the Art and Language movement towards Conceptual Art. Theatricality, in a more literal sense than could be imagined by Fried in the 1960s, flourishes as Performance Art, in an early example of which

⁴ Kosuth's comment is not disinterested. As a spokesperson for Conceptual Art he would naturally wish his art to carry its quota of concepts.

the text of Greenberg's *Art and Culure* was communally chewed to a pulp by students at the St. Martin's School of Art (Hopkins, 2000, p. 108).

Fried's 1998 reflections on these developments (Fried, 1998, p. 43 ff.) lie squarely in the great tradition of patrician disdain running in literary criticism from Mathew Arnold through TS Eliot to Fried's close friend, the late Ian Hamilton. The sensibility which confidently appeals to the court of history when that history still lies in the future, can only dismiss the present as barbarism when it all lies in a past which has moved in the wrong direction. Theatre has triumphed, and just as Fried foretold, the consequence has been a melting-pot of the arts in which even the possibility of standards has dissolved.

As for the late Jules Olitski (d. 4/2/07), the critical promotion of his work by Greenberg and Fried had mixed consequences. Although many prominent figures were carried along by the flow, others saw the support of such prominent critics as demonstrating that the work *depended* on that support. Harold Rosenberg's review of Olitski's 1973 retrospective at the Whitney Museum illustrates both responses:

"The enveloping dialogue dominating American art" is not a dialogue at all unless there is such a thing as a dialogue in which only one sound is heard: the ritualistic drumming in the art magazines which for a decade or more has sought to establish that a particular vein in abstract painting is the quintessence of contemporary art. In this propagandistically favoured vein, Olitski is the today undisputed chief; for the past three years he has been the most written-about figure in the art press – the artist whose innovations, it is contended, have placed him at the farthest outpost of progress in art.' . .

. . . According to Kenneth Moffett, curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, 'the painting of Jules Olitski has begun to seem decisive. For a surprising number of younger painters he is like a block. The influence that has to be gone through or overcome if any fundamental innovation of breakthrough is to be achieved.' . .

. . . Olitski needs to purge himself of the Moffetts within. Dogmantics aside, his present paintings depend on the sentimental and the grandiose: the candy box colors of the smaller canvasses and the fever-flushed firmaments of the larger ones. All in all, a second-rate performance

Rosenberg 1976, pp. 62-4

The prominent critic Lucy Lippard put it more succinctly, describing Olitski as 'visual muzak' (quoted in Kosuth (1969 [1992]))

Despite Greenberg and Fried's onslaught, Literalism fared rather better. Enjoying the support of prominent critics and museum curators, 'In a sense, Minimalism came to represent to epitome of the avant-garde in subsequent decades' (Crane, 1987, p. 42). Certainly the work of its leading practitioners continued to find a place in major exhibitions (Crane, 1987, Ch. 7), examples being the 1988 show at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (Foster, 1986) and the well-received Donald Judd retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2007 (Searle, 2007).

Criticism meanwhile, moves on, officially in hectic pursuit of art's avant-gardes, but driven too by the dynamics of its own cultural entrepreneurship. By ???, Leider (1992) believed that there was a fresh labour of discrimination to be performed, this

time one *within* Literalism. The 'mud slide called 'Minimal Art', he believed, was not the real Literalism at all. Rather it had 'set back everyone for years' so that:

the job of criticism now would seem to be to patiently undo the damage and carefully begin the work of revealing the development of a Literalist art in America which extends quite unbrokenly from about 1959 to the present. . .

This new version of art history was to begin by reading Jackson Pollock literally rather than pictorially (as dribbles and blobs, rather than line, shape and colour). Probably an even greater heresy than the actual production of Literalism in the eyes of the once-dominant priesthood of Abstraction, this new vocabulary of appreciation will doubtless reveal new patterns in the art of the past, and project, in the process, a far-from-disinterested version of what is of value in the art of the present. And so on.

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