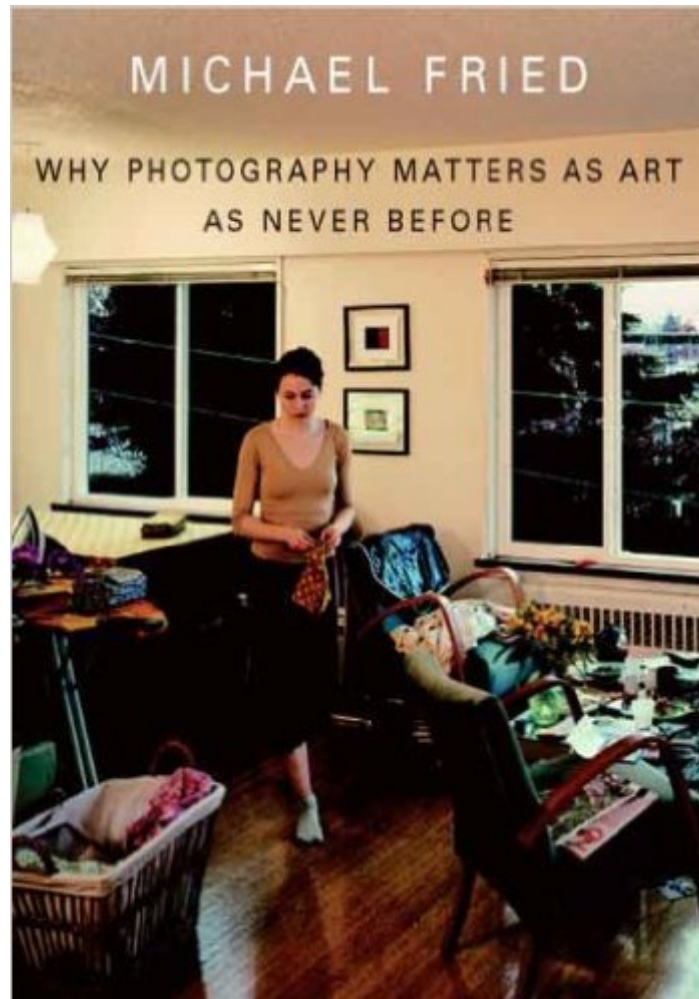


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# Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before



## Synopsis

From the late 1970s onward, serious art photography began to be made at large scale and for the wall. Michael Fried argues that this immediately compelled photographers to grapple with issues centering on the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it that until then had been the province only of painting. Fried further demonstrates that certain philosophically deep problems associated with notions of theatricality, literalness, and objecthood, and touching on the role of original intention in artistic production, first discussed in his controversial essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967) have come to the fore once again in recent photography. This means that the photographic ghetto no longer exists; instead photography is at the cutting edge of contemporary art as never before. Among the photographers and video-makers whose work receives serious attention in this powerfully argued book are Jeff Wall, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Luc Delahaye, Rineke Dijkstra, Patrick Faigenbaum, Roland Fischer, Thomas Demand, Candida Höfer, Beat Streuli, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, James Welling, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. Future discussions of the new art photography will have no choice but to take a stand for or against Fried's conclusions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book was reviewed in the Jan 2009 issue of ArtForum by Robin Kelsey, an art history professor at Harvard University and himself the author of several books on photography. Kelsey criticizes

many aspects of the book, and points out some of the very same faults that people here have, including Fried's annoying habit of talking about himself and his work and his determination to make his theory work even when it requires ignoring, dismissing, or rationalizing evidence that seems to go against it. Still, he takes what Fried is saying very seriously and, in the end, recognizes the book as an important work about photography by an important art historian and critic. I myself found the book a difficult and at times exasperating read but at the same time a, for the most part, interesting, even fascinating one. It showed me a way of looking at and thinking about photography that I had not encountered before. The key idea is the opposition between theatricality and antitheatricality. A theatrical work of art is one that addresses the beholder in some way, tells him something, asks him something, presupposes his presence. An antitheatrical work of art is one that does not do any of this, that is fully self-sufficient, asks nothing of the beholder, does not acknowledge his existence. Fried talks about being both an art historian and an art critic. As an art historian he sees the two kinds of art as both existing and one or the other as having the upper hand vis-à-vis the other at a given point in (art) time. Fried the critic clearly strongly prefers antitheatrical to theatrical art, and loves to see antitheatrical art rise up and triumph over theatrical art.

Cutting to the conclusion, the answer to the question posed by the author in the title is that now photography has provided the author with the work of more photographers that the author can bend to fit within a pet theory that he has developed over the years. Michael Fried is the author of books like "Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot" and "Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews" which, he tells the reader throughout this book, are important works if one is to understand much of modern art. The author analyzes the work of many modern photographers, some of whom at first glance might appear to have nothing in common, including Jeff Wall, Thomas Ruff, Jean-Marc Bustamante, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gurski, Luc Delahaye, Rineke Dijkstra, Thomas Demand, Hiroshi Sugimoto and even Bernd and Hilla Becher. For many viewers, the images of these photographers have been difficult to understand so that a global explanation of their work would certainly be welcome. As far as I can deduce, Fried's thesis is that the photographers, while creating works that are clearly meant to be seen, are at the same time trying to be antitheatrical, which in the author's lexicon means creating the illusion that the subjects are unaware of the photographer. I must confess that for many of the artists this was an easy to accept proposition that did not require so many pages for such a simple idea.

At a very young age in 1963 Michael Fried became an art critic and until about 1970 he was (in my

opinion, along with Clement Greenberg) America's most perceptive, intellectually powerful and consistently interesting writer about contemporary painting and sculpture. What made Fried's work special is his astonishing ability to describe what he sees in such a way that works of art are revealed as making compelling ontological claims on the beholder - claims that exist only in their art-historical context. Fried's best essays during the 1960s consist almost entirely of detailed descriptions of particular works - by Pollack, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella, Anthony Caro and Larry Poons. The miracle is that something close to pure description somehow ends up gathering the force of a philosophical argument, stated in visual terms. This phase of Fried's career culminated in his 1967 polemic "Art and Objecthood", in which Fried pretty much staked something like his professional identity on the claim that the High Modernist work he favored represented not only the future, but the ONLY possible future for serious artistic activity. The history played a nasty trick on Fried: The theatrical aesthetic of Minimalism, recast as "post-modernism", completely displaced modernism as the historical present. Fried's career as a working art critic seemed to be over almost as abruptly as it started. Although Fried denies that his subsequent leap into art history (tracing the history of the anti-theatrical impulse from about 1750 in France to Manet and the "Generation of 1863") has any strong connection with his previous work as a critic, the book on photography suggests that this denial ought not to be taken at face value.

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