

*Michael Fried, Minimalism, and a Trip to Dia:Beacon (2014)*

A couple of weeks ago, having just relocated to New York City, I contacted an old friend who is a fairly well connected artist in the city. She graciously offered to introduce me to her friends and colleagues and I'm ambitious enough to not let an offer like that slip away. I was invited to a dinner party at her apartment along with a several artists, a few art students and some self-proclaimed art lovers. If the latter part of that sentence seems a bit snide, it is, art haters would be more accurate. I mentioned that I was planning a trip to Dia:Beacon and, much to my surprise, this erupted into a tense debate about minimalism, the current art "scene", art criticism, the art market, art institutions and the future of art... not much love, a lot of hate. At one point our host asked, by a show of hands, who preferred minimalism over modernism – I was the only one who raised my hand! That night as I lay in bed, I found myself eloquently and gloriously defending minimalism, or defending myself perhaps, I'm not sure, those words now escape me.

Prior to my trip to Dia:Beacon I re-read Michael Fried's famous essay *Art and Objecthood*. Fried makes a passionate case *for* art and *against* objecthood, "There is a war going on between theatre and modernist painting, between the theatrical and the pictorial—a war that, despite the literalists' [minimalists] explicit rejection of modernist painting and sculpture, is not basically a matter of program and ideology but of experience, conviction, sensibility." It sounds to me like Mr. Fried was not coping well with the art revolutions of the 1960s. But, he's a smart guy and more than capable of presenting his case. First, he distinguishes modernist works of art – composed of different elements, autonomous, independent from their location - from minimalist works which are whole, free of individual parts, relying solely on shape and presence to occupy a specific location in the world. This matter-of-fact distinction is vital to Fried's argument as it establishes

his own grounds for considering the meaningfulness, or lack thereof, of art and objecthood. Art, I was reminded by the critic, is meaningful based on the very nature of the relationships of the elements. The essential nature of objecthood finds meaning only in relation to the space it occupies, including the viewer. He is proposing here that objecthood requires the viewer as an integral part of the experience without whom the object has no meaning. According to Fried – and this is the crux of his position - the requirement of an audience in order for a work to have meaning is theater. “What is it about objecthood,” he asks us, “as projected and hypostatized by the literalists that makes it antithetical to art?” His answer is a scathing reduction of minimalism to nothing more than “a new genre of theater”... non-art.

This is what was on my mind as I began my journey to Dia:Beacon. The train made its way up river, the urban density thinned, the season became more identifiable and the river, flowing aggressively against the direction of the train, was an apt metaphor for my entering into what might prove to be treacherous waters. Leaving behind the distractions and noise of life in the great city of New York for the quickly quieting landscape seemed to heighten my senses. To a city boy like me Beacon feels like the wilderness. The old factory space that has become the museum is an all too perfect fortress for the art: solid, spacious, industrial, crispy-clean, light-filled. I thought about how much time has passed since this work was made, all the ‘posts’ and ‘isms’ that have staked their claim. Art movements endlessly evolve, respond and react to both art history and art potential, to cultural changes and economic realities. Tasmil Raymond, curator at Dia Art Foundation writes, “...the artist works within a historical development, providentially decodes and proposes a reading of present conditions, and ultimately shifts art into a realm of experience.” Bingo! This may be the Achilles heel of Fried’s argument. It strikes me that he is unable (or unwilling) to acknowledge the appropriateness of time and place in regards to minimalism.

However, looking closely at the all-star cast of minimalist artist's work I realized that Michael Fried is also right – sort of. The works, especially those by Andre, Judd, Heiser and Serra are not autonomous, nor moveable, nor contained within a frame, they are definitely not tableau. The work is for and about the viewer, it engages the architecture, it is meant to be experienced, seen, walked on, walked through and peered into. It is, in this sense, theatrical and performative. However – and this is where Fried and I truly part company – I find these attributes provocative, critical, and revealing. They are revolutionary to me, even today; they are still capable of questioning what is art, how is art made, where can art exist. This work is demanding of viewer and critic. And, even though these once controversial minimalist works are commodified and monetized, residing comfortably in museums and corporate lobbies, there was a profound sense of joy knowing that, at one time, the work's non-artness threw into turmoil the institutional idea of an artwork's value, validity, and authenticity. I find myself becoming aware of an acute challenge to my own sensibilities as I take in gallery after gallery.

Of course some works are more challenging than others. Perhaps this is most notable in the nearly invisible and deceptively simple works by Fred Sandback. He was a master of creating objects with essentially no mass, non-objects that somehow confidently delineate and fill space. Sol Lewitt as well whose nearly imperceptible and ephemeral wall drawings fill several galleries. I can't just pass these by, curiosity gets the better of me; I'm compelled to know, to look deeper, to question, to converse. And, for anyone who thinks Lewitt, Judd, and Serra embody minimalism, what of the diversity seen in works by Joseph Beuys, John Chamberlain, Robert Smithson, or Louise Bourgeois. Altogether Dia is adept at clearly displaying the complexity of the movement. Minimalism, like all art movements has no singularity. No doubt, I find some works more compelling or successful than others, a privilege I'm willing to extend unconditionally to Michael

Fried. Yet I cannot help feeling that Fried's short shrift of minimalism is a great disservice to art history and himself. Despite my dinner conversation and Michael Fried's essay *Dia* reminded me of the incredible breadth of art making: its objects, its ideas, its functions, its appearances, its timeliness. I rediscovered for myself that the expansive realm of art is, in its entirety, how and where meaningfulness is made manifest.

My journey to *Dia:Beacon* was transformative and enlightening. Carl Andre, whose work is currently on display at *Dia*, wrote, "Art is not only the investment of creative energy, but the sharpening of the critical faculties... Things have qualities. Perceive the qualities." Words to live by. And, as much as Fried may have been challenged and even threatened by minimalism, in *Art and Objecthood* he makes no effort to consider minimalism's historical poignancy or relevance. He is desperately clinging on to not only modernism as it trips and stumbles but also to ideas of 18<sup>th</sup> century France, Diderot, and the tableau. As the art world of the 1960s was quickly evolving, apparently Michael Fried was not. I believe there is much to learn from ideas and artifacts of the past. But let's not forget that past and present are deeply interwoven in continuum that constantly feeds and devours itself. Perspectives change, attitudes morph, new interests emerge, technology advances, and meaningfulness shifts. What is radical today will likely be ubiquitous tomorrow. It's all meaningful.