Fried, Michael (1939-) Word Count: 576

Michael Fried is an American art critic, literary critic and art historian. Fried is most well-known for his art criticism, which contributed to the debates on modernist painting and sculpture that were played out in the pages of American art journals, such as *Artforum*, during the 1960s. In 1958, while studying English as an undergraduate at Princeton University, Fried met Clement Greenberg, whose theories on modernist painting influenced Fried’s subsequent writings and art criticism. He later studied under Richard Wollheim while at Oxford University. The formalist influence of Greenberg’s art criticism is prevalent in Fried’s two canonical texts on modernist art: ‘Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella’ (1965), the catalogue essay for an exhibition curated by Fried at Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum; and ‘Art and Objecthood’ (1967). The former focuses upon three second-generation New York School painters, considered to be ‘high modernist’. The latter is a defence of modernist painting against a new form of three-dimensional work that he terms ‘literal’, now known as minimalist, sculpture. The argument initiated in these two essays formed a key moment in the debates that defined late-twentieth-century modernist art history. In the late sixties Fried moved away from writing art criticism, focusing instead on modernist art in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He recently returned to contemporary art with his text *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before.*

In ‘Three American Painters’, Fried took up ideas established in Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting’ (1961) to develop a historical lineage for contemporary modernist painting. In his introduction to the text, Fried claims that, since the publication of Heinrich Wölflinn’s *Renaissance and Baroque Style* (1888), the history of painting can be understood as following an internal dynamic or dialectic, rather than responding to economic or social conditions. Fried’s use of the term ‘dialectic’ signals a Hegelian notion of historical progression, wherein a thesis, an antithesis, and a moment of synthesis follow in sequence. Fried argues that only since the late-modernist paintings of artists such as Noland and Stella can one see the significance of the earlier works of the New York School painters. Through taking up formal problems such as structure (the ‘support of the canvas’), Stella and Noland continuously critiqued their works, as well as the works of the past. Fried further establishes Stella in this trajectory of modernist painting, demonstrating the reliance of Stella’s advancements on the work of Willem de Kooning and Barnett Newman, in an attempt to defend Stella’s work against the ‘literalist’ interpretations by artists Donald Judd and Carl Andre. Stella was to be the bone of contention between the abstractionists, on one side, and the literalists, on the other. ‘Art and Objecthood’ is considered to be a response to Judd’s identification of three-dimensional characteristics in Stella’s work in the essay ‘Specific Objects’ (1965). Fried criticised the new three-dimensional, ‘literalist’ work of artists such as Judd and Robert Morris by proposing that the work adopts an inherent theatricality due to its relationship with the viewer and the temporality of this relationship. Fried’s ideas regarding theatricality remain controversial, but also influential, within the story of modern art.

**References and further reading**

Fried, M. (1965) *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, New York: Fogg Art Museum.

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Greenberg, C. (1961) ‘Modernist Painting’, *Arts Yearbook,* 4.

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Leider, P. (1970) ‘Literalism and Abstraction’, *Artforum*, 8:8, pp. 44-51.