

# Michael Fried and Philosophy

Modernism, Intention,  
and Theatricality

Edited by Mathew Abbott

First published 2018  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-67980-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-56350-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# 11 The Aesthetics of Absorption

*Magdalena Ostaš*

Michael Fried has returned to the distinction between “absorption” and “theatricality” in all of his art historical work since he first introduced the dyad in 1980 to illuminate the dynamics of the relationship between painting and beholder in eighteenth-century French painting and the critical writings of Denis Diderot. The remarkable historical reach of Fried’s work since then, coupled with the attentiveness of the readings of individual artworks that comprise his arguments, demonstrates that, in Fried’s hands, the distinction between “absorption” and “theatricality” can yield a range of insights that are fully receptive to the particularity of the works they take up even as they seek to alert us to a foundational problem motivating and alive in all of them. In this sense, there is a rare convergence of formal, historical, and philosophical receptivity in Fried’s writing on art. Another way to underline this achievement in Fried’s work is to say that his consistent returning to the distinction between “absorption” and “theatricality” has the effect—very unexpectedly—of *particularizing* and thus illuminating works of art rather than subsuming them under the critic’s matrix. We see something new *in* Caravaggio or Jeff Wall (to name the outer ends of Fried’s historical range) *because* each speaks to a similar problem so distinctly grounded (like Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Jacques-Louis David, Gustave Courbet, and Édouard Manet had been) in the developing historical and material dimensions of a specific art form. We see this distinctiveness as Fried elucidates the way each artist becomes oriented toward a horizon of cares that are indeed analogous and overlapping, but that always demand an individuated response, in a concrete medium, bound within specific circumstances. As Fried moves in his art historical writings from Chardin, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, David, and Diderot, who help him in *Absorption and Theatricality* to first uncover this horizon of cares, through to Courbet and Manet, he tells a story about “absorption” and “theatricality” that helps us see how paintings grapple with being paintings, and how they in effect fight for their own “ontological status” so as to be able to claim belonging in “the class of objects that we call paintings” (AT 159). The horizons of “absorption” and “theatricality” that direct Fried’s readings of art history thus do not amount to revealing a set of recurrent formal features or details, structural principles

of organization, thematic concerns, shared motifs, or ongoing conceptual preoccupations. Instead, Fried's concern with the very ontology of painting draws our attention to the fact that for him a painting can become a different kind of object because of or by virtue of its specific handling of absorptive and theatrical concerns. While certainly related to some thematic occupations or structural principles, this is more fundamentally a change in how a painting acts like or becomes a painting. The concept "absorption" and its counter-concept "theatricality" thus point beyond common themes and toward a more primary grappling with what Fried frequently calls "the primordial convention that paintings are meant to be beheld" (AT 93; MM 405). The two concepts for Fried name ways in which being-for and being-seen become critical problems in the history of the visual arts.

In a certain sense, then, and contrary to the thought that faults Fried for a too-general framework for understanding widely disparate figures in art history, it may be that Fried's terms "absorption" and "theatricality" actually have not been understood broadly and widely enough. A more capacious understanding of the concept of "absorption" especially can help us see that the term is rich with a philosophical significance that echoes central concerns long at play in philosophy's thinking about the status of art objects and the singular, sometimes puzzling role of aesthetic experience in ordinary life. For at stake in Fried's concept of "absorption" is the coming into being of a new understanding of what it means to have or undergo an aesthetic response and, correspondingly, a new understanding of what comes to constitute the aesthetic object as an aesthetic object for us. As Fried describes "absorption" across artworks and movements in his art historical writing, the ontology of works of art—or a concern with what works of art "are"—emerges not as an investigation into modes of classification or states of being but into our own orientation toward and interests in certain kinds of objects and the ways those objects elicit and sustain such forms of attention. This essay focuses on how Fried thereby dramatically reconceives the place of the beholder in the task of understanding what works of art are, so that he effectively shifts the burden of ontological definition from its traditional source in an object's inherent qualities to, instead, the activity of a specific and uncommonly indirect kind of human responsiveness and engagement.

"Absorption" and "theatricality," therefore, serve not only as registers of a work's grappling with the primordial convention that paintings are meant to be seen or beheld but also as expressions of another convention, possibly an even more primordial or primary one: that in the Western tradition a work of art *is a work of art* and not some other kind of thing that one responds to *in another way*. It is worth noting that the very moment—the eighteenth century—that Fried pinpoints as the beginning of the anti-theatrical tradition's upholding "absorption" as an ideal is the same moment in the history of philosophy when aesthetic responsiveness is first conceived as a form of human experience different and separate from other kinds of experience. Like the beautiful and sublime objects in Immanuel

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that draw out of the subject a form of disinterested reflection, the artworks in the tradition Fried traces do not "address" us as ourselves, standing tied to the world by our usual psychological preoccupations, cognitive tasks, practical worries, sensuous reactions, emotional attachments, ethical cares, social affiliations, and personal idiosyncrasies. Such artworks and objects demand our engagement at the same time that they ask us precisely to interrupt or momentarily dissipate ("negate" is Fried's term (AT 108)) the kinds of engagement that anchor us to the ordinary world. Through a range of absorptive techniques and structures, such paintings do this by presenting us with the "supreme fiction" (AT 103) that we aren't where we actually are: standing before the painting. For Fried the work of art cannot betray that it knows we are positioned before it, and it thus becomes the work's burden to convince us of something difficult: that we are not actually present. Unlike natural objects whose identity in the world is guaranteed or nonnegotiable—they simply are what they are, and we are or are not present to see them—aesthetic objects in both Kant's and Fried's understandings contrastingly stand under the continual threat of not being or counting as what they are (that is, as works of art) or not sustaining their status as aesthetic objects by drawing from us the mode of responsiveness that defines their identity. Unlike other kinds of objects in the world, artworks might be said to have an ongoing responsibility for the solicitation of their own identity. In this way, their compositional force and formal work are a crucial part of what Fried repeatedly calls "ontological work" (WPM 3).

The portrayal of human figures immersed in absorbing activities is only the beginning for Fried of representational strategies used in painting and photography to evoke absorptive themes and structures, but understanding absorption as a literal theme as distinct from absorption as a form of "ontological work" is a good place to begin teasing out the philosophical significance of Fried's central term. The human figures in the class of mid-eighteenth-century French paintings that occupy Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality*, for example, make known their attentiveness, arrest, enthrallment, and literal absorption in a number of ways: they might be pictured listening, reading, sketching, daydreaming, writing, witnessing, judging, or perhaps, as in Chardin's archetypal painting, blowing and gazing abstractedly into a soap bubble (Figure 11.1). In these early examples of what we might call "classic" absorption, primarily evident in Chardin's genre paintings, Fried finds an important thematic dimension to the representation of absorption, and it usually involves the human figures' suspension of distracted activities. The figures that interest Fried in Chardin's paintings of the 1750s are characterized singularly by a self-forgetting and self-abandonment (both are terms Fried employs; see AT 13 and 60–1) that are vividly written on their faces and bodies, so that, paradoxically, their "psychological absence" (AT 35) from the scene is what the painter signals. If their absence is at issue in the painting, where are these figures



*Figure 11.1* Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Blowing Soap Bubbles*, 1734

(Los Angeles County Museum of Art; photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)

understood to be “present” instead? Since they have forgotten the world around them, and since they are wholly pulled away by whatever has grasped their intense attentiveness, we as beholders might be said to have unique access to these figures’ minds as their thoughts and preoccupations wander away from the very world we can see right there in the painting.<sup>1</sup> Fried’s figures are “off” reading, drawing, or intently blowing into soap bubbles (if they are alone in the composition), or reflecting, conversing, observing, or witnessing (if they are subsumed in a scene with others). It is as though they have abandoned their physical environments, despite being pulled into them, *so that* we can see those environments bare and without the look of being-seen. Similarly, one has the sense that they have forgotten that their faces orient outward and that their bodies are expressive. As Robert Pippin remarks, such figures’ deeds and gestures have the look of not anticipating our gaze and are instead uniquely “their own” as the painter puts out in the open the unself-conscious, “nonalienated” way in which they seem to inhabit their bodies.<sup>2</sup> The painting’s assertion of these figures’ obliviousness to their surroundings also ensures the sense of their resilience against any distractions, including the danger that our own looking and bustling before the canvas suddenly seems to pose. Because these figures’



immersion in a singular task or singular scene is what orients them fully and entirely within the painting, we as beholders, threatening to disturb or unsettle this fixated scene, are indicted by our very presence. The figures, therefore, have to be convincingly absorbed or reabsorbed into the world of the painting, and our presence as spectators has to be negated, “counteracted,” “obliterated,” or “neutralized” (AT 67 and 68)—in other words, made into an imaginary or imagined absence—so that we no longer pose this suppositional but sensed and consequential threat. It is in this way that the fact *that* paintings are meant to be beheld first emerges as the central problem in the age of Diderot.

For Fried, sustaining the absorptive values that maintain the fiction of the beholder’s absence involves much more than the representation of human figures caught in unself-conscious reflection or reverie, and in *Absorption and Theatricality* his emphasis quickly shifts from a motif-driven analysis of human figures fallen into inwardness to the wider strategies whereby a painting, now conceived as “a unified compositional structure” or “a closed and self-sufficient system” (AT 132), convinces us that we are, in effect, not present before it. Fried shows that in the 1760s Greuze inherits from Chardin the value of absorption and transforms it into something new and nearly unrecognizable. Greuze’s use of highly dramatic narrative structures that often involve morality, emotion, and sexuality contrasts abrasively with Chardin’s more simple understanding of the essence of absorption. The contrast leads Fried to his most consequential philosophical point in *Absorption and Theatricality*, as the concept of absorption allows him to reveal a deep metaphysical-formal-historical overlap between Chardin’s intensely quiet canvases and Greuze’s unruly scenes. Both artists ultimately belong for Fried to the same anti-theatrical tradition. Nowhere is the leap in thought that allows Fried to make this connection more apparent than in his discussion of Diderot’s understanding of the tangled concept of *tableau*. Fried describes the structure of *tableau* clearly: “the grouping of figures and stage properties that constituted a *tableau* stood *outside* the action, with the result that the characters themselves appeared unaware of its existence and hence of its effect on the audience” (AT 95). Here Fried follows Diderot in the powerful insight that the figures in a *tableau* themselves are never aware of the *tableau* of which they are a part, immersed instead in the action and emotion of the scene that embeds them, and since the *tableau*—that is, the embodied compositional intention of the painting—is consequently only visible from the beholder’s point of view, the *tableau* brings into relief for the beholder the fact that the world to which the figures in the painting belong and the world to which he or she belongs are entirely distinct. There is a world from which we begin to sense our total exclusion as we perceive that the figures in the *tableau* can’t see at all what we see about them. It is exactly this sense of their utter self-enclosure that arrests and enthralls us, or that generates and sustains our enthrallment, so that the painting comes to absorb us in the same way that the world around the figures fully absorbs them. Toril Moi

underlines this important parallel “between the work of art’s representation of absorption and the viewer’s or reader’s ability to lose him or herself in the work of art” and claims that being “held” or spellbound by a painting importantly rests on being unacknowledged by the figures pictured in it, since their disregard for us is what confirms their unbreakable immersion in the world before them.<sup>3</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell notes (with an admittedly different emphasis) that Fried’s concept of absorption in this way is like the processes of desire or seduction, which succeed in proportion to their “indirectness,” so that for Mitchell the paintings that interest Fried “get what they want by seeming not to want anything” and “pretending that they have every-thing they need.”<sup>4</sup> We inhabit the space before the painting, and the figures inhabit the world of the painting, absorbed in their own apparent interiority (as in Chardin) or subsumed within the work’s sealed and unified compositional structure (as in Greuze).

This understanding of a painting’s compositional unity, one that is grounded in the modality of the beholder’s responsiveness as much as in the formal dynamics of the painting itself, finally transforms in Fried’s explorations of contemporary art photography into the philosophical idea of a “world.” The perception of formal self-enclosure out of which the concept of absorption arises deepens in Fried’s later work into the foundational thought that a work of art can display, constitute, or itself stand as evidence of a world. Fried’s conception of compositional unity in *Absorption and Theatricality* centers on closure and self-containment, so that “absorption” seems to name the relation of the parts or aspects of a painting, ones that have the effect of sealing it off, as much as it describes the state of enthrallment or reflectiveness such a composition works to prompt in the beholder. The beholder is “absent” in the sense that the painting’s self-containment is concretely apparent and impenetrable. But through his studies of Courbet and Manet, and conclusively in his readings of contemporary art photography, Fried discovers that the demand for the beholder’s imagined absence conflicts too absolutely or outrightly with the very conditions of (or spatio-temporal “facts” involved in) human beings encountering and looking at works of art. The demand for the beholder’s imaginary non-presence also conflicts with the way artists in the nineteenth century re-confront the contours and values of absorption and especially theatricality, an orientation toward the beholder crucially distinct for artists in the periods just preceding modernism from a painting’s ability to “face” or “strike” its viewer. Thus the complete absence of the beholder Chardin, Greuze, and Diderot had demanded is replaced in Fried’s later thinking by an attention to the beholder’s own perceived condition of difference, exclusion, or “confinement from” (MC 106) the work, what in his writing on contemporary photography Fried concisely calls “the depiction or evocation of a separation of worlds” (WPM 30). The artwork no longer weaves the fiction of our actually not being there and instead simply declares its “world-apartness” (WPM 124 and 129). The existence of this “world” on which the artwork stakes

its ontological “apartness” hinges in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, as it does in *Absorption and Theatricality*, on the artwork’s handling of what Fried calls the dimension of “to-be-seenness” (WPM 35). The convention that artworks are meant to be beheld thus remains at the center of the image’s “ontological work.”

Fried helps us see with clarity the connection between an artwork’s handling of being-seen and its ontological force in the work of the contemporary photographer Jeff Wall. The extensive labor of construction and staging that Wall’s near-documentary photographs entail, Fried claims, actually makes it possible for Wall to realize compelling depictions of human beings unaware of being seen or pictured. As Fried suggests, the staggering preparations Wall undertakes in his works underline that in the contexts and environments that interest this photographer, the inference that a human being might be conscious of being beheld can “contaminate” (WPM 35) a world. Yet Fried reminds us of the distance between the images in Wall’s lightboxes and a true documentary practice or even everyday snapshot-taking. In his reading of Wall’s *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (Figure 11.2), for example, Fried claims that Wall seeks to recreate the “world” of the Invisible Man, so that the depicted figure is not acting but *being* in his world: “As if only by virtue of the Invisible Man’s seeming obliviousness to his world could the latter have



Figure 11.2 Jeff Wall, *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, 1999–2001 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, transparency in lightbox 174 × 250.5cm; image courtesy of the artist)

yielded itself up to depiction” (WPM 47). In this reading Fried contrasts the Invisible Man’s own reserved pose of absorption as he sits turned away from us and toward the interior picture-space, his face mostly unrevealed, with the unbelievable profusion of sheer objects and elements in his surrounding environment, so that the Invisible Man’s “hole” comes into view for us as viewers just as we have manifest evidence of it receding for him. The Invisible Man’s reflectiveness strangely becomes an abstract condition of the possibility of his “hole” and the immense volume and clutter of objects within it appearing so materially in the image for us. Both the Invisible Man and his “hole” shed their invisibility, in a sense, by seeming to be unseen. All of the physical elements and objects that populate the room and comprise the composition of *After “Invisible Man,”* in addition, reflect a very elaborate orchestration, one that in the photograph has the unmistakable look of an unreality. As a collection of objects, the scene is also self-evidently (and allusively) fictitious, so that the thought of Wall’s picture being some version of a snapshot or documentary photograph does not occur to its viewer. That is not the logic of Wall’s near-documentary work. Fried thus shows that the implausibility of the pictured room in *After “Invisible Man”* surprisingly does not obstruct the sense of the image’s giving us what he, following Heidegger, calls the “worldhood” (WPM 49) of the world that surrounds the depicted figure.

We can see that theatricality, absorption’s counter-concept, emerges here as something different from a register of artistic principles, values, or inherited interests. “Theatricality” in Fried’s writing on photography names a threat to an artwork’s world, its very existence, as it describes the possible puncturing of that world by the look of the beholder. The perception of such a look threatens not just to disturb or unsettle that world, but now to *void* it and deflate its integrity entirely, rendering it unconvincing, unconvincing *as that world*. With the insinuation of the beholder’s look, such a world becomes a world just waiting to be looked at, already conscripted and camera-ready, figuring on the viewer’s likes, dislikes, and various expectations. For this reason it is important for Fried to differentiate painting and photography’s elementary visuality—their being artistic mediums that necessarily are seen—from theatricality in the sense he develops. In his readings of Manet, Fried describes the elementary situation of looking that painting involves as “the inescapable or quasi-transcendental relation of mutual facing between painting and beholder,” and for Fried it is only the most simplistic understanding of what “mutual facing” entails that grasps the situation of beholding as “essentially visual” (MM 397). Manet’s commitment to the quality of “strikingness” in his paintings, for instance, has a metaphysical consequence for Fried that is not at all the same as visual impactfulness. This is a central axis of distinction in *Why Photography Matters*, where Fried argues that contemporary art photography inherits the values of the Western anti-theatrical tradition at the same time that it confronts “to-be-seenness” with a renewed imaginative seriousness. Fried makes the

wonderfully vivid suggestion at one point in a related discussion of Caravaggio that a painting can actually face *away from* its viewer:

A further dimension of the issue of embodiment in these canvases might be framed as a question, one that was implicit in the previous lecture: which way does a painting face? It might seem that the answer is obvious, beyond all question: it faces out from the wall on which it hangs, directly toward the viewer; more precisely, easel paintings do that. (I am here using the term “easel painting” in its most general acceptance.) But the opposite may also be true. To the extent that a representational or, for that matter, an abstract painting evokes a space that opens up toward an illusionistic distance—to the extent that the depicted or virtual space is felt to be an extension of the lived spatiality of the painter (and viewer)—the painting in question may be felt also to face *away* from the painter (and viewer).

(MC 143)

In *Absorption and Theatricality* Fried imagines that an artwork can secure the beholder’s interest by dramatizing that it is not concerned with his presence at all, so that it works hard to foreground its active indifference and lack of consideration for him. In the image Fried offers here of the way in which a viewer can sense that a painting faces *away* from him, the painting’s attitude is anything but indifferent or indirect. This is so because the painting makes a forceful claim to its world, one it constructs in a space the beholder senses is *over there* away from him or her and bizarrely *not* right there on the outward surface of the canvas in front of which he or she stands. Now the painting (or photograph) *does* appear to have a stake, and while it refuses to address or conscript the beholder, it also hopes at the same time for the emergence of a particular form of responsiveness from him or her that bespeaks a conviction in the world it constitutes.<sup>5</sup> As early as “Art and Objecthood” Fried categorizes the artwork’s confrontation with or direct appeal to its viewer as the very “negation of art” (AO 153)—the theater with which real art is at war. In his readings of Fried’s art history, Pippin instructively traces the continuing lines of Fried’s interest in such distinctions between “genuine” and “false” ways of *being* an artwork, and how “theatricality” for Fried captures the way in which an artwork can be thought to fail.<sup>6</sup> Through the remarkable play with space and perspective that characterizes his condensed image of a painting that hangs on the wall impossibly facing away from us, Fried conveys how such a painting actually anchors itself in a world other than our own. This paradoxical painting disavows the theatrical impulse and summons us in a different manner. Neither an image for the creations of the imagination nor a picture of an allegorical illusion of some kind, the idea of a painting that faces away from its viewer that he or she still continues to see elucidates the essential difference between *seeing* and *beholding*.

This distinction between our usual responses to the world (seeing, thinking, liking, caring) and a different responsiveness (here, “beholding”) that uniquely requires us to suspend or “neutralize” (AT 68), as Fried puts it, these everyday functions and attachments first comes into view at an important moment in the history of philosophy in the foundational text of modern aesthetics, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The laborious opening sections of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” in Kant’s third *Critique* concisely illustrate the importance for Kant of defining aesthetic experience by rigorously isolating what it is *not*: it is not a form of cognitive, conceptual, or logical judgment (§1); it is not an agreeable or gratifying sensation that elicits a liking from us (§3); it is not our estimation of what is morally good and respectable in the world (§4); it is not what we can approve of or endorse (§5); and, later on, it is not evoked by an object’s perfection or commensurateness between its function and form (§15).<sup>7</sup> Kant’s understanding of aesthetic judgment as a form of responsiveness that strangely requires us to disengage our actual engagement with the object before us finds numerous echoes in Fried’s discovery that some works of art seem to demand our absence or come to insist on their separateness from us. It is as if such objects depend for Fried, as for Kant, on evidence of our *disen*-gagement from the solid coordinates of our world and our disinterest in the objects’ literal existence. In the break Kant posits in the subject’s experience of beauty from intellectual activity, emotional bonds, sensuous responses, or moral investments, he—like Fried—demands that the subject take him or herself away from before the object as if his or her physical presence in that particular place were somehow surmountable or interruptible. For Kant the subject must withdraw his or her usual forms of empathy, pleasure, curiosity, excitement, enjoyment, confusion, or elation, since this is how freedom from intellectual and sensible experience is realized. At the same time the object, correspondingly, is freed from its normal relations to and determinations by thought, sensation, and desire. Standing before a work of art for Kant entails relinquishing the sense that the object is beautiful “for me,”<sup>8</sup> a form of what Hannah Arendt in her reading of the *Critique of Judgment* pinpoints as the “liberation from private conditions” that enables aesthetic judgment to ground meaningful community.<sup>9</sup> Kant is clear in his opening remarks that the central issue in aesthetic judgment is “whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care” about the thing’s existence.<sup>10</sup> This is an idea Fried mirrors in “Art and Objecthood” when he argues that art (unlike an object) is never “concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters [the] work” (AO 153). Our actual care or concern with the object reduces it to a “literal” (Fried) or merely “real” (Kant) thing,<sup>11</sup> so that as Walter Benn Michaels appositely claims, looking at artworks in effect “demands a subject who is as little a subject as the object is an object.”<sup>12</sup> Instead of being a subject who occupies the world, the beholder becomes a spectator or onlooker onto the world, both drawn into but also distinctly shut out by it. The cognitive powers in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* engage in “free play” before the aesthetic object, and this play

amounts to a refusal to subsume that object by conceptual thought or to reduce it to simple sense perception. Instead, the faculties aimlessly “linger” and contemplate the object, activated and stimulated by it without the constraint of a deliberate aim.<sup>13</sup> Kant gives this pleasantly undirected state the name “reflection.” He uses it throughout the third *Critique* to designate the subject’s immersion in the complex state of the “feeling of life”<sup>14</sup> in which the subject is filled with a sense of his or her own existence yet mark-edly (intellectually, sensually, morally, ordinarily) *absent* from the experience. A kind of self-forgetting is involved in Kant’s conception of reflection as a nonintellectual, nonemotional state, and it strongly parallels Diderot’s understanding of the “psycho-physical” feeling that absorption in an art-work elicits through which the subject “comes to experience a pure and intense sensation of the sweetness and as it were the self-sufficiency of his own existence” (AT 130–1). The artwork gives rise to reflectiveness in the subject for both Kant and Diderot as it goes about the “ontological work” that convinces a mere viewer (or see-er) to further *behold*.

The difference between our usual ways of seeing the world and the kinds of responsiveness that a painting or photograph can call for—grounded in seeing but not solely visual—becomes vivid if we compare two images that interest Fried in which the human act of “looking-at” is placed at the center. There are clear points of compositional overlap between Caspar David Friedrich’s *Woman at the Window* (Figure 11.3) and Thomas Struth’s *Art Institute of Chicago II* (Figure 11.4), yet these points work to found very different worlds, so that the differing ontological stakes of the painting and photograph become all the more pronounced on account of the superficial parallels that appear to undergird both of them. In both Friedrich’s painting and Struth’s photograph, a woman is depicted from the rear gazing at a scene that in some evident way excludes her and disallows her from entering into it. In *Woman at the Window* the figure depicted gazing out of the window is like the figures in many of Friedrich’s well-known paintings (*Monk by the Sea*, *Wanderer above a Sea of Mist*, *Woman before the Setting Sun*) whose gazes consistently mark the natural landscape before them as something-viewed. The act of looking gives form to the landscapes and scenes they occupy. These *Rückenfiguren*, or figures pictured from the rear, make evident that landscape for Friedrich is only made meaningful through order-bestowing acts of the eye and mind. Friedrich is so insistent about populating the foregrounds of his paintings with onlooking human figures that as a group these paintings read like a serious rhetorical argument for the primacy of the human response in the encounter between mind and world, or consciousness and nature. The Kantian echoes in Friedrich’s obsession with the world-ordering gaze do not escape any of his best critics, including Fried. Joseph Leo Koerner, for instance, emphasizes the “humanizing plot” that Friedrich’s rear-view figures necessarily impose on nature, so that the landscapes in his paintings are never “settings” peopled with men and woman or “places” narratively encountered by individuals but, instead, are framed as visual fields subject to the ordering function of human



*Figure 11.3* Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at the Window*, 1822

(Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin; photo credit: bpk Bildagentur/Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen/Joerg P. Anders/Art Resource, New York)

vision.<sup>15</sup> Fried also reads Friedrich's insistence on placing the act of looking at the center of his compositions as an "allegory of subjective orientation in Kant's sense" (AL 122):

To enlarge briefly on the essential point of the affinity between Kant's remarks and Friedrich's paintings as I understand it: the felt difference





Figure 11.4 Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago II*, 1990

(The Art Institute of Chicago; photo credit: The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, New York)

between right and left is also, by its very nature, an experience of oneself as a subjective center, a fact reflected in Friedrich's commitment to the central axis—to uprightness—in picture after picture. One might think of that centeredness and uprightness as a kind of universality but not the universality of what the world might be imagined to look like if cognition were not grounded in subjective feeling as Kant suggests (that is, if it were wholly objective, without reference to the experiencing subject); by the same token, the subjectivity in question is not *mere* subjectivity, a kind of unanchored and essentially formless responsiveness to visual or say sensuous stimulus in all their multifariousness and profusion.

(AL 136)

Fried argues that the natural landscapes in Friedrich's paintings seem to conform to what we might call the felt geometry of human cognition, and this leads him to the conclusion that Friedrich's figures are not viewers or beholders but more aptly "cognizers" (AL 118). They structure the world and give it form through the subjective orientation of their minds and bodies, and Friedrich's paintings bear the evidence of this essentially human orientation through the forms of symmetry by which they are arranged. As

in Kant, the natural world in Friedrich's paintings, again, appears neither as a setting (the place wherein people carry on) nor as a place simply there (an assemblage or scene of natural objects) but always as something experienced through a form of perception that imposes its own rules of sense.

What makes *Woman at the Window* one of Friedrich's most revealing paintings is that the painter sustains such a relationship between an order-giving figure and a corresponding landscape in a context where the landscape at issue barely comes into view. The natural landscape in the painting, in fact, is obstructed almost entirely in a manner that mounts like a con-spiracy against our desire to see. *Woman at the Window* is a painting that is essentially *about* something we cannot see because it is not rendered in the painting. The woman standing before the window is fixated on a part of the world that Friedrich hardly reveals to us, so that, unlike his other *Rück-enfiguren*, she emphatically does not represent or mirror our own sense-making gaze and point of view. Instead, the woman occupies the position that the painting suggests we might like to occupy, ideally, but that it works hard nonetheless to bar us from, as if she represents a concrete wish the image taunts us with. The majority of the canvas is taken up by the somber, dark, bare, and monotone wood planks in the interior space that physically keeps the woman exiled from the bright scene outside. Thus the room pictured in *Woman at the Window* is a physical obstruction to her, but it also acts as a screen for us since the small size of the window frame makes our seeing what she sees impossible. The view out of the window would have been our only way "in." Furthermore, Friedrich's figure, centered in the double frame of painting and window, herself blocks our view of the outside scene. In addition, her subtle left leaning, apparent because it departs from the otherwise strict angles of the painting's details (planks, frames, shrouds), makes us want to ask her to lean even further or even nudge her as if to advance a plausible hope of seeing a bit more. We cannot help but follow her gaze outside the austere room into the open air, despite the fact that the composition only foils our progressive visual advances. She thwarts our own confrontation with the scene that the painting itself takes up as its subject. Her sense-making gaze in this painting structures a world that for us is only obliquely or partially represented through a glimpse of a row of trees, a partial ship mast and shrouds, and a simple sky. The painting veils the world it reveals to her. Koerner makes sense of Friedrich's strategy here by suggest-ing that, in this way, Friedrich locates sublimity not in the natural world but singularly in the effect of the world on the viewer. In the strategies through which he confines his figure and sequesters his viewer, Friedrich is actually "repeating the experience of exclusion" that marks sublimity.<sup>16</sup> The painting thus holds out the utter "alterity" of the landscape from which we are shut out since the woman's gaze defines the outdoor scene as something from which she is constitutively distanced. The natural scene outside the window, writes Koerner, is "a domain set radically apart from the woman."<sup>17</sup> She stands in the painting on the physical edge of a world she cannot join. She is

positioned in the bare room looking out at a scene that the window frames, like a picture, and from which she is barricaded.

But no matter how committedly and absolutely the composition of *Woman at the Window* wants to lock us out of the landscape outside the window, entrapping us indoors along with Friedrich's figure, it is a basic fact about the painting that its centrifugal pull comes from the mostly unpainted, only partially depicted outdoor scene. The world out there on the other side of the window simply *is* felt to be the locus of the woman's longing and of our own suppositional frustrations with having our line of vision blocked and thus being so concretely left out of what the painting itself posits is really worth our regard. Perhaps Friedrich's painting is so emblematically a Romantic work because of the logic that centers its composition unmistakably around obscurity or mystery and human yearning. In contrast to this, the painting pictured on the museum wall in Struth's photograph *Art Institute of Chicago II*, Gustave Caillebotte's well-known *Paris Street; Rainy Day*, simply *does* shut out the depicted viewer standing in front of it. Caillebotte's painting in Struth's photograph is not a painting that stirs and encourages the beholder's imaginative entry but appears to act instead, as Fried convincingly shows, like a wall for the woman in the foreground. *Paris Street* in Struth's photograph almost seems to physically project just slightly from the museum wall on which it hangs in an effect that makes it seem to subtly push back at the depicted viewer. This push moves in a direction we perceive runs in oppositional parallel to the way the outside scene in Friedrich's *Woman at the Window* pulls the figure into it. In Friedrich's painting, the implied river scene outside is nearly recessed within the painting and seems to occupy an actual world-space behind the canvas. The museum masterpiece Struth photographs, as Fried notes, is contrastingly "actively indifferent" (AL 120) to the existence of the viewers who have taken an interest in it. The painting seems satisfied with its "cut-offness from whatever might be taking place in the world of the museum-goers" (AL 128), as if it too could see and were intentionally passing over them in the gallery. Fried concludes that the depicted couple in *Paris Street* and the viewers in the museum "belong absolutely to two disparate and uncommu-nicating realms or . . . 'worlds' " (AL 119). The photograph puts on display the separateness between the world of the gallery space and the closed-off, complete world of a painted Paris street. The couple in *Paris Street*, in fact, constitute a point of contrast to the individuated painting-viewers, one of whom has paused while pushing a stroller while the other occupies an entirely different space away from her, much closer to the painting. As the man and woman in *Paris Street* together throw a glance from under their shared umbrella to something off to their right that catches their atten-tion, their subtle connection distinguishes them from the few remote figures who have paused to look at the painting. In these ways Struth's photograph brings the unique act of beholding into relief as a mode of encounter with an artwork that, strangely, insists on its ontological distance in order to

absorb us in its world. The painting in Struth's photograph stands content in its world-apartness and its separation from the beholder whose attention it seizes.

The viewers depicted in Struth's photograph and Friedrich's painting, both fixated before a scene, make vivid the difference between our varied responses before nature and our responsiveness before works of art. This essential difference between the ways we engage various kinds of objects in the world importantly motivates Kant to isolate aesthetic experience from other kinds of experience in the *Critique of Judgment*, where he gives aesthetic experience a philosophical vindication commensurate with the unique qualities of aesthetic reflection. The objects that populate Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, written ten years earlier, come into view as they are assimilated by the subject's cognitive and intuitive faculties, just as the natural scene outside the window in Friedrich's *Woman at the Window* arises from the woman's reaction to the landscape's direct address. She longs after the world out there precisely as she remains exiled indoors, tied to the physical and psychological conditions of her barren interior confinement. One might say that the pull of the bright outdoor river singles out her own response, so that we as viewers of the painting don't even have to lay eyes on the scene to realize the weight it carries as she stands at the window. Our evidence for the fact that she inflects the world out there with her form-giving, projective gaze of longing is that we are not even *needed* to be co-conspirators, co-creators, or even confirmers of the form she finds in the natural world, since Friedrich will not let us actually see the scene that lies along the path of her visual gaze. The painting, in this sense, is about her condition of world-apartness from the outside scene but only as an *actual* condition that must be either tragic or overcome, as though the painting expressed a wish from some point of view or other to unconfine this particular human figure. Its compositional logic turns on understanding her confinement-from as a strictly circumstantial and not an ontological condition. None of it would be the same were the woman not standing within the plain and monotonous interior at the window, her feet anchored firmly to the unvarying solid planks she stands on. Thus there is nothing hypothetical about the response the river scene elicits from her, as it seems to engage precisely the emotional, psychological, personal, social, gendered, cognitive, and sensuous responses that might for her be actual within the world the painting seeks to represent. In Kant's terms, the river scene for the woman is a merely real thing, one subsumed by the mechanisms of human sense perception, cognition, and desire. It is an object in the world before her, one whose actuality is not diminished by its status as the object of intense longing and unattainability. As such the unpainted outdoor scene demands the same sets of human responses as the other natural objects with which we share the world and to which we, their seers, are also anchored.

Contrastingly, the woman standing in the museum pictured in Struth's photograph pausing to look at *Paris Street* stands beholden to an image

that refuses and even rebukes the abstract pull of her gaze and preemptively announces its independence from it. The ground of the nineteenth-century

Paris street and the gallery space of the contemporary museum in Chicago nearly revel in their ontological separateness in Struth's photograph, even as that sense of utter dividedness is what compels the viewer in the gallery to

behold and linger. Caillebotte's painting establishes its viewer's conviction in the world it constitutes by seeming to pass her over in the gallery, as though the museum-goer might threaten to puncture the saturation of Paris-street existence that the painting renders were that "world" not guarded by indif-

ference to her presence. When Fried calls this the artwork's establishing a "world," he underlines that the formal and compositional force of images that belong to the absorptive tradition relies on the "ontological work" of disavowal. Like Kant, Fried posits that the artwork in this way asks for an interruption, suspension, or neutralizing of our intellectual cares, sensuous experiences, and moral frameworks. But art demands this neutralizing and asks for a mode of responsiveness that remains deeply and intimately tied to all these parts of us, completely and categorically, despite being itself incomprehensible as any of them. This means that the work of art makes a demand *as a work of art*, an object in the world interrelated with and connected to other kinds of objects but also distinguishable from them in singular ways. It is part of Fried's achievement to show us that there is nothing strange about this, since we are not confined in experience to extensions of our physical and conscious presence in the world. Art itself, as the endeavor that it is, sets out to remind us of this inventive aspect of our capacities and forms of attention all the time.

## Notes

1 Lisa Zunshine reads Fried's concept of absorption as a way of thematizing our access to others' minds in a suggestive but strangely situated way that seems to miss the stakes of Fried's concept. Because she attributes the beholder's interest in the representation of absorbed human figures to our common cognitive-evolutionary adaptations and neural circuits, Zunshine bypasses altogether how absorption emerges as a horizon of concern for painting specifically in response to questions of form, medium, and art historical context. She argues that Fried's concept of absorption captures the cognitive-evolutionary impulse to render the human body transparent by catching it in moments of spontaneity and self-forgetting, and that the paintings Fried reads in *Absorption and Theatricality* actually "flatter our mind-reading adaptations" (192) and offer "sociocognitive satisfaction" because they "present us with an illusion of direct unmediated access to the subjects' mental states" (195). There is something to Zunshine's emphasis on the paradox of evident or external inwardness in the paintings Fried considers, but her insistence on understanding this visual strategy and complexity as a pseudo-biological "cognitive paradox" (183) is perplexing. Why should this biological paradox structure threads in the history of the visual arts? What does it mean to say, more generally, that an art form or a particular artwork evidences our evolutionary inclinations? Are there other strategies, for instance, whereby painting engages the philosophical problem of other minds and deciphering others' bodies? Why does painting become centrally

occupied with complex visual strategies for representing and eliciting absorption specifically in the eighteenth century? Zunshine does not offer guidance on such questions, which her cognitive-literary account raises (see “Theory of Mind and Michael Fried’s *Absorption and Theatricality*: Notes toward a Cognitive Historicism,” in *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 179–203).

- 2 Robert B. Pippin, “Authenticity in Painting: Remarks on Michael Fried’s Art History,” *Critical Inquiry* (31, 2005), 591.
- 3 Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115.
- 4 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 42.
- 5 My reference here is to the notion of “conviction” that Walter Benn Michaels develops in his discussion of Fried’s criticism:

[T]he address to the subject becomes the appeal to the subject’s interest, while the address to the spectator appeals to his or her sense of what is good, of what compels conviction. And if one more or less inevitable way to understand this distinction between paintings he likes and paintings he doesn’t, Fried’s insistence that good paintings compel conviction seems designed precisely to counter this objection, to counter the criticism that the difference between interesting and convincing objects is just the difference in our attitude toward those objects. For what makes conviction superior to interest is the fact that interest is essentially an attribute of the subject—the question of whether we find an object interesting is (like the question about how the waterfall makes us feel) a question about us—whereas objects that compel conviction do not leave the question of our being convinced up to us. Compelling conviction is something the work does, and it is precisely this commitment to the work—it is good regardless of whether we are interested—that Fried wants to insist on.

(*The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*  
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 87)

- 6 Pippin, “Authenticity in Painting,” 578.
- 7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. and trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). For a discussion of the connection between Kant’s development of the idea of aesthetic judgment and Fried’s argument in *Absorption and Theatricality*, see my analysis in “Kant with Michael Fried: Feeling, Absorption, and Interiority in the *Critique of Judgment*,” *Symploke* (18: 1–2, 2010), 15–30. See also Michael Thomas Taylor, “Critical Absorption: Kant’s Theory of Taste,” *MLN* (124: 3, 2009), 572–91. Taylor also argues with different emphases that Kant’s theory of taste describes an intensification of absorption (577).
- 8 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 55.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 73.
- 10 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45.
- 11 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 44; and Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” and AO 151.
- 12 Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 89.
- 13 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 68.
- 14 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 44.
- 15 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 11 and 76.
- 16 Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 212 and 247.
- 17 Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 138 and 135.