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“ART AND OBJECTHOOD,” MICHAEL FRIED AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

Summary. Michael Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” is one of the most well-known and influential pieces of art criticism ever written, and continues to generate novel interpretations. Its overtly theological cast, however, has never been the subject of close study. This article focuses on Fried’s decision to use a lengthy quotation from Perry Miller’s biography of the theologian Jonathan Edwards as his epigram, and contends that Fried’s essay is informed in significant ways by Edwards’ notions of history and grace, and characterized by wordings that reveal an active engagement with Miller’s text. Certainly, the contexts in which Edwards and Fried worked were irreducibly different. Nevertheless, an examination of the ways in which Fried drew on Miller’s text and Edwards’ ideas demonstrates that he was productively influenced by both in composing “Art and Objecthood.”

Keywords: Michael Fried, Minimalism, Jonathan Edwards, theology, grace, Modernist art theory.

“The problem – which in one sense is the problem of this entire study – is what he really meant by it.”

–Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*¹

Since its publication in *Artforum* in the summer of 1967, the significance of Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” (Fig. 1) has been consistently acknowledged and reaffirmed; as David Velasco put it, in 2022, the essay “remains an enduring touchstone.”² A vastly influential piece of art criticism in its own time, Fried’s piece continues to

yield new and diverse readings in the present tense. In 2013, for example, Jennifer Doyle accented its queer aspect, arguing that the best moments of the essay recall a cruising scenario.³ And in 2023, Tina Post provocatively re-read “Art and Objecthood” in relation to reductive racist stereotypes, contending that Fried’s characterization of Minimalist art

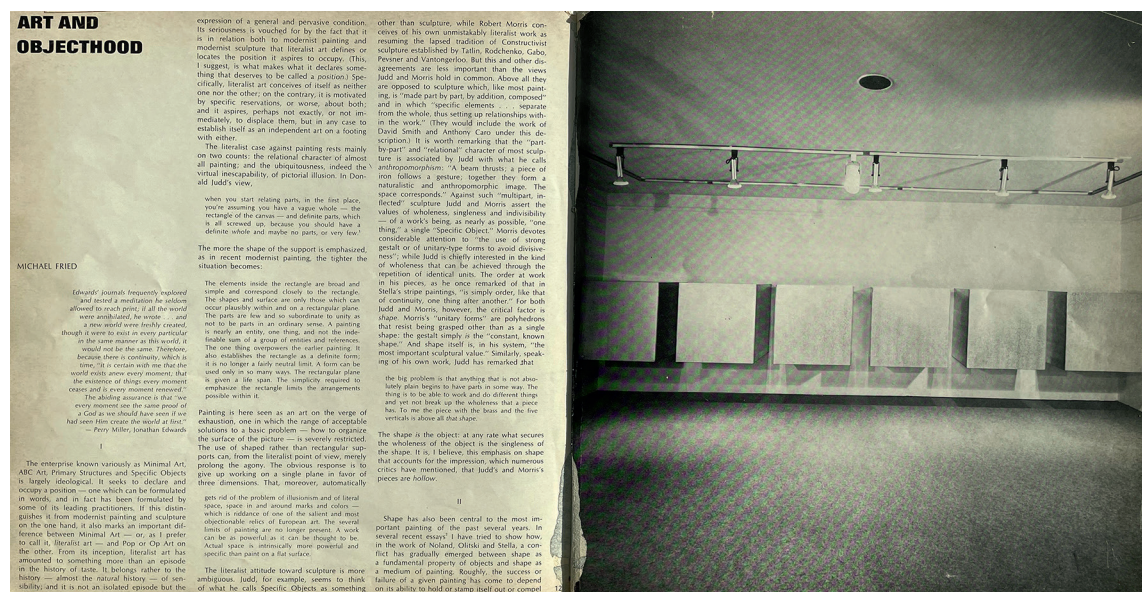


Fig. 1. Michael Fried’s publication “Art and Objecthood” in “Artforum” 1967

paralleled longstanding descriptions of Black subjects as obstinate, inexpressive, and stubbornly present.⁴ Certainly, “Art and Objecthood” is commonly discussed through the lens of intellectual history, and read in relation to Fried’s philosophical interests at the time.⁵ But it is also a piece of writing whose meanings are still very much the subject of ongoing construction and discussion, and whose pivotal references to religiosity and theological terminologies have never been exhaustively analyzed. In this article, I will thus employ close textual analysis in order to contextualize and clarify Fried’s allusions to the theologian Jonathan Edwards and his use of terms such as faith and grace, and will contend that Fried employed such themes as semantically flexible material in developing his provocative and original critical position.

SITUATING “ART AND OBJECTHOOD”

The central arguments of the piece are, at least, established and comfortably familiar. Over the course of a dozen pages, Fried offered an ambitious critique of Minimalist (or literalist, as he called it) art, making in the process numerous assertions that still shape, today, discussions of Minimalism. Emphasizing the scale and hollowness of much literalist art, and claiming that it frequently involved a hidden anthropomorphism, Fried went on to accuse literalists of creating work that was effectively theatrical. Literalist art, in his view, projected a kind of presence, and therefore produced a distanced and self-conscious beholder: a subject, that is, who is always aware of her relationship to the literalist object. All of this was anathema to Fried, who still partly accepted Clement Greenberg’s argument that every artistic medium must entrench itself firmly in its specific areas of competence – and who held that the most powerful modernist works of art could prompt a virtually instantaneous optical effect that bordered on the revelatory.⁶ By contrast, Fried concluded, literalist art was irredeemably rooted in a more mundane embodied and durational form of experience, which offered no clear resolution. He thus provided a potent, if controversial, account of an important artistic

genre: an account that has since been termed both definitive and crucial.⁷

But if the ambitious argument of “Art and Objecthood” has interested many readers, so too have its unusual opening and closing – or what Fried would later call “the overtly theological cast of my essay’s rhetorical framework.”⁸ That framework included an epigraph drawn from, of all things, Perry Miller’s intellectual biography of the 18th-century New England Puritan philosopher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, which had first been published in 1949. Fried’s readers were thus confronted with a lengthy passage whose content was challenging and whose relevance was far from immediately clear:

*Edwards’s journals frequently explored and tested a meditation he seldom allowed to reach print; if all the world were annihilated, he wrote... and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, “it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed.” The abiding assurance is that “we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.”*⁹

This was hardly standard fare in the pages of *Artforum*. True, erudite epigraphs were popular in mid-century art criticism: Harold Rosenberg, for instance, had prefaced his seminal essay “The American Action Painters” with a passage from Apollinaire, and Fried placed excerpts from Marx and Kierkegaard atop several of the writings he published in 1966 and 1967.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Fried’s allusion to Edwards’ meditations was unusual, in large part because of its explicitly religious content. After all, as James Elkins has since noted, “the excision of piety and faith from art has deep roots and is entangled with the very ideas of modernism and postmodernism.”¹¹ In an essay by Fried, who had established himself as a leading modernist, an overt reference to a proof of God thus read as

perplexing, or even willfully provocative. And yet the epigram was merely the start of things – for in the final paragraph of his essay Fried returned to a religious vocabulary in a passage that soon become infamous:

*I have wanted to call attention to the utter pervasiveness – the virtual universality – of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace.*¹²

Presentness is grace: and modernism, by implication, is associated with the instantaneity of an encounter with the divine.

It is perhaps difficult to fully comprehend, a half-century later, the jarring nature of Fried's analysis. But the recorded reactions of Fried's peers offer at least a sense of the piece's effect. Years later, for example, Rosalind Krauss – who was, at the time, also a modernist critic and a colleague of Fried's – remembered the jolt that she felt on first reading the essay. "[I]t produced a shudder," she recalled, "like a lining ripping open so that the ideological seams showed through."¹³ Fried's citation of Edwards and bold reference to grace simply could not be squared in her mind with modernism's emphasis upon rationalism and what she called its abiding "contempt for piety."¹⁴ The artist Robert Smithson, meanwhile, responded with a raucous letter to *Artforum* in which he characterized Fried as a fanatical puritan. Writing in a tone that was at once playful and dismissive, Smithson imagined a televised spectacular entitled "The Tribulations of Michael Fried" – and prefaced his own account with a passage drawn from Miller's book, impishly ridiculing what he saw as the pretentious spiritual skeleton of Fried's text.¹⁵

More recently, however, several scholars have indicated an interest in developing less polemical and more nuanced analyses of Fried's allusion to Edwards, and have offered initial sketches of the relationship between the two thinkers and their positions.¹⁶ Nevertheless, each of these analyses

has been brief, and several of them are marred by basic misreadings. In her generally engaging book *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, for instance, Pamela Lee wrote of "the essay's last sentence, in which, citing Jonathan Edwards, Fried proclaimed, 'presentness is grace.'"¹⁷ It is a curious and misleading moment in Lee's book, for in fact Fried's closing sentence is not a citation of Edwards at all – and arguably does not even reflect (as we shall see) an Edwardsian position.

In short, there exists no serious, sustained consideration of the precise relationship between Edwards' ideas, Miller's text, and Fried's essay: a regrettable lacuna, given the continued importance of "Art and Objecthood" and the assertiveness with which it foregrounds a religious terminology. This article, then, offers a detailed study of the complex relationship between Edwards' wordings and ideas (as they were presented by Miller) and Fried's essay. Specifically, it begins by contending that Fried was understandably sympathetic to Edwards' conception of history, in which a general progress is occasionally threatened by moments of reversal that in turn require intervention by committed individuals. But Fried did not only embrace that idea; he also deployed a vocabulary derived from Miller's book in conveying his sense of exasperation regarding certain recent developments in the field of contemporary art. Furthermore, Fried also adopted Edwards' notion of perpetual creation – but modified it, significantly, in order to accent what he termed the constant work being done by the viewer. Here, Fried meaningfully departed from Edwards in emphasizing an active and rigorous process of intellectual labor, rather than the passive model of revelation advanced by his Puritanical predecessor. Ultimately, however, Fried did retain Edwards' emphasis upon the merely partial, or fleeting, aspect of transcendence; indeed, one rewarding way of reading his essay is as an exploration of that idea. In any event, the main point is that a close reading of "Art and Objecthood" reveals that Fried was more deeply and variously engaged by Miller's book on Edwards than has previously been recognized, and thus allows us to see a canonical piece of art criticism in new ways.

'A WONDERFUL BOOK': FRIED AND MILLER'S STUDY OF EDWARDS

Of course, Edwards' ideas constituted only one element in the complex admixture of ideas that led to "Art and Objecthood." Importantly, the essay was written at a moment when Fried was distancing himself from the ideas of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's writings had been invaluable, as Fried has since acknowledged, in aiding his own intellectual maturation, and the early writings of the younger critic regularly depended upon Greenberg's theorizations of modernist art.¹⁸ Fried was intrigued by Greenberg's teleological interpretation of modernism and his insistence that the best modernist works are experienced in an immediate, all-at-once manner.¹⁹ Greenberg's tendency to discuss modernism using ethical terms, too, evidently interested Fried.²⁰ And yet, by the mid-1960s Fried had begun to question some of his mentor's fundamental claims. As Diarmuid Costello has argued, Fried pressured Greenberg's notion that each artistic medium has an unchanging essence, whose identification was the ultimate goal of modernism. Instead, Fried now viewed such essences as the products of convention: in other words, he saw the essence of a practice such as painting as subject to an open and ongoing transformation, over time.²¹ Essences, Fried felt, still existed – but where his mentor had seen them as unchanging, Fried now perceived them to be evolving.

This shift in Fried's thinking was due in large part, as several writers have pointed out, to his active interest in the work of Stanley Cavell, a Harvard philosopher with whom Fried enjoyed a close friendship in the late 1960s.²² Cavell, at the time, was deeply interested in Wittgenstein's discussions of convention, and his interpretation of the subject proved crucial to Fried's evolving conception of modernism.²³ At about the same time, however, Fried was also reading ambitiously into the history of 18th-century religious thought and early American Puritanism. Admittedly, this emerging interest was essentially casual, rather than systematic or academic, but it soon began to manifest itself in his writings. In 1965, for example, Fried argued

that Kenneth Noland's "use of the stain medium is puritan in its self-discipline."²⁴ And it was at around that time, too, that he happened to come across ("more or less by chance," as Fried would later recall it) a copy of Perry Miller's study of Jonathan Edwards.²⁵ Part of a series of intellectual biographies on American men of letters, Miller's book was first published in 1949 and then reissued a decade later. A remarkable volume (one reviewer called it "the most important study of Edwards that has as yet appeared"), it was celebrated both for its suggestion that Edwards' ideas can best be apprehended in aesthetic terms, and for the related idea that his writings might thus be more easily appreciated by a modern humanist than by an orthodox believer.²⁶ Or, as Miller put it, Edwards should be seen as "one of America's five or six major artists, who happened to work with ideas instead of with poems or novels."²⁷

That unexpectedly aesthetic emphasis may have been one of the factors that led Fried to see Miller's biography as a "wonderful book."²⁸ But it likely appealed to him on several other levels, as well. For one thing, Miller's account of Edwards' view of history must have felt quite recognizable. The final chapter of the book offered a sustained and sympathetic analysis of Edwards' unfinished *A History of the Work of Redemption*, a text rooted in the idea that history is an orderly series of events. Miller's summary of the work's underlying philosophy is helpfully clear: "History, Edwards says, is a grand conception, a design, a chain of events within a scheme of causation."²⁹ Moreover, the scheme advanced by Edwards was one bent fundamentally towards spiritual progress. "In general," insisted the preacher, "grace is growing."³⁰

Despite obvious differences in context and emphasis, Edwards' teleological notion of history broadly recalled the accounts of Modernist art that had dominated formalist art criticism in the early 1960s. Most famously, a similar idea had stood at the heart of Greenberg's "Modernist Painting," which was first published in 1961; in it, Greenberg associated Modernism with the intensification of a sustained project of self-criticality that he traced

back to Kant.³¹ But Rosalind Krauss' summary of the Modernist view of history is also relevant in this regard:

The syllogism we took up was historical in character, which meant that it read only in one direction; it was progressive [...] The history we saw from Manet to the Impressionists to Cezanne and then to Picasso was like a series of rooms *en filade*. Within each room the individual artist explored, to the limits of his experience and his formal intelligence, the separate constituents of his medium. The effect of his pictorial act was to open simultaneously the door to the next space and close out access to the one behind him.³²

One room thus led, inexorably, to the next (or, as Miller put it, "Successive events in different ages are parts of a continuous whole; the chain is never broken.")³³ But who, exactly, did Krauss mean by "we"? Notably, she specifically attached the linear, progressive model to a conversation she had had with Fried, in 1965. As noted above, though, Fried's ideas were evolving quickly, and by 1967 he harbored real doubts about such a simplistic teleology. Nevertheless, the philosophy of history that Fried encountered in Miller's book surely struck him as broadly familiar.

Indeed, it may also have appealed to him in a more specific sense. For while Edwards saw the large design of history as one of general progress, he also acknowledged the existence of periods of temporary retreat or reversal. "History moves," wrote Perry Miller, summarizing Edwards' ideas, "through a pulsation of 'special seasons,' interspaced with exhaustion and backsliding."³⁴ Clearly, this was very different from the insistence of Greenberg and Krauss that there could be no exemptions to the general project of self-definition and purification ("No *a rebours* was possible," Krauss later recalled, "no going backward against the grain").³⁵ Edwards, by contrast, offered a historical model that was predicated upon general advancement, but could also explain and accommodate moments of regression. Indeed, it had seemed to Edwards that he was living in just such a moment, as he felt surrounded

by heretical clans such as the Anabaptists, Quakers, and Deists. The 1730s were thus, for Edwards, an exception to a broad pattern of improvement; in Miller's phrasing, the decade was a "time of darkness."³⁶

It is fascinating to think of Fried contemplating these words and ideas as he composed "Art and Objecthood." After all, as James Meyer has observed, the preceding year had been a triumphant one for the Minimalists – and thus a troubling one for Fried. The Jewish Museum's *Primary Structures* show had drawn substantial interest, Donald Judd had held his debut exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, and Carl Andre had unveiled his first installation of arranged bricks at Tibor Nagy.³⁷ Then, too, there were the writings, as 1966 also yielded the publication of Bruce Glaser's interview with Judd, the first portion of Robert Morris' "Notes on Sculpture," and Lawrence Alloway's "Systemic Painting" – all of which were quickly seen as major theoretical statements.³⁸ Cumulatively, these episodes constituted a substantial challenge to the Modernist position. But how to understand such a challenge, in a general historical sense? Greenbergian Modernism, built around a notion of history as a narrative of unidirectional progress, seemed to offer no viable explanation. But Miller's text, with its frank acknowledgment of periods of reversal and backsliding, provided a promising alternative:

Though the large design is constant progress, from Adam to Christ, from Christ to the Judgment, within these segments of time the morphology is retreat and advance... The intervals are necessary in the design as times for the gathering of forces...³⁹

History, here, is cast in terms that are in part geographical and martial; it is largely the language of a military campaign. And, as in any sustained campaign, setbacks are understood to be inevitable, but are not necessarily seen as debilitating. Rather, they represent opportunities for regrouping and consolidation.

Fried actively embraced these ideas in "Art and Objecthood." "[T]here is a war going on between

theater and modernist painting,” he declared, “between the theatrical and the pictorial.”⁴⁰ Read in the abstract (or read, say, with an eye towards the escalating crisis in Vietnam) such a claim can read as hyperbolic and naïve. But read in the light of Miller’s biography of Edwards, it suggests that Fried was beginning to explore the potential of a specific philosophy of history – and to insert himself into the middle of a perceived conflict, in an active effort to influence its outcome. Hence the unmistakably bellicose aspect of his argument. “This essay,” he added, in the essay’s culminating paragraph, “will be read as an attack on certain artists (and critics) and as a defense of others.”⁴¹ He was correct; it was indeed read in that way. But it should also be understood in relation to Miller’s contention that in Jonathan Edwards’ most controversial tracts, “the method is a sustained attack.”⁴² Like Edwards, Fried had come to feel that exceptional historical moments demand aggressive and even bellicose responses.⁴³

Fried’s essay echoes Miller’s biography of Edwards in other ways, as well. Numerous readers have remarked, over the years, on the moralizing tone of “Art and Objecthood.”⁴⁴ But it has never, it seems, been observed that Fried repeatedly opted for word choices that echo Miller’s text.⁴⁵ Consider, for instance, Fried’s claim that the literalist sensibility has been “corrupted or perverted by theater.”⁴⁶ *Corrupted, perverted*: to be sure, the terms would carry, in virtually any context, a pronouncedly judgmental aspect. But it is notable that both words had also appeared repeatedly in Miller’s biography of Edwards, where they were used to describe a dissolute cultural environment. Yale College, for example, is characterized as “corrupted & ruined with Arminianism & Heresy,” and comparable references to corruption appear in no fewer than eight other passages in the book.⁴⁷ Allusions to perversion also recur. In evoking Edwards’ unhappiness with contemporary notions of faith, for example, Miller writes that “New England had so perverted the language of the founders – the language lent itself rather too easily to perversion...”⁴⁸ Again, the cultural contexts described by Miller and Fried were distinct. But a shared vocabulary allowed each

writer to create an air of moral exasperation and indignation.

A further example of this tendency appears in Fried’s characterization of modernist works of art that reveal themselves suddenly. “It is as though,” wrote Fried, “one’s experience of the latter *has no duration* – not because one *in fact* experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest...*”⁴⁹ Here, Fried’s use of the phrase *every moment* clearly echoes Edwards, who had employed the same wording four times in rapid succession in describing the reconstituted world, in the passage chosen by Fried for his epigraph:

[...] “*it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed.*” *The abiding assurance is that “we every moment see the same proof of a God [...]*”⁵⁰

But Edwards, of course, was proposing cosmic ontology; Fried, by contrast, was centrally concerned with an aesthetic experience. Through a simple act of verbal appropriation, Fried thus conveyed his interest in Miller’s text and in Edwards’ ideas – but also his willingness to apply those ideas to a new context.

EVOLVING ESSENCES: FRIED’S MODIFICATIONS OF EDWARDS

Evidently, then, Fried had read *Jonathan Edwards* attentively, and “Art and Objecthood” can be seen as a testimony to that interest. Unsurprisingly, though, there were also some real differences between the positions of Fried and Edwards. And, interestingly, the brief ellipsis in Fried’s epigraph points to one of those differences. With that ellipsis, Fried eliminated an aside in Miller’s text, which framed Edwards’ ideas in a larger context and which reads in the original like this:

*Edwards's journals frequently explored and tested a meditation he seldom allowed to reach print; if all the world were annihilated, he wrote (ringing changes on Locke's concept of identity as consisting in idea), and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same.*⁵¹

The parenthetical reference to John Locke is brief, and feels almost cryptic – unless one has read the rest of Miller's book, which insists that Edwards was deeply affected by Locke's notion that identity is effectively an idea, rather than a substance. Earlier in the book, Miller had laid out Locke's radical proposal in some detail:

*If all the atoms in a man's body were changed overnight, and he still thought of himself as the same person, his identity would endure. 'In this consists identity, when the ideas it is attributed to vary not at all from what they were that moment wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present.' A plant that has 'one common life' is one coherent body, no matter what branches are lopped off.*⁵²

Edwards was evidently fascinated with this idea. Indeed, as Miller observed, he "pounced upon this concept as one of the most liberating in the *Essay*."⁵³

So why, then, did Fried eliminate the reference to Locke's concept of identity? Conceivably, the clause may simply have felt distracting, as it alluded to a series of ideas explicated elsewhere in Miller's book. Simply cutting the passage resulted in a clearer and more tightly focused epigraph. But eliminating it also allowed Fried to avoid a tacit endorsement of the claim that essences are fixed and enduring. That, again, was a Greenbergian position: that, say, flatness and the delimitation of flatness constitute the irreducible essence of pictorial art.⁵⁴ Influenced by Cavell, though, Fried was no longer sympathetic to such a position. Rather, he now understood essences to be mere reflections of a need for historically contingent conventions – and thus open to revision over time.⁵⁵ Eliminating Miller's

invocation of Locke's emphasis on persistent ideas obscured an alternative to Fried's evolving concept of essences.

At the same time, too, it also resulted in the convenient repression of Locke's emphasis on endurance and continuity: themes that were central, it is worth noting, in the writings of several leading Minimalists. For example, in the second installment of his "Notes on Sculpture," published in October of 1966, Robert Morris had written that, due to the motion of viewers, the perceived shape of Minimalist works "does not remain constant. For it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work." And yet, he added, these apparent changes in shape hardly affected one's basic impression of the object, or the form itself. "[I]t is," contended Morris, "the strength of the constant, known shape, the gestalt, that allows this awareness to become so much more emphatic in these works than in previous sculpture."⁵⁶ Much as a plant remained, for Locke, the same plant, no matter what branches were lopped off, a cube remained, no matter where one stood, a cube.

Fried was fully aware of these ideas, of course, and in fact much of "Art and Objecthood" constitutes a serious engagement with (and criticism of) them. By eliminating the reference to Locke, though, Fried crafted an epigraph that was stripped of its reference to the themes of constancy and duration, and that centered instead upon the notion of renewal. Which, Fried went on to argue, was a concept relevant in the discussion of the best modernist art, as well:

*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.*⁵⁷

The experience of a modernist work of art, in short, bordered on the revelatory, while durational art was cast as merely mundane, or secular.

Notice, though, the cautiousness in Fried's assertion, which is scattered with qualifications: *as it were; a kind of; as though*. Indeed, Fried has since drawn attention to this aspect of his essay, stressing the "reliance in the passages quoted above on constructions involving 'as though,' which by itself should have ruled out taking instantaneousness literally, so to speak."⁵⁸ That is, instead of simply equating an aesthetic encounter with instantaneousness, Fried meant to suggest something analogous or comparable: something nearly but not entirely equivalent. In doing so, he was yet again echoing Edwards, who had argued that "there is a crucial difference between God and man: God is by definition a Being who perceives not separate entities in succession, but the totality of being in a single, eternal glance."⁵⁹ Ultimately, for both writers, humans are condemned to a life of temporal duration, denied a true experience of instantaneousness, or a full commingling with the divine. It is a gulf that simply cannot be traversed. "The particular time," Edwards concluded, "will never come when it can be said, the union is now infinitely perfect."⁶⁰ Or, to use Fried's terms, the time will never come when one is "infinitely more acute."

Despite this, both Edwards and Fried contended that a partial experience was still desirable. Indeed, both men used the term *grace* to describe this partial knowledge of the transcendent – and both seem to have felt that grace was theoretically available to all. That said, though, they did offer very different accounts of the process by which grace could be acquired. As Perry Miller explained, Edwards had been educated in a Puritanical New England, "in which it had always been held that man is passive in the reception of grace and that he is bound to sin if he tries to earn salvation by his own efforts or on his own terms."⁶¹ In a Calvinist system, characterized by a strict emphasis upon predestination, grace was bestowed, rather than sought or earned.⁶² For Fried, by contrast, grace was entirely dependent upon the constant active effort of the viewer.

"[T]he rightness or relevance of one's conviction about specific modernist works," he wrote in "Art and Objecthood," "is always open to question."⁶³ Viewing is thus associated with a relentless process of inquisition and self-examination. And because conviction was closely linked, in his mind, to grace, grace was thus the outcome of hard work. It "must be secured again and again, as though continuously," as Fried later put in, in a retrospective gloss on "Art and Objecthood," "in the act of experiencing, by the viewer, by us."⁶⁴ Of course, this accent on ongoing effort might be seen, in its own right, as a variant on the Puritans' historic emphasis on the value of labor.⁶⁵ Regardless, though, Fried's sense that grace was earned through active work set his account from that of Edwards.

Interestingly, the two men also differed in their attitudes about the potential usefulness of structured analysis in this process. For Edwards, naïve simplicity could make one more open to the reception of grace, and a formal education could in fact constitute an impediment. As Miller put it, in his biography of Edwards:

*Edwards constantly preached (as the 'Notes' discover) that persons of 'mean capacities' may see whatever reason requires a long discourse to explain; because grace is sensible, unlettered people may well have the simple idea in perfection when the gentry know it not. Because the heart is the subject of sensible knowledge, simple souls may apprehend more of divinity than Harvard graduates.*⁶⁶

By contrast, Fried (who was, of course, a Harvard graduate) held that the best Modernist works rewarded those willing to engage in rigorous examination, and were simply not accessible to casual observers. Indeed, one of Fried's most fundamental complaints about Minimalist art involved its apparently universal accessibility. In "Art and Objecthood," he thus quoted, disapprovingly, Tony Smith's celebration of an art that is "something everyone can understand." To Fried, such an open comprehensibility precluded the need for meaningful interrogation, yielding a simple, unquestioned

experience rather than anything that could conceivably be called conviction or grace. Or, as Fried put it, rather coldly: "It is, I think, hardly necessary to add that the availability of modernist art is not of this kind."⁶⁷ Again, then, while Fried followed Edwards in centering the quality of grace, he felt that arduous, systematized analysis was a means, rather than an obstacle, to its acquisition.⁶⁸

AN ORIGINAL NOTION OF PRESENTNESS

With that important distinction in place, we can now turn to the final sentence of "Art and Objecthood" – which, as Barry Schwabsky once observed, "is probably the best known sentence Fried has written."⁶⁹ *Presentness is grace*: again, Fried's closing assertion has frequently been read as a direct allusion to, or citation of, Edwards.⁷⁰ But in fact, while Fried was certainly interested (as we have seen) in Edwards' notion of grace, the term *presentness* is not at all central to Edwards' writings. It does not appear once in Miller's biography of Edwards; nor does it merit a mention in any of the indices in the 26-volume collected works of Edwards.⁷¹ Admittedly, several scholars in recent years have used the term in characterizing Edwards' arguments against the Deist notion of a clockmaker who had abandoned his creation after its conception.⁷² But these applications of the term postdate Fried's essay, and differ significantly from his use of the word – which, it is important to note, was not limited to "Art and Objecthood." The term also appeared, for example, in a catalogue essay that Fried composed for a 1967 exhibition of paintings by Jules Olitski: "One is forced, that is, to *bear down on* each color with unaccustomed intensity, as though each color *competes for presentness* with every other."⁷³ For Fried, the term was clearly an important one, and he used it to suggest both an intensification of perception and a partial or qualified transcendence of ordinary, time-bound habits.⁷⁴

Fried was not, it is perhaps worth pointing out, the only mid-century writer to use the term *presentness* in such a way. Strikingly, the theologian Martin Buber frequently employed the word to

comparable ends. In his widely read *I and Thou*, for example, Buber had invoked a person entangled in self-will: "Without sacrifice and without grace, without meeting and without presentness, he has as his world a mediated world cluttered with purposes."⁷⁵ *Presentness*, here, is again associated with grace and with the transcendence of selfish, earthly experience. Moreover, as Donald Moore has observed, revelation for Buber was "a present experience" – and "this 'presentness,' this 'ever-again' of each moment, is the key to Buber's 'holy insecurity...'"⁷⁶ Like Fried, Buber thus explored and privileged the concept of perpetual recreation. But while Buber's use of the term *presentness* is therefore broadly similar to Fried's, Fried has alleged that he has never read *I and Thou*, and that he was unaware, until recently, of any overlap in terminologies.⁷⁷ Writing in 1967, Fried thus seems to have been honestly oblivious to the various religious connotations of the term *presentness*, and to have employed the word instead in a manner that paralleled but did not depend upon the phrasings of earlier theologians.⁷⁸

The result, though, was inarguably complex: an essay that opened with an invocation of the religious meditations of Jonathan Edwards but closed with an abstract suggestion that grace could be understood in secular, aesthetic terms. The overtly theological cast of the rhetorical framework, as Fried later called it, was thus married to an insistently modernist formalism. And this willfully idiosyncratic arrangement clearly frustrated or confused many of Fried's readers. Krauss, as we have seen, claimed that "the ideological seams showed through," while Lee imposed a missing unity on the piece by calling the concluding sentence an "Edwardsian edict."⁷⁹ Perhaps the most sustained criticism, though, came from T.J. Clark, who complained that Fried never fully explains, in "Art and Objecthood," his metaphysics. "I do not mean to insinuate," wrote Clark, "that a religious point of view is indefensible in criticism [...] But the view is not defended here, it seems to me, just noised abroad in an odd manner."⁸⁰ Indeed, Clark even pointed, in a footnote, to Fried's use of the terms *presentness* and *grace*, calling them metaphysical buzzwords

that *seem* to provide a ground for appeals to intuition – but that ultimately *depend upon* intuition.⁸¹

Each of these reactions is understandable. Ultimately, though, perhaps each depends upon a misplaced expectation of unity or consistency. Fried's opening citation of Perry Miller's biography of Edwards seems to have led readers, again and again, to expect an explicitly religious interpretation of art. ("This," Tim Gough has written, "is art criticism, or art theory, as theology.")⁸² But that is not, ultimately, what Fried provided. Instead, he offered a sustained attack on Minimalism that was clearly informed by Miller's text – but that also treated it, repeatedly, as a malleable source of terms and ideas. Fried's essay, I have argued, advanced a view of history that was broadly comparable to Edwards', and it repeatedly featured wordings and syntactical structures that appear in Miller's book, as well. At the same time, however, Fried edited the passage cited in the epigram in order to bring it into closer conformity with his own ideas, suggested new meanings for terms quite dear to Edwards (faith is now conviction, and grace is now presentness), and edged away from Edwards' notion of grace as especially accessible to the unlettered. Miller's biography of Edwards was thus both source and foil to Fried: a text in which he recognized certain ideas, and against which he could define others. And so it feels somehow misplaced to expect a full account of metaphysics in "Art and Objecthood," for it is not, in the end, a religious essay. Instead, it is a piece of art criticism that employs religious thought as a model, or a template: a framework, to use Fried's own words. Daniel Sack recently claimed that Fried, in "Art and Objecthood," "wants a work of art that, like a church, provides the architectural support for a moment of eternal transcendence."⁸³ That is exactly right: the work of art is *like* a church, but not a church. This is not, finally, art criticism as theology. It is art criticism as creative analogy.

CONCLUSION

"There is an essay to be written," Clark wrote, in a footnote to his discussion of "Art and Objecthood,"

"on when and how the religious attitude in criticism declines from [a] complex building and questioning of the past into a set of merely metaphysical episodes in an earthbound, present-bound discussion of cases."⁸⁴ This is not quite that essay – but as I have tried to show, an understanding of Fried's complex, varied, and productive engagement with the work of Jonathan Edwards and Perry Miller, rooted in an attention to his use of specific terms and phrases, yields a clearer sense of his aims and strategies, as he modified existing ideas to convey his own evolving sense of the trajectory of modern art. Nearly sixty years after its publication, "Art and Objecthood" continues to inspire creative new interpretations. But it also continues to challenge readers; in Stephen Melville's memorable wording, "we move through hallways and meet in rooms in which 'Art and Objecthood' becomes only ever more unreadable."⁸⁵ A focus on what Fried himself called the essay's theological cast thus offers valuable evidence as to how he may have intended the piece to be read – and may, perhaps, offer at least a measure of something like grace in the process.

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Notes

¹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Toronto: William Sloane, 1949), 328.

² David Velasco, "Editor's Letter: Love's Work," *Artforum* 61 (September 2022), 50. Fried's essay was originally published as "Art and Objecthood," in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), 12–23. It has subsequently been republished in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 116–147; Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–172; and Kerr Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism* (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 279–289, among other volumes.

³ "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* 72 (Winter 2013), 64.

⁴ Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York: NYU Press, 2023), 74. Also relevant here is Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 111–112.

⁵ See for instance James Meyer, "The Writing of 'Art and Objecthood,'" in *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writing of Michael Fried*, eds. Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross (Sydney: Power Publications, 2000), 61–96.

⁶ For a considered analysis of Fried's evolving relationship to Greenberg's notion of medium specificity, see Diarmuid Costello, "On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), 285–295.

⁷ Peter Schjeldahl, *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl 1978–1990*, ed. Malin Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 208, and Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art 1945–1986*, ed. Howard Singerman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 171.

⁸ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 46.

⁹ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 12, and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 148.

¹⁰ See Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ARTNews* 51 (December 1952), 22–23, 48–50, republished in Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism*, 259–264; and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 77, 100, 132.

- ¹¹ James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 48.
- ¹² Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 23, and, with slight modifications, Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 168.
- ¹³ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 8.
- ¹⁴ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 6–7. Fried later offered a partial response to Krauss; see *Art and Objecthood*, 58, n. 25. Also relevant, if more oblique, are his comments on the notion of a "reductionist conception of modernist painting," first published in 1966 in "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," and his claim, in the 1967 essay "Jules Olitski," that certain conventions owed their importance to "nothing less than the entire history of painting since Manet." See *Art and Objecthood*, 35–36, 133.
- ¹⁵ Robert Smithson, "Letter to the Editor," *Artforum* 6 (October 1967), 4.
- ¹⁶ See Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 189; Seth Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience and Other Essays* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); and Rob Marks, "In the Body's Space, the Body's Time: Feeling Your Way through Richard Serra's *The Matter of Time*," in *Space and Time in Artistic Practice and Aesthetics: The Legacy of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, ed. Sarah Lippert (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
- ¹⁷ Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 45.
- ¹⁸ For Fried's account of his relationship with Greenberg (whom he calls "the foremost art critic of the twentieth century"), see Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, xvii–xviii.
- ¹⁹ For a well-known discussion of all-at-onceness in Greenberg, see the 1959 essay "The Case for Abstract Art," republished in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 80–81.
- ²⁰ Meyer, "The Writing of 'Art and Objecthood,'" 72–73.
- ²¹ Costello, "On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium," 285–292.
- ²² On Fried's relationship with Cavell, see Costello, "On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium," 285–295; Rex Butler, *Stanley Cavell and the Arts: Philosophy and Popular Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 127–145; Steven Melville, "Art and Objecthood," *Philosophy*, *Journal of Visual Culture* 16 (2017), 12–19; and Steven Melville, "Art and Objecthood: A Lecture," *Quaderns portàtils* 15 (Barcelona: MACBA, 2008), 10–51.
- ²³ Costello, "On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium," 289.
- ²⁴ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 244.
- ²⁵ Michael Fried, e-mail to author, May 21, 2018. Fried also recalls reading, at about the same time, Yvor Winters' *Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of Obscurantism* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1938), a work of literary history and criticism that considers Puritanism obliquely. Fried, e-mail to author, July 28, 2018.
- ²⁶ Preston Roberts, "Review of Jonathan Edwards by Perry Miller," *The Journal of Religion* 30 (October 1950), 267.
- ²⁷ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, xii.
- ²⁸ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 46.
- ²⁹ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 313.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.
- ³¹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, 85–93.
- ³² Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism," *Artforum* 11 (September 1972), 49.
- ³³ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 314.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 316.
- ³⁵ Krauss, "A View of Modernism," 49.
- ³⁶ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 317.
- ³⁷ Meyer, "The Writing of 'Art and Objecthood,'" 67.
- ³⁸ For replications of these texts, see Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 37–60, 148–164, 222–235.
- ³⁹ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 316.
- ⁴⁰ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 20, and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 160.
- ⁴¹ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 23, and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 167.
- ⁴² Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 51. The word *attack* appears in eight other places in Miller's book, as well; perhaps most relevant is Miller's claim, on 168, that "In the struggle with his Hatfield cousins, Edwards learned that the best defense is attack."
- ⁴³ Relevant, here, is Fried's later remark that "a sense of inner combat motivated the overtly theological cast of my essay's rhetorical frame." See Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 46.
- ⁴⁴ See, for example, Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism & the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 10; Meyer, "The Writing of 'Art and Objecthood,'" 72; and Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience* (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), 159, n. 42.
- ⁴⁵ Pamela Lee comes closest, perhaps, in her observation that "...only the moral authority of an Edwards could do justice to this condition;" see Lee, *Chronophobia*, 37. But she is writing in broad terms about Fried's epigraph, rather than about his word choices.
- ⁴⁶ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 20, and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 161.
- ⁴⁷ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 7. For other instances of the word *corrupted* in the same text, see 101, 123, 274; the related *corrupt* appears in five other places.
- ⁴⁸ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 77. For other instances of the word *perverted* in the same text, see 112, 122, 238.
- ⁴⁹ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 22, and, with slight modifications, Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 167. Incidentally, Fried's repeated use of the phrase *as though* (visible in the passage cited here, and elsewhere in his essay) also seems indebted to Miller's book, where it appears in nine separate places.
- ⁵⁰ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 12, and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 148.
- ⁵¹ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 329.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 279.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 279.
- ⁵⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, 131.
- ⁵⁵ Costello, "On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium," 288–289.
- ⁵⁶ Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 233–234.
- ⁵⁷ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 22, and, with slight modifications, Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 167.
- ⁵⁸ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 46. Also relevant here is Fried's claim that "I meant the epigraph to be taken as a gloss on the concept of presentness, and in particular

as suggesting that what was at stake in my invocation of that concept was something other than mere instantaneousness (however that is defined) ..." See *Art and Objecthood*, 46–47.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 298.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶¹ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 57.

⁶² Thus Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 31: "the Holy Ghost is from God, and grace is the gift of God. 'And God is under no obligation to any man: He is sovereign, and hath mercy on whom he will have mercy.'"

⁶³ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 19, and Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 158–159.

⁶⁴ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 47.

⁶⁵ Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1964), 130–132.

⁶⁶ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 325.

⁶⁷ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 19, and, with a slight modification, Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 158. Also relevant is his claim, regarding Minimalist work, that "Certain modes of seriousness are closed to [the beholder] by the work itself, *i.e.*, those established by the finest painting and sculpture of the recent past. But, of course, *those* are hardly modes of seriousness in which most people feel at home, or even which they find tolerable." See Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 16, and, with modifications, *Art and Objecthood*, 155.

⁶⁸ Some critics and historians have also made the case that Fried's position is less than democratic: see for instance Schjeldahl, *The Hydrogen Jukebox*, 208 ("His is an aristocratic cast of mind that cherishes quiet cultivation and loathes crowds. One can sense in his denunciation of minimalism a tacit protest against the militantly democratic culture of the 1960s ...") and Meyer, "The Writing of 'Art and Objecthood,'" 79 ("Let it be said that the aesthetic of 'Art and Objecthood' is unapologetically undemocratic"). Such claims are clearly very different from Miller's contention (in *Jonathan Edwards*, 326) that "while Edwards wore a wig, his theology contains a democratic implication").

⁶⁹ Barry Schwabsky, "Makeshiftness," *London Review of Books* 25 (April 2003), 24. Also notable here is Velasco, "Editor's Letter," 50: "His concluding words – 'presentness is grace' – thrill in their conceptual economy."

⁷⁰ Lee, for instance, writes of "the now infamous Edwardsian edict 'Presentness is grace,'" while Schwabsky claims that the sentence refers back to the citation from one of Jonathan Edwards's sermons at the head of the essay. See Lee, *Chronophobia*, 37, and Schwabsky, "Makeshiftness."

⁷¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller, 26 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957–2008).

⁷² See, for example, Robert Slifkin, "Fast Times," *Art Journal* 64 (Spring, 2005), 111.

⁷³ Michael Fried, "Jules Olitski," in *Jules Olitski: Paintings 1963–1967*, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1967), 7, and, with a modification, Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 136.

⁷⁴ And would do so once again, in a 1971 essay on Morris Louis. After quoting a lengthy passage from the writings of Hart Crane, Fried wrote that "Crane's vision of the 'absolute' poem as present to consciousness and memory not as something which has duration but as a single, new, unsayable 'word' is, I suggest, a vision of it as somehow attaining to the nontemporal, as it were instantaneousness, presentness of *paintings*..." See Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 128.

⁷⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, second edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 61.

⁷⁶ Donald Moore, *Martin Buber: Prophet of Religious Secularism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 29 and 72.

⁷⁷ Michael Fried, e-mail to author, May 21, 2018.

⁷⁸ Similarly, James Meyer has speculated that Fried's use of the term *presentness* might be read in terms of attempted communication: a subject that also interested Cavell. See Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 23, n. 19, and Meyer, "The Writing of 'Art and Objecthood,'" 83.

⁷⁹ Lee, *Chronophobia*, 37.

⁸⁰ T. J. Clark, "Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, second edition, ed. Francis Frascina (London: Routledge, 2000), 107.

⁸¹ Clark, "Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried," 109, n. 7.

⁸² Tim Gough, "Theatricality and Sincerity," <https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2016/15-theatricality/theatricality-and-sincerity>.

⁸³ Daniel Sack, *After Live: Possibility, Potentiality, and the Future of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 106.

⁸⁴ Clark, "Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried," 109, n. 7.

⁸⁵ Melville, "Art and Objecthood," *Philosophy*, 19.

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„MENAS IR OBJEKTYVUMAS“, MICHAELAS FRIEDAS IR JONATHANAS EDWARDSAS

Santrauka

1967 m. Michaelo Friedo esė „Menas ir objektyvumas“ yra vienas žinomiausių ir įtakingiausių kada nors parašytų meno kritikos kūrinių, kuris ir toliau kuria naujas interpretacijas. Tačiau jos atvirai teologinė sudėtis niekada nebuvo nuodugniai tyrinėta. Šiame straipsnyje pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas Friedo sprendimui kaip savo epigramą naudoti ilgą citatą iš Perry Millerio biografijos apie teologą Jonathaną Edwardsą, kurioje tvirtinama, kad Friedo esė labai pagrįsta Edwardso istorijos ir malonės sampratomis bei jai būdingomis formuluotėmis, atskleidžiančiomis aktyvų įsitraukimą į Millerio tekstą. Žinoma, kontekstai, kuriuose Edwardsas ir Friedas dirbo, buvo nepalyginamai skirtingi. Nepaisant to, išnagrinėjus būdus, kuriais Friedas rėmėsi Millerio tekstu ir Edwardso idėjomis, paaiškėjo, kad kuriant „Meną ir objektyvumą“ jie abu produktyviai paveikė šį meno teorijos traktatą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Michaelas Friedas, minimalizmas, Jonathanas Edwardsas, teologija, malonė, modernizmo meno teorija.

Gauta 2023-04-11

Parengta spaudai 2023-06-13

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