

MICHAEL FRIED AND BEHOLDING VIDEO ART

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In this article, I consider Michael Fried's recent contribution to the debate about the experience of video art, made in relation to the work of Douglas Gordon. Fried speculates that issues of antitheatricality may in fact be key to specifying the medium of video installation. While Fried's position on a work's to-be-seeness offers a useful way of framing the relation with the beholder in video art, I question his notion of 'overcoming' theatricality – preferring to see the theatrical/antitheatrical dichotomy as a dynamic at play within individual works. I welcome what seems to be an explicit acknowledgment from Fried that the position of the spectator is a contributory factor in what he terms empathic projection, but relate this to the notion of a figural presence. I argue that video art, as a *spatial* practice, offers a distinct mode of reception by problematizing the position of the spectator in relation to two-dimensional figurative space to which she is excluded.

I

The hybrid nature of much contemporary art practice poses particular difficulties in terms of characterizing the phenomenology of the experience of the artwork. This is particularly true of a type of work that despite its interdisciplinary nature has become a staple of gallery art, the video or film installation. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to visit any major contemporary art event without confronting such work. And yet there is little serious philosophical investigation into how the experience of the moving image is altered by its migration from the cinema to the space of the gallery.¹ As an artist who makes sculptural installations incorporating video projection, I find this particularly disappointing. So the recent, and typically provocative, contribution to the subject by the art historian and critic Michael Fried is most definitely welcome. Unfortunately, Fried's well-known predilections place unnecessary limits on the applicability of his account, limiting a potential generalization of his position into a more inclusive theory of beholding video art. In this paper, I hope to reframe certain questions Fried raises in a way that I believe remains sympathetic to his concerns, but nevertheless fundamentally questions whether Fried's theatrical/antitheatrical dichotomy is one of two opposed 'traditions' or might be reconfigured as tensions manifest in works of individual artists or even individual works of art. Indeed, Fried's recent writings

An earlier version of this essay was given at the 2011 European Society of Aesthetics Conference held in Grenoble. I am grateful to the chair of the session, Robert Hopkins, and to audience members for their contribution. I am also appreciative of the extremely useful comments by two anonymous reviewers of this article.

¹ This is not to suggest an absence of historical perspectives on this shift in moving-image practice, but a lack of serious investigation into the phenomenology of the experience.

on photography and video art foreground what he terms a work's to-be-seeness (an acknowledgement of a work's 'own constructedness and artifactualty') in a way that seems directly to grant a previously unregistered mutual interdependence of such a dynamic – where the structuring of a work's to-be-seeness opens up a new 'dialectic' relation between absorption *and* theatricality.² Such a structuring might even be said to be a distinctive (if not defining) feature of video installation. Yet continuing talk from Fried of 'defeating' theatricality negates the constitutive role it plays in video art, particularly with respect to the ways situated video focuses attention on configurational properties of a film's production *and* reception.³

II

The challenges posed by interdisciplinary practices are hardly new. Indeed, it is now over forty years since Fried wrote his seminal (some would say 'infamous') 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood'.⁴ Fried defined the so-called minimalist art he opposed by its ideological commitment to a hybrid practice that was neither sculpture nor painting. This was an art that Fried labelled *literalist*, in that, unlike the self-sufficient art of high modernism, where internal relational properties affect a supposed indifference to both the presence of the beholder and the space of the gallery, minimalism was an art that specifically sought to address the subjective embodied experience of the spectator.⁵ Indeed, it is with the development of a 'situational' art in the 1960s that the literal presence of a beholder is theorized as both definitive of the new art *and* inherently problematic. Minimalist art opened up new possibilities for drawing the spectator into indeterminate experiences that now included the gallery space as spatial container. Fried's polemical essay unequivocally condemned minimalist artists' blurring of the boundary between painting and sculpture, their inclusion of 'real'

² Michael Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 22.

³ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 13. My position here echoes Heffernan's observation with respect to the photography of Jeff Wall, in that 'in showing how Wall – by his own account – meticulously *stages* his photographs of absorption, Fried prompts us to wonder if Wall thereby deconstructs the wall that Fried himself has erected – on foundations laid by Diderot – between absorption and theatricality'. James A. W. Heffernan, 'Staging Absorption and Transmuting the Everyday: A Response to Michael Fried', *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 818. I agree with Heffernan that, regardless of any inherent problem in treating absorption as a transhistorical phenomenon, we might accept that a work such as Chardin's *The House of Cards* 'displays absorption in every sense'. *Ibid.*, 821.

⁴ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

objects, and their direct address to an 'audience', all of which threatened the autonomy of the art object.

Fried continues to maintain that the minimalist art he characterizes as *literalist* 'is not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and persuasive condition'⁶ – a condition of *theatricality* that Fried makes parallels to in his consideration of eighteenth-century French painting in his *Absorption and Theatricality*.⁷ Indeed, it is arguably only when set against such a context that Fried's designation of restrained minimalist works as 'theatrical' makes any sense. Fried shares the eighteenth-century philosopher and critic Denis Diderot's antagonism to the theatrical, proposing the Diderotian notion of an absorptive art, an antitheatrical art – such as that of Jean Siméon Chardin – that presents 'the image's absorption in itself', oblivious to the presence of a beholder in front of the canvas.⁸

By way of contrast, Fried writes disparagingly of the notion that with literalist art 'someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been waiting for him'.⁹ Rather, Fried champions the kind of supposed antiliteral and antisituational sculpture of artists such as Anthony Caro that maintains an ontological distance and cannot be 'entered'. And of course Fried is right to register the engagement of a spectator as a defining feature of the new art he so opposed, to the extent that theorists potentially hostile to his position, such as Claire Bishop, can likewise claim that 'an insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art'.¹⁰ Fried thus anticipates, albeit from a highly critical perspective, the move to an art practice that privileges the experience of 'a *situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*'.¹¹ This challenges modernist sculpture's self-containment by

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁸ Ibid., 50. While Fried's position is clear, I nevertheless contend that a theatrical relation, in the specific sense used by Fried, should be one that not only feels 'staged' for an audience, but disregards the ontological divide between the fictive and real – to flout an intrinsic metaphysical separation that is both spatial and temporal. Many anecdotal Dutch genre paintings are undoubtedly theatrical in this sense, in that they seek to address the spectator as an audience external to the fiction. By contrast, the minimalist insistence on non-referential real space and real time may challenge the autonomous status of the work of art, but it does not bridge any metaphysical divide.

⁹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 163.

¹⁰ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005), 6.

¹¹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 153. Fried claims that the experience of the situation 'stands-in' for the work. This is a trope that Fried unjustifiably applies to minimalist or literalist work. While such works do include an awareness of the total situation, threatening the autonomy of the work, they do not bridge any ontological divide – the subjective experience no more stands in for or replaces the work than our experience of a chair might be said to substitute for the object itself.

opening up a situation that includes the beholder's *body*, and threatens an autonomy conceived as both spatial and, importantly, temporal. As Rosalind Krauss notes:

With regard to sculpture, the point on which the distinction between itself and theater turns is, for Fried, the concept of time. It is an extended temporality, a merging of the temporal experience of sculpture with real time, that pushes the plastic arts into the modality of theater. While it is through the concepts of 'presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theater'.¹²

Now this is familiar and well-rehearsed territory.¹³ Indeed, Fried himself claims that the battle he had fought for the autonomous work of art had been essentially lost: the insistent rise of postmodernist thought and situational art practices has been manifest in a shift away from painting and sculpture to installation and (of particular relevance here) video art.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Fried's recent writing on photography¹⁵ and, of greater relevance to this essay, on video art, presents an intriguing new twist, in that he claims that these media once again raise a burning question for contemporary art around issues of theatricality and objecthood. Given Fried's known predilections, the attention that he has given to the gallery-based video art of Douglas Gordon, an artist best known for his 1993 work *24 Hour Psycho*, is especially surprising. Fried's recent book *Four Honest Outlaws* devotes an entire section to Gordon's work, as well as a section to works by the video artist and photographer Anri Sala.¹⁶

Given his previous commitment to the 'purity' of art mediums, Fried himself acknowledges the unexpectedness of this championing of the works of a video artist such as Gordon.¹⁷ It is especially unforeseen given Gordon's frequent use of found footage, a kind of cinematic readymade, and his employment of projection or projections that engage both the beholder's movement and the space of the gallery (a seemingly theatrical mode of engagement Fried has had to 'learn to appreciate').¹⁸ Yet Fried uses Sala and Gordon's work to suggest that the ontological issues of absorption that came to the fore with the encounter between modernism and minimalism in the 1960s are once again at the top of

¹² Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 203–4. Krauss quotes Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 167.

¹³ See, for instance, the panel discussion Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Michael Fried, and Rosalind Krauss, 'Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop', in *Dia Art Foundation: Discussions in Contemporary Art*, vol. 1, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 71–86.

¹⁴ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 10.

¹⁵ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*.

¹⁶ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, chs. 1 and 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

some contemporary artists' agendas. In a deliberately 'provocative remark' at a lecture given at the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in May 2008, Fried claims 'not only that Douglas Gordon, especially in works involving film, is a consistently antitheatrical artist', but that antitheatricality as defined by Fried 'may be the key of any attempt we wish to make to specify the medium of work like [Gordon's 2000 three-screen projection] *Déjà-vu*'.¹⁹

III

I propose to take seriously Fried's claim that antitheatricality may be the key to any attempt to specify the medium of at least some works of video art. I start with a point of agreement. Fried has consistently maintained that cinema evades (rather than overcomes) theatricality through the viewer's engrossment in its narrative. Thus, in 'Art and Objecthood' he notes that there is 'one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely – the movies', an argument that Fried has developed further in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* and *Four Honest Outlaws*.²⁰ Now many narrative-based contemporary moving image works, whether they use video or film (or film transferred to digital video), likewise evade the issue of theatricality by replicating not only the cinematic experience, but also cinematic means of production (one might think of work by Doug Aitken or Eija-Liisa Ahtila). While the screen image might have shifted from the cinema to the space of the gallery, the content of the projected image (or images) is experienced in an essentially cinematic way, in a 'black-box' environment reminiscent of Fried's 'self-forgetting darkness' of the cinema.²¹ Galleries now provide seating for films that have a defined beginning and end. While these may be more conceptually structured and framed than traditional cinema, breaking down linear narrative, the experience is typically characterized by alternating moments of disjunction and narrative absorption. In such circumstances, it is difficult to make a strong claim for why such works differ phenomenologically from cinema. But what happens when the beholder is free to move around, and the image looped?

It has become almost obligatory to distinguish video installation from cinema by its more participatory experience. John Ravenal, for instance, argues:

Many video installations [...] draw attention to the viewer as being external to the imagery, thereby raising issues of perception, observation, and spectatorship. Unlike

¹⁹ Michael Fried, 'Michael Fried on Douglas Gordon' (lecture, Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, May 8, 2008), <http://www.wdw.nl/event/michael-fried-on-douglas-gordon/>.

²⁰ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 164. See Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 178–92; Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 5–14.

²¹ Fried adopts this term from V. F. Perkins; see Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 183.

film's stationary audience, viewers of projected video installations are often active participants who move through the surrounding space. The heightened awareness of the conditions of spectatorship often becomes, in some ways, the subject of the work.²²

Now, the viewer of cinema is also 'external' to the imagery – she is not so much transported into its fictional realm, as absorbed by its narrative. Indeed, there is much confusion about the illusory nature of film. If we are to register the significance of *how* video installations structure a distinctive awareness of their 'conditions of spectatorship', then it is necessary first to clarify some aspects of the phenomenal engagement with cinematic film. We shall see there are problems with Fried's account.

I agree with Robert Hopkins that the 'illusionistic' nature of cinema is at the level of its theatrical presentation (the term 'theatrical' used here in a different sense to that of Fried's pejorative use), not its photographic presentation – what Hopkins refers to as 'collapsed seeing-in', where through the subject's engrossment in the narrative she no longer attends to the film's configurational properties.²³ These properties include aspects such as the film set and props, the operation of the camera and lights, the framing of scenes and the acting. While we certainly *can* attend to these aspects of two-tier film (and with 'art' films frequently do), with many films we focus on the story told. In other words, we see a photographic representation of a staged story, but in a way where the collapse means we only attend to the latter. Fried's failure explicitly to address tiered seeing-in weakens his account of how motion pictures evade theatricality.

Fried's brief references to film in 'Art and Objecthood' in fact offer little detail of how narrative absorption is afforded, other than to suggest that the escape from theatricality is somehow automatic.²⁴ Fried now acknowledges that the 'movie world' is, in fact, 'an extremely complex achievement, requiring the cooperative work of a large team of artists and technicians (in that sense there is nothing automatic or guaranteed about it)'.²⁵ We might add that this collective effort is self-effacing, in the sense that to avoid overt 'staging' – so that the fictive world of film is believable – it must not draw attention to itself. But Fried then goes on to conflate this argument with another, quite different thesis. He quotes the film theorist V. F. Perkins: 'In the (ideally) comforting, self-forgetting darkness of the movie-house we attain faceless anonymity, a sort of public

²² John Ravenal, *Outer and Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane & Louise Wilson, and the History of Video Art* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 2.

²³ Robert Hopkins, 'What Do We See in Film?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 149–59.

²⁴ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 164.

²⁵ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 182.

privacy, which effectively distances the real world and our actual circumstances.²⁶ This is not in itself problematic. But then a confusion between two separate claims is revealed when Fried states that ‘the involved viewer seated in the darkness loses himself or herself in the story (the diegesis, as a certain sort of theorist puts it), which is to say in the fictive world of the movie as a whole – a process made possible by the fact that the viewer has no place in that fictive world: the movie unreels as if wholly indifferent to his or her existence.’²⁷ Losing ourselves in the fictive world of the story is thus made contingent upon an intrinsic ontological split, an extraneousness to the virtual made apparent by the self-forgetting darkness of the cinema.

Yet it seems to me that while darkness and self-forgetfulness might be considered contributory factors, they are not *necessary* features of narrative absorption.²⁸ Sitting at home we might more easily become distracted, but few would doubt the kind of engrossment sustained by a television series such as *The Sopranos*. If, as Fried suggests, figural presences on screen, inhabiting a self-enclosed world, appear oblivious to the existence of the audience, this obliviousness is a property of the film’s *production* rather than the context of its cinematic *reception*. Any ‘illusion’ is one where in experiencing staged events the viewer disregards the fact that she is watching actors on a carefully lit and framed set: it is not, as has been suggested, a *perceptual* illusion that she is witnessing such events face-to-face, experiencing the scene as she would ordinary events;²⁹ neither, as Fried seems to claim, is the ‘illusion’ dependent upon the ‘self-forgetting’ of our situation. This highlights important distinctions between the configurational properties of a film’s production (photographic *and* theatrical) and those of its reception: differences which have a bearing on Fried’s claims as to photography and video art’s acknowledgment of its own to-be-seeness.³⁰

At this point we might return to two-tier film. Hopkins introduces an additional notion of collapsed photographic seeing, which goes further than his account of ‘collapsed seeing-in’ in that it involves an intimate *photographic* experience

²⁶ Ibid., 183. Fried is here quoting V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 134.

²⁷ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 183–84.

²⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for obliging me to clarify this point.

²⁹ See, for instance, André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). For a more sophisticated notion of ‘projective illusion’, see Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Illusion of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Fried suggests ‘that once it became imaginable that a “world” could be “contaminated” by the mere fact of being beheld, the situation was ripe for the emergence of an esthetic that would accept such “contamination” as the basis of its procedures. Inevitably, that esthetic found its home in photography’. Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 35.

of the story told.³¹ This affords a distinct relation where ‘we would then seem to stand, in whatever special relation photography makes possible, not to the objects and events in fact photographed, but to whatever events those filmed events relate.’³² Such a collapse, however, faces a particular problem:

But photographic experience will only collapse if seeing-in does so. And the collapse of seeing-in before two-tier films requires a certain *insensitivity* to their origins. We must put aside our knowledge of how such films were made – that they are photographic recordings of theatrical representations of the story they tell – and draw our attention to focus on that story. Thus there is a tension in what is demanded, if collapsed photographic seeing is to occur.³³

Hopkins maintains that this tension is not necessarily contradictory. And Kendall Walton has likewise noted how various filmmakers have used the relative crudity of hand-held cameras to provide ‘a more convincing illusion of seeing the characters *through the photographs*’: something that ‘reconciles the immediacy which is claimed for such techniques – the feeling they provide of intimacy with the objects portrayed – with the obvious sense of contrivance that they engender – their calling attention to the medium.’³⁴ Indeed, some films, such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), integrate the very fictive presence of the hand-held camera into the film’s inner reality.³⁵ There are many other strategies for providing cinematic realism, all suggestive of a strong desire by film directors to circumvent the tension Hopkins claims is inherent to collapsed photographic seeing.

³¹ Hopkins, ‘What Do We See in Film?’, 155–59. In the article, Hopkins does not commit himself to any particular theory of photography’s distinctiveness, simply arguing that ‘whatever holds for still photographs will carry across to moving ones’ (p. 156). What is the relevance of the so-called transparency of photography here? Fried claims that the transparent nature of photography – as opposed to the non-transparent character of painting – is causally dependent upon the mechanical nature of the photographic process (Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 124). Kendall Walton’s well-known transparency claim (more radical than Fried’s) states that to see a photograph is literally to ‘see’ the object itself ‘through’ the representation. Kendall Walton, ‘Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism’, *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246–77. For a critique of Walton’s position see Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For our current purposes, all we need to grant here is the contention that the natural dependence of photographs (including moving pictures) allows us to feel intimately connected with objects in a way that handmade representations do not. This is something even Currie can grant.

³² Hopkins, ‘What Do We See in Film?’, 156. Hopkins does not actually commit himself on whether such collapsed photographic seeing exists.

³³ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁴ Walton, ‘Transparent Pictures’, 269.

³⁵ The pretence is that the film we are watching is actually found footage rather than fiction. The film is written and directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez.

This is relevant precisely because I want to suggest that one way video art is distinguished from cinematic film is that it often sets out to make explicit such tensions in two-tier film – resisting collapse in order to foreground a work’s to-be-seeness.³⁶ This returns us to Ravenal’s suggestion that with much video installation art the heightened awareness of the conditions of spectatorship (what in reception aesthetics is often referred to as the ‘conditions of access’)³⁷ becomes part of the work’s content. We might agree, but note that this heightened awareness also serves other purposes. Ravenal’s account is not untypical in its failure to address the interplay between configurational properties of a film’s production (photographic *and* theatrical) and those of its reception. Falling back on generic claims for a spectator’s active ‘participation’ too often ends up a mere tautology – a necessary consequence of *all* multiscreen video where we must, by definition, shift between screens. A lack of seats is no guarantee that narrative absorption is not simply exchanged for an all-encompassing (and uncritical) immersive experience of spectacle and sound.

Here Fried makes a particularly welcome intervention into the debate about the reception of video art. Fried discusses at length Douglas Gordon’s installation *Déjà-vu* (2000), which comprises a three-screen projection of Rudolph Maté’s film *D.O.A.* (1949–50). Three adjacent digital projections are set at slightly different speeds of 23, 24, and 25 frames per second, a relatively minor technical change that results in unexpected juxtapositions of scenes from the film. Fried claims that *Déjà-vu* ‘opiques’ the movie; frustrated by our inability to get a hold of the narrative, we shift from projection to projection, examining them in close up as we physically approach the large screens. The experience ‘takes place almost entirely in the realm of the real world and of one’s actual circumstances: standing in a gallery or museum exhibition space’.³⁸ In other words, expelled from the narrative, we start to experience a heightened awareness of the conditions of spectatorship. But importantly, Fried states:

Now something extraordinary happens: instead of feeling simply shut out or alienated from the content of the projections, the viewer discovers *another source or basis* of interest and involvement, namely, the exemplary absorption [of the actors] *in the performance of their roles*. That is, being distanced from the narrative and being denied

³⁶ We might also claim that such a tension is exactly what is at play not only in Jeff Wall’s explicit ‘cinematographic’ work, but also in his constructed ‘near documentary’ photographs.

³⁷ See, for instance, Wolfgang Kemp, ‘The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception’, in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180–96.

³⁸ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 185.

the kind of unself-aware involvement with the characters on which movies of the D. O. A. type are predicated, the viewer nevertheless becomes first conscious of, then interested in, and then [...] fascinated by the projections' presentation of especially the leading actors' commitment to [their professional task].³⁹

Fried claims that *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) might likewise be said to 'anatomize' film acting. In this work Gordon stretches the running length of Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* to twenty-four hours, projected onto a single screen which might be approached from both sides. *24 Hour Psycho* again frustrates our attempts to engage the narrative, insistently refocusing our attention on the film's configurational presentation. Fried notes that here 'the import of the two-frames-per-second slow motion in combination with the absence of a sound track is precisely to show – to bring to the viewer's awareness – the extreme difficulty, verging on impossibility, of distinguishing between the intentional behaviour of the actors in their roles and a whole range of unintentional actions such as breathing, blinking, swallowing, and other automatisms taking place before the camera at the same time'.⁴⁰

So Fried seems to be suggesting that one way by which the experience of video installation might be said to differ from cinema is the structuring of a work's to-be-seenness in such a way that it provides a *new* source of interest, specifically in the configurational properties of a film's construction: rebuffing the illusory pull of its narrative representation, the pull by which Fried claims cinema escapes theatricality. While this might be said to heighten the conditions of spectatorship, this is not (at least with Gordon's work) an end in itself. Fried intriguingly states: 'I think of that "opaquing" as a kind of theatricalizing of the movie itself, a theatricalizing that is then unexpectedly and ingeniously defeated or overcome – to use the language of "Art and Objecthood" – by the reorientation of the viewer's attention'.⁴¹ In other words, it is the literal presence of the spectator, her freedom physically to wander through the gallery in real time and space (the experience which characterizes so-called literalist art), attending to the projection(s) but distanced from the narrative, which facilitates this intense engagement with how the film is constructed, an engagement that runs counter to the so-called transparency of the medium. It allows us to experience a very particular sense of the image's absorption in itself, via our involvement with the actors' absorption in their roles.

But why does Fried need to revert here to talk of theatricality 'defeated or overcome'? As Vered Maimon notes, 'regardless of Fried's new position that absorption and theatricality are now mingled, his analysis is conducted in

³⁹ Ibid., 185–86.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 186–87.

⁴¹ Ibid., 191.

a manner that emphasises, yet again, the hierarchical opposition between absorption and theatricality.⁴² Indeed, Fried does not seem to have good grounds for arguing that one phenomenal experience is overwhelmed by another.⁴³ Rather, we might contend that a work such as *24 Hour Psycho* 'stages' a film (in this case Hitchcock's) in such a way that tiered seeing-in is explicitly revealed, such that we attend to the configurational properties of the film's production in a way that is diametrically opposed to the collapse of seeing-in on which cinema is so often predicated. Moreover, we might also argue that it is only through technical aspects of its staging that we are granted an intense photographic experience of the actors' gestures and facial expressions. My own experience of this work is one that alternates between moments of deep involvement with the slow motion image and attending to the situated context of the gallery, and, importantly, to the screen's *materiality* and *object* status in a way that counters the projected image's supposed transparency.⁴⁴ Indeed, the screen's double-sidedness allows us to approach from the rear without our shadow obscuring the image, allowing us to see at close hand the texture of both the original film (made more apparent by the slow motion) and its digital reconstruction. The experience not only reveals configurational properties of the film's production, but makes apparent the configurational properties of its situated reception. This, I argue, is the real import of Gordon's refusal of the 'black-box': it is not that simply a reaction against the 'self-forgetting darkness of the cinema' but a revealing of the wider situated conditions of access.

This 'theatricalizing' of a film's reception also has significance for Fried's second major contribution to defining what is distinct about the experience of certain kinds of video installation: a 'staging' of empathic projection. In relation to Gordon's 2003 installation *Play Dead; Real Time*, where on two large screens and a monitor cropped images are presented of an elephant that continually falls and then struggles to get up again, Fried suggests that such a work 'lays bare – all but forces on one's attention – the empathic-projective mechanism that lies at the

⁴² Vered Maimon, 'Michael Fried's Modernist Theory of Photography', *History of Photography* 34 (2010): 390.

⁴³ The need to draw the reader's attention to this point was made by an anonymous reviewer.

⁴⁴ Fried conflates his argument that photographic transparency is dependent upon its mechanical nature with a *separate* argument that conceives of such transparency in relation to the photographic surface: 'photographic transparency means [...] that the material surface is put out of play as a bearer of pictorial meaning'. Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 188–89. Richard Allen has also argued for a similar notion of transparency, while rejecting Walton's claim that we see the object itself through the photograph or motion picture. See Richard Allen, 'Looking at Motion Pictures', in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 76–94.

heart of one's response to often minimally demonstrative absorptive motifs.⁴⁵ Here, the elephant is 'absorbed' in the considerable exertions necessitated by her role of 'playing dead' – exertions that not only make the spectator feel uncomfortable as 'Minnie' rocks back and forward, struggling onto her knees, but engenders a powerful emotional response. Fried argues that in projective art there is a fitting connection between empathic projection and the technological, where 'the two modes of projection meet and mingle on screen.'⁴⁶ Yet Fried insists that *Play Dead; Real Time* is not merely an appeal to the viewer's 'experience', but a laying bare that is 'structural' – that reveals the mechanism at play.⁴⁷ As such, the work offers 'a powerful thematization of to-be-seenness', in that not only is the scene clearly staged for the benefit of the beholder, but 'the viewer is led to intuit the presence in the depicted space of others whom he or she never is shown.'⁴⁸ Fried's arguments represent an audacious attempt to draw Gordon's work into Fried's wider project of antitheatricity. What distinguishes his position from other commentators is the aligning of both empathic projection and the opaquing of film to absorptive ends. With Gordon, he claims that distancing devices which resist narrative absorption and draw attention to the situated positioning of the viewer within the gallery paradoxically refocus attention to one aspect of the foregrounding of a film's configurational presentation – namely, the acting (an aspect which forms part of what Hopkins terms the film's theatrical presentation). While Minnie cannot be said to be acting as such, she is required to play a role. But is this compensatory involvement with the actors' absorption in their tasks the only possible gain of a foregrounding of the conditions of spectatorship? In the next section I address a particular blind-spot in Fried's account.

IV

While Fried is not claiming to present a comprehensive theory of video art as such, his recent contributions to the debate nevertheless represent a serious contribution to our understanding of what is potentially distinct about the experience of certain works of video installation. I have already noted shortcomings of his account which derive from a certain myopic concentration on the need to defeat theatricality (a refusal to recognize that the play of theatricality/antitheatricality may be two sides of one coin). I believe a second problem arises from a lingering

⁴⁵ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 198.

⁴⁶ Fried, 'Michael Fried on Douglas Gordon'.

⁴⁷ Fried first develops this mechanism in relation to minimally demonstrative works by Caravaggio. See Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴⁸ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 171–72.

disregard for conceptual and minimalist strategies that underlie the hybrid medium.⁴⁹

Fried suggests that, unlike modernist sculpture and painting, with Gordon's work 'it is not at all clear how the concept of a medium bears on my analyses of *Play Dead; Real Time* or *Déjà-vu*'.⁵⁰ Yet we might refer to a rich 'tradition', stretching at least back to the 1960s, of so-called expanded cinematic practices that resist both narrative content and, importantly, the immersive pull of cinematic spectacle: the kind of spectacle typically offered by some of Bill Viola's recent video installations, where the viewer is immersed in enveloping spectacles of sight and sound.⁵¹

There are, of course, good reasons why Fried might want to disregard such practices, not least because of their inherent 'literalist' tendencies. This experimental tradition also sets out to heighten the conditions of access – a work's to-be-seenness – but (at least according to the rhetoric) in order to expose the 'illusory' and 'ideological' construction of the image as spectacle (though we should here refer back to misunderstandings as to the illusory nature of film). Though we might question aspects of underlying Debordian assumptions popular at the time, what is indisputable is that such practices foreground the very technological apparatus that many contemporary digital video installations now seek to hide. They draw our attention to the mechanisms of projection, the configurational properties of the *photographic* rather than *theatrical* presentation. Here, far from 'overcoming' the 'theatricalizing' of the image (leaving aside any reservations about such terms), these works, like literalist art, insist on a non-referential and material film practice – one of situated duration. One might think of the 'light sculptures' of Anthony McCall, such as *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), which go as far as to deny any implied filmic space, shifting attention to the film projector itself and the cone of light so reminiscent of smoky cinemas. McCall's film begins with a single point of light on 'screen' which immediately transforms into an arc, eventually tracing a complete circle: resulting in the cone of light in the smoke-filled room.⁵² Like minimalist sculpture, these 'films' are manifest only in real time and real space. Other film and

⁴⁹ While I am less concerned with Fried's 'ahistorical perspective' than Maimon, he makes very similar points in relation to Fried's writing on photography: 'The most striking feature of his interpretations is the way they downplay how contemporary photography has assimilated conceptual and minimalist strategies and models of practice. Fried is less interested in offering comprehensive interpretations of contemporary photography than in "proving" that it falls within the anti-theatrical tradition of art' (Maimon, 'Michael Fried's Modernist Theory', 391).

⁵⁰ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 204.

⁵¹ It is no coincidence that so much of Viola's work involves the enveloping elements of water and fire.

⁵² Recent re-enactments of this 1970s work now include a smoke machine, rather than McCall encouraging his friends to smoke.

video artists highlight configurational properties of either the image's construction or presentation by means such as exploiting the sculptural properties of monitors, the technical limitations or quirks of the media, or emphasizing the materiality of the film strip or individual frames. These techniques all seek to resist the kind of insistent narrative pull associated with cinematic film.

We might note here that video technology's facility for instant or time delayed playback can also be used literally to draw the viewer's presence into the work's content (in what is often referred to as reflexive work, where self-referential content is drawn from the situated context of the work's showing). Dan Graham, for instance, uses mirrors and video to create a dialogic, reciprocal situation, where the viewer interacts with both themselves and others. In *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974), a time delay of eight seconds between a wall-mounted camera and monitor immediately below means that a viewer sees herself in the monitor as she appeared eight seconds earlier, plus a reflection (in a mirror that constitutes the rear wall of the self-enclosed room) of the monitor recording her a further eight seconds back in time: a reflective sequence which regresses in time. Dan Graham conceptualizes the viewer's position here in a way that problematizes the relation between implied and literal spectatorship by overlaying levels of reality mediated by technology. But he also reveals the very means by which he constructs this relation.

Now, as already noted, Fried tends to downplay the role of technology in his account, despite the fact that it is in no way incidental to Gordon's work. (Gordon's subtle manipulation of film speeds, for instance, is entirely dependent upon advances in video technology.) More importantly, it is disingenuous of Fried to maintain that Gordon, as some 'sort of genius',⁵³ works independently of this earlier moving image tradition. By way of example, consider an extraordinary 1976 film installation by Paul Sharits, entitled *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*. This is an example of what Sharits referred to at the time as 'locational film', and consists of two film projections, one immediately on top of the other, filling the short wall of an open trapezoid arrangement where the projections are partly mirrored by the two reflective angled walls. Medical film footage of patients having epileptic convulsions are rapidly intercut with blocks of pure colour, presenting a stroboscopic pulse accompanied by a soundtrack of the patients' moans and simulation of brain wave frequencies (and of course the not inconsiderable sound of the two projectors in a confined space). Sharits describes the experience thus:

Viewers entering the trapezoidal-shaped space with its reflective, aluminum-painted walls, exaggerating the frenetic pulsing of the screen images, become part of the

⁵³ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 27.

projected image beam. This is enhanced by the stereo sound which creates an inferred 'wall' (closed door) behind them [...] seized as it were, in a convulsive space, becoming one with the two images of paroxysm.⁵⁴

What distinguishes this piece from his earlier work is not only the spatial context, but that Sharits successfully matches paroxysmal content to his own characteristic flicker form. Should we really be watching this? Not only does our viewing feel somewhat invasive, but we are very aware that such photic stimulation might potentially trigger just the kind of seizure we are witnessing. We are made to experience something of the convulsive state of the epileptic. As Sharits states, 'everything was done to allow the viewer to move beyond mere voyeurism and actually enter into the convulsive state, to allow a deeper empathy for the condition and to also, hopefully, experience the ecstatic aspect of such paroxysm'.⁵⁵

Now anyone familiar with Gordon's work cannot fail to register certain similarities of concern, in both content *and* spatial/temporal form.⁵⁶ In *10 ms⁻¹* (1994), for instance, Gordon likewise loops 'found' medical footage, this time supposedly of a physically and psychologically damaged First World War casualty (though, significantly, there is a strong possibility that the whole event has been staged).⁵⁷ In painful slow motion, the figure struggles and fails to get to his feet. Fried claims that 'empathic projection is in this case at once solicited and challenged by the oddness of the damaged man's behavior and the slow motion jerkiness of the image-flow'.⁵⁸ Does this complicate the viewer's empathic response? Certainly, as Gordon acknowledges, there is a sadistic mechanism at work here. More importantly,

⁵⁴ Paul Sharits, 'Installation Diagram for Epileptic Seizure Comparison', in *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973–1990*, ed. Woody Vasulka and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 330.

⁵⁵ Paul Sharits, 'Epileptic Seizure Comparison', *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue*, no. 7 (1989): 436.

⁵⁶ I have absolutely no idea whether Fried, or, indeed, Gordon, is aware of Sharits's work, but the similarities remain regardless of any familiarity with this particular piece. Here we might also note the debt of Sala's works *Three Minutes* (2004) and *After Three Minutes* (2004) (see Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 50–56) – involving the image of a cymbal being repeatedly struck under strobe lights set to a time different from the camera's 25 frames per second – to earlier experimental flicker films such as those by Sharits.

⁵⁷ This work was purchased by the Tate in 1997. According to Tate Modern: 'The man's outwardly healthy appearance makes the forces responsible for his collapse ambiguous. He may be suffering from a spinal injury or from shell shock, but it is equally possible that he is an actor involved in a clinical reconstruction for teaching purposes. In another work made around the same time, Gordon used a medical demonstration film in which a case of hysteria was staged, and he has acknowledged an interest in the way that such ambiguous documentation opens up questions about truth, perception and representation'. 'Douglas Gordon: Between Cinema and a Hard Place, 12 May – 3 December 2000, Tate Modern, <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cinema/gordon.htm>.

⁵⁸ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 210.

Fried points out that with Gordon's work 'the emphasis falls on the structurally imposed recognition of the "mechanism", not on the nuances of a particular subject's personal experience of it'.⁵⁹ The 'laying bare' of empathic projection is not just a straightforward case of eliciting emotion, but reveals how a work's to-be-seeness structures such a mechanism. Sharits's work (despite his description of becoming part of the image) is also *not* just about the experience (the experience does not simply 'stand-in' for the work), in that it also problematizes the spectator position by staging the event in a way that distances us, but also provides a new source of engrossment, albeit of a transgressive psychological nature.⁶⁰ And of course Sharits's epileptic patients might be seen as paramount examples of absorption and obliviousness to any external presence (predating Gordon's use of found footage as 'ontological object').

It is surely incongruous therefore to negate such strong connections between Gordon's work and a set of film and video practices that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, while simultaneously claiming Gordon as working in another 'tradition' of antitheatricality that dates back to Diderot. (Not that Fried is at all suggesting that Gordon is conscious that he is working within this tradition, but this only seems to reinforce my point.) What Fried *can* legitimately claim, however, is that issues of theatricality/antitheatricality are inherent to a particular dynamic that emerges from 'situated' video. And, indeed, Fried's emphasis on video art's to-be-seeness acknowledges that he is aware of a new, more dialectical relation. But he then undermines his own case by reverting back to the language of 'Art and Objecthood'. In the final section I pursue this further.

V

The notion, inherent to reception aesthetics, that the beholder-function is implicit *within* the work might legitimately be seen as a distinctive feature of the experience of non-cinematic video art, distinguishing it from that of film. We might agree with Fried that this emerges from the modernist notion of foregrounding a work's to-be-seeness.⁶¹ As such, the explicit foregrounding of the configurational properties of film in moving-image installations might thus be said to structure

⁵⁹ Ibid., 210.

⁶⁰ I am grateful to a suggestion made by an anonymous reviewer here.

⁶¹ While Fried does not use this term in relation to Édouard Manet, the origin of his notion of an artwork's 'to-be-seeness' might be traced back to the historical point where Fried argues that strategies for the fiction of the denial of the beholder become unsustainable. For Fried, Manet's 'radical *facingness*', manifest in works such as *Olympia* (1863) where the protagonist stares out blankly from the canvas, marks not a triumph of theatricality, but rather the inclusion of the beholder-function within the painting itself. See Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

a mode of reception distinct from cinematic film, but in a wider sense than Fried's specific focus on antitheatricality.

Fried is, in my view, rightly dismissive of works that make no effort to counter the kind of 'theatricalizing' of film that is inherent to the situated use of video.⁶² But the fact that Gordon's work is nevertheless dependent upon its real time viewing and spatial situation – its staging – alerts us to an inherent weakness in Fried's argument. Rather than seeing the theatrical/antitheatrical dichotomy as products of opposed 'traditions', one might claim that Gordon's work *structures a particular tension between theatricality and antitheatricality*, envelopment and distance.⁶³ Thus conceived, this tension might be thought to be at play within the work of individual artists, and even individual works of art. I have argued that Fried's opaquing of film might also be conceived as an exploiting of a tension inherent to collapsed photographic seeing, revealing the tiered nature of cinema through the staging of a work's to-be-seenness. This may well facilitate the kind of compensatory absorption to which Fried refers, but it might equally facilitate the kind of intrusion of the real to which Fried has always so pointedly objected, drawing attention to a complex overlaying of reality/unreality that draws upon a situated positioning of the spectator.⁶⁴ And this tension is, I believe, essential to Gordon's work, where the 'real' continually intrudes to disrupt our engagement with the absorption presented by the screen image.

Can this tension be said to define the medium? This might be going too far. Certainly, video art is supremely able to construct unashamedly theatrical relations with its audience precisely because of its spatial presentation of the animated figure. We might think here of the work of the video artist Tony Oursler, who 'animates' sculptural objects through projection, or projects spectral presences onto smoke, referencing the phantasmagoric potential of pre-cinema. Vito Acconci's notorious one-to-one confrontations with the filmed artist, his head tightly framed by a video monitor, might also be construed as theatrical, in that they deliberately set out to exploit an ontological divide.

⁶² Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 252.

⁶³ There is a rich tradition of considering such a dynamic. Stokes may be of some relevance here – see Adrian Stokes, *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, 3 vols., ed. Lawrence Gowing (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).

⁶⁴ Reigl maybe recognizes something of this when he argues that Rembrandt 'must have realized early on in his career that complete and well-defined external coherence – meaning the connection between the viewer and the figures depicted in the painting – depends on an already resolved internal coherence – meaning a subordinate relationship among the figures portrayed'. Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. Evelyn M. Kain (Los Angeles: Getty, 1999), 253. For a fascinating discussion about Renaissance painters' manipulation of levels of reality, see Sven Sandström, *Levels of Unreality: Studies in Structure and Construction in Italian Mural Painting during the Renaissance* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1963).

And yet I believe Fried is essentially right to suggest that

Gordon's and Sala's videos suggest that we may well be in the neighbourhood of a further turning-point in its history, whereby increasingly a recourse to absorptive themes and effects both in photography and, especially, in film and video will find it necessary to come to terms with a new awareness of what from the outset has been the central role of the empathically projecting viewer in making the "magic" of absorption come off.⁶⁵

But crucially, I would argue that this is dependent upon the kind of situated encounter Fried, in earlier writings, had seemed to have been at pains to deny – what Thomas Puttfarcken terms a figural presence.⁶⁶ I am thinking here of Puttfarcken's arguments about issues arising from the scale of an image, particularly the engagement with the life-size scale of figures certain paintings afford. Here, the spatial relation with the beholder is determined in such a way that our orientation towards the work is explicitly brought into play.⁶⁷ What video art seems especially capable of doing is structuring something twentieth-century modernist painting and sculpture subsequently seemed to preclude, an encounter with a figural presence that problematizes the beholder position relative to the virtual space of the artwork, and brings our orientation towards the work into play. Whether such relations are construed as theatrical or antitheatrical, they are dependent upon the fact that video installation art, as a hybrid form, is able to construct a particular tension between the virtual and the real. I would go as far as to suggest that any ensuing empathic projection is in fact dependent upon an artist exploiting inherent ambiguities of 'where' this figural presence is relative to the beholder, who is both an implicit presence *and* external to the image. This issue of the implied spatial location of virtual presences is something Fried's profound antipathy towards the theatrical precludes (despite his acknowledgment of theatricality's constitutive role in contemporary photography and video art): it runs counter to his aversion to works that involve imagination in bridging the ontological divide between the virtual and real.

My own video installations specifically set out to explore such ambiguities of location through the possibility of embedding within the sculptural object something that sculptural experience specifically lacks, a distinct perspective or point of view. I attempt to construct a complex relation between the external

⁶⁵ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 215.

⁶⁶ Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). Puttfarcken makes his case for scale and presence in relation to works such as Caravaggio's *The Entombment* (pp. 149–52).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.



Ken Wilder, *Plenum #2*, 2004. Steel, DVD projection.

spectator and a notional implicit beholder, anticipated by the work, by integrating elements into both the work's inner and outer reality. Installations such as the series entitled *Plenum* (which began in 2003), where a life-sized breathing figure periodically occupies an otherwise empty niche, specifically set out to configure a problematic figurative presence that structures empathic projection through uncertainties of spatial and temporal proximity.



Ken Wilder, *Intersection*, 2006. Double-screen corridor projection.

Intersection (2006) is a work that overlays video footage of a framed metal object (a raised corridor through which a woman occasionally walks) onto the object itself. The work structures two 'ideal' viewpoints, suspended in space, from which projected reality and physical object coincide. Of course, it is unlikely that the beholder adopts either position, so she struggles to relate the seemingly compressed virtual space of the film to the actual space of the object. The installation thus juxtaposes situational concerns that activate the beholder's space with explicit references to perspectival painting, where the relation to the virtual is problematized and the viewer externalized. It is this potential not only for problematizing the spectator position, but also for intimating proximity and distance, presence and absence, which might perhaps define a distinct mode of reception for such video art. It is a mode which creates a tension between the distance inherent in foregrounding a work's to-be-seenness and the structuring of an intimacy associated with the photographic experience. As with Gordon's work, the configuration 'functions as a constant reminder that the entire work not only exists for the viewer but also [...] calls for his or her active engagement throughout the entire duration – the "real time" – of the gallery visit'.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 210.

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