

On the Very Idea of a ‘Specific’ Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts

Diarmuid Costello

1. Michael Fried Then and Now

In the summer 2005 issue of this journal James Elkins writes, in response to Michael Fried’s ‘Barthes’s *Punctum*’, from the preceding issue:

“Barthes’s *Punctum*” is part of a work in progress on photography, and I imagine that when the book appears much of the reaction will center on the jump in Fried’s interests from painting to photography. It’s not just that Fried hasn’t written much on photography . . . ; it’s that modernist criticism has long been identified with claims about the specificity of media that would apparently prohibit the move in “Barthes’s *Punctum*.”¹

Elkins goes on to consider the extent to which such a response, if it is forthcoming, need concern Fried, suggesting that the ‘point, concerning the specificity of media, may seem troublesome because in “Barthes’s *Punctum*”

I would like to acknowledge the support of a Leverhulme Trust research fellowship while working on this paper, versions of which were given at the 2005 Photography Theory Symposium in Cork and the 2006 annual conferences of the United Kingdom Association of Art Historians, the British Society of Aesthetics, and the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand. I would also like to thank Jim Elkins, Michael Fried, Stephen Melville, Stephen Mulhall, Joel Snyder, and an anonymous referee for their comments on earlier drafts, and Claire Bishop, Dominic Rahtz, David Raskin, and Daniel Sturgis for their assistance with images.

1. James Elkins, ‘What Do We Want Photography to Be? A Response to Michael Fried’, *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Summer 2005): 941; hereafter abbreviated ‘W’. See Michael Fried, ‘Barthes’s *Punctum*’, *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Spring 2005): 539–74; hereafter abbreviated ‘B’. The book to which Elkins refers is provisionally titled *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. It has been widely previewed; in addition to various lectures and ‘B’, Fried has published short papers on Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall, and Luc Delahaye (‘Being There’, *Artforum* 43 [Sept. 2004]: 53–54; ‘Without a Trace: The Art of Thomas Demand’, *Artforum* 43 [Mar. 2005]: 198–203; and ‘World Mergers’, *Artforum* 44 [Mar. 2006]: 63–64, 66, respectively). It was also the source of his 2005 Lionel Trilling

Critical Inquiry 34 (Winter 2008)

© 2008 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/08/3402-0004\$10.00. All rights reserved.

Fried applies several of the same criteria to photography as he has applied to painting, apparently breaching the medium-specificity that has been central to modernist criticism since [Clement] Greenberg' ('W', p. 941). In support of this claim Elkins cites Fried's contention that 'the frontal pose has come to play a crucial role as' ('B', p. 569) 'ambitious photography increasingly has claimed for itself the scale and so to speak the address of abstract painting' (quoted in 'W', pp. 941–42; see 'B', pp. 570–71). When he makes this claim Fried has in mind the post-Bechers tradition in recent art photography, broadly construed.² That said, the mode of address that Fried associates with high modernist painting—citing Morris Louis's *Unfurleds* as an example³—is not exclusively tied to the frontal pose in Fried's mind; several pages earlier in 'Barthes's *Punctum*' Fried points out that the notable increase in the size of recent colour photography has itself allowed the work of Thomas Ruff and Jeff Wall (an artist not noted for frontal poses) to 'address more than a single beholder at the same time' ('B', p. 562). That is, in this respect at least, to function analogously to painting. For Fried, this increase in size is 'intimately related to . . . the display of those photographs on gallery and museum walls *or, rather, the fact that photographs like Wall's and Ruff's were made in order to be so displayed*' ('B', pp. 562–63; my italics).⁴

seminar at Columbia University, 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', published in *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007): 539–74.

2. Broadly construed because the point about frontality and the frontal pose would include influential photographers who did not study with the Bechers (such as Rineke Dijkstra) and not include important photographers (such as Andreas Gursky) who did.

3. Fried uses Louis's *Alpha-Pi* as a touchstone for the achievements of recent photography, specifically *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999*, in 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday.' The links between modernist painting and photography are especially pronounced in Fried's article on Delahaye. Fried focuses on the scale of Delahaye's recent panoramas and what he calls their 'sheer openness' and 'total accessibility to vision' (Fried, 'World Mergers', p. 66). This stress on visual perspicuousness and legibility is familiar from Fried and Cavell's work on modernist painting. Think of Cavell's description of modernist painting as 'wholly open' in his 'Excursus: Some Modernist Painting', *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), p. 111; hereafter abbreviated *WV*.

4. Fried is in at least partial agreement with Jean-François Chevrier here, who remarks of Wall and other recent photographers:

Their images are not mere prints—mobile, manipulable sheets that are framed and mounted on a wall for the duration of an exhibition and go back into their boxes afterward. They are

DIARMUID COSTELLO is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Warwick and codirector, with Margaret Iversen, of a three-year AHRC-funded research project titled 'Aesthetics after Photography'. He is coeditor, with Jonathan Vickery, of *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers* (2007) and, with Dominic Willson, of *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics* (2008). He is completing a monograph, *Aesthetics after Modernism*. His email is Diarmuid.Costello@Warwick.ac.uk



FIGURE 1. Morris Louis, *Alpha-Pi*, 1960. Acrylic on canvas, 260 cm. × 450 cm.

I stress this point because it makes clear that Fried takes the intentions of these artists to be crucial to their achievement and, hence, to both what their work is taken to *count as* and to what tradition or medium it is taken to *contribute to*, a point I shall return to.

As to whether Fried's approach to photography through the optic of painting should be considered a problem, it is not immediately clear where Elkins stands. After suggesting that it need not be worrisome, Elkins goes on to say:

If this appears as a betrayal of modernist faith in media-specificity, I wonder if that isn't because modernist criticism has a structural inability to determine what constitutes the specificity of a medium. Medium-specificity is either presented as a given—an inherent set of properties comprising “all that [is] unique in the nature” of each medium—or else as a historical fable, now jettisoned in the “age of the post-medium condition.” [“W”, p. 942]

designed and produced for the wall, summoning a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator that sharply contrasts with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received. . . . The frontality of the picture hung on or affixed to the wall and its autonomy as an object. . . . is not a matter of elevating the photographic image to the place and rank of painting. . . . There is a return to classical compositional forms, along with borrowings from the history of modern and premodern painting, but that movement is mediatized by the use of extra-painterly models.

(Jean-François Chevrier, ‘The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography’ [1989], in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle [exhibition catalog, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 11 Oct.–4 Jan. 2003], p. 116)



FIGURE 2. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999*. Transparency in light-box, 187 cm. × 351 cm.

The references are clearly to Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss, rather than to Fried, whose position is distinct from both. Elkins claims that “Barthes’s *Punctum*” steps around that inbuilt and unproductive choice [between Greenberg and Krauss] by paying attention to the pressure exerted on the present by the historically specific forms media have taken, while at the same time acknowledging the possibility that media co-opt properties from one another, thereby rearranging, blurring, or simply switching their historical roles’ (‘W’, p. 942). But to my mind, putting it this way glosses over the gulf, *if* Elkins is right, between Fried’s early criticism and the more relaxed view he takes today. From the perspective of the early Fried, the idea that artistic media might ‘co-opt properties from one another, thereby re-arranging, blurring, or simply switching roles’ would, I take it, have been anathema.⁵

That Elkins passes over this is strange, not least because it is the reason he is doubtless right to expect others will think this looks like something of a turnaround. And against that, I want to argue that there is no problem here at all, although it certainly *looks* as if there is. One might expect that to be a boon for Fried; his present position only appears to jar with his earlier one. But I want to suggest that if addressing photography through the terms he has previously applied to modernist painting really does not present a problem for Fried’s conception of medium-specificity, then so much the worse for the very *idea* of a ‘specific’ medium, and the weight it was asked to carry, in Fried’s early account. Let me make this clear: where Elkins glosses over what would generally be regarded as fundamental differences between early Fried and Fried today, I part company with Elkins in stressing the apparent differences between early and late Fried; but I also part company with anyone who believes such differences create a problem for Fried. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, I suggest that Fried’s ‘photographic turn’ may be directly extrapolated from the theoretical position he mapped out in two essays from 1966–1967: ‘Shape as Form’ and ‘Art and Objecthood’.⁶ The latter claim is clearly the more contentious, and it is the

5. Personally, I do not think Fried’s attitude is any more relaxed today than it has been before. Fried’s claims for aspects of recent photography are as trenchant as his earlier claims for modernist painting, and that they are is central to the ethos of his criticism, with its emphasis on conviction and absolute responsibility for one’s critical judgements. This is what makes Fried’s recent work on photography recognizably *modernist*, if *not* medium-specific—a combination that would presumably have seemed oxymoronic to the early Fried.

6. The relation of his current work on photography to ‘Art and Objecthood’ is something that Fried himself has raised as an open-ended question in recent interviews and art criticism, as though inviting interlocutors and suggestions. See, for example, Fried, ‘Being There’, and ‘Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday.’ Gregor Stemmrich has made a similar point in relation to Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross, ‘An Interview with Michael Fried’, *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writings of Michael Fried*, ed. Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross (Sydney, 2000), p. 380. See also Gregor Stemmrich, ‘Between Exaltation and Musing Contemplation: Jeff Wall’s Restitution of the Program of *Peinture de la Vie Moderne*’, in *Jeff Wall: Photographs*, ed. Achim Hochdörfer (exhibition catalog, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, 22 Mar.–25 May 2003), pp. 140–57.

burden of what follows to establish it and thereby dispel any air of contradiction from the two claims just advanced.

The upshot of this continuity, if I am right, will be to open up an unorthodox perspective on the early criticism. Fried's early work is often, and to my mind unthinkingly, dismissed as dogmatic or narrowly restrictive; I want to suggest instead that the conception of an artistic medium deployed in Fried's early criticism and Stanley Cavell's early philosophy of art is actually so *accommodating* as to undercut the idea that artistic media put any substantive constraints on artistic practice that may be specified in advance. Hence, if it is true that Fried's current work on photography can be justified from within the theoretical framework of his art criticism from the 1960s, my own view is that this brings out a fault line *internal to* 'Art and Objecthood' itself, residing in an hitherto unremarked tension between the terms *theatre* and *theatricality* on which that essay's critique of minimalism turns. Insofar as Fried defines *theatre* as 'what lies between the arts' and understands as *theatrical* any art that presents itself as 'incomplete' without an experiencing subject (and does so by virtue of actively soliciting the beholder it requires for its completion), I want to suggest that these terms have no necessary *internal* relation, despite the fact that at the time Fried brought them together there was no doubt a notable *historical* overlap between them. Nonetheless, their equation was a red herring; there is no necessary correlation between medium-specificity, or lack thereof, and the theatrical in the pejorative sense in which Fried uses this term. It is eminently possible to be theatrical *within* an artistic medium just as it is possible to eschew the theatrical *between* or *across* artistic media.⁷

We would therefore do well to separate out questions of medium-specificity and artistic address because it is arguably the entanglement of these two issues in the terms *theatre* and *theatrical*, which Fried's detractors have tended to uncritically take over—albeit *a contrario*—that is responsible for the hostility towards Fried and modernist theory and the dispiriting fate of ideas such as aesthetic value in subsequent art theory. Hence I want to suggest that while minimalism may well have been *theatrical*, in Fried's terms, it certainly wasn't *theatre*, again on his terms, because theatre, like the idea of medium-specificity it is meant to oppose, is conceptually in-

7. To say that there was no *necessary* relation between the terms *theatre* and *theatrical* as Fried used them in 1967, though there was a strong *historical* correlation between them, is to say that while Fried may have been right that it was in virtue of the invidious relation it sought to its beholders that minimalism took the form that it did and, as a result, fell between artistic media, the latter nonetheless remains a contingent fact about such art. That is, even if, in the case of minimalism, the meretricious relation it sought with its beholders took the form of falling between media it *need not* have done; it could have taken any number of different forms. In other words, it is not *because* it falls between media that minimalism is meretricious as art, assuming that it is.



FIGURE 3. Robert Morris, installation, Green Gallery, New York City, Dec. 1964–Jan. 1965.

determinable. If correct, the upshot is that this aspect of Fried's critique of minimalism (that is, the argument from theatre as opposed to the argument from theatricality) unravels—and does so on Friedian grounds. It may have taken Fried's 'photographic turn' to make this apparent, but it was always true.

2. Fried on Theatre and Theatricality

Notoriously, both *theatre* and *theatrical* function as wholly pejorative terms in Fried's account, conveying his absolute rejection of both the staging and the effect typical of minimalist installations. Fried described minimalism as theatrical in virtue of its relation to the space in which it was set, a relation he saw as a self-consciously theatrical *mise-en-scène* projected towards the beholder required for its completion. Soliciting a viewer in such a manner constitutes an ever-present risk for authentic (that is, modernist) art in Fried's account. Fried argued that artists such as Carl Andre and Robert Morris incorporated the work's viewer into the work itself by installing it in such a way as to draw attention to the time it took its viewer to navigate the physical space of its installation.⁸ This whole *situation*—consisting of

8. The essay itself focuses largely on the writings of Donald Judd and Robert Morris and the remarks of Tony Smith. But reviewing the essay in 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism' Fried

the work, its placement within a given architectural container, and the viewer—constituted the literal presence of such works, a presence that was theatrical on (at least) four counts for Fried: first, because it set up an experience that was elaborately staged and to that extent ‘sure-fire’; second, because it persisted (in principle endlessly) in time rather than gathering itself into the punctual plenitude, or ‘presentness’, characteristic of the best modernist works;⁹ third, and most importantly, because it *required* a beholder for its completion, the viewer being an anticipated component of the work itself, towards whom its installation was projected, in contrast to the self-subsistence (at least as regards its mode of address) of the autonomous modernist work;¹⁰ and, fourth, because it alienated and estranged its viewers, both physically and psychologically, as a result of its hollow and public, nonpersonal mode of address. All four, it should be clear, are specifications of what Fried took (and still takes) to be wrong with the relation such work sought to *impose* upon their projected beholders.

In doing so, minimalism transformed the idea of a work from a discrete, internally complex entity on the wall or floor to that of a simple object *plus* its spectator *plus* the spatiotemporal location in which it was installed, hence from a one-term to a three-term relation or from a complex, internally rich work to a simple, internally empty object embedded in a complex installation. Fried maintained that, both in its practice and its theoretical apologetics, this expansion served to blur the boundaries between media (hence the argument from theatricality to theatre) going on to declare that the concepts of value and quality only apply—indeed *can* only apply—to works not so expanded: ‘theater and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such’ (‘AO’, p. 163).¹¹ From this, now notorious, statement Fried goes on to draw a sequence of even more infamous conclusions:

specifies that he had the installations of Andre and Morris in mind. See Fried, ‘An Introduction to My Art Criticism’, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), p. 40.

9. Fried specifies that it is a concern with duration, particularly the consciousness of *endless* duration, as if time itself were rendered an object, rather than simply a concern with time *per se*, that makes such work literalist. See Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 166–67; hereafter abbreviated ‘AO’.

10. Cavell elaborates on this theme of the self-sufficient modernist work, the work that is complete in itself, in *WV*, pp. 108–17.

11. The most interesting reflections on whether Fried does—or can—really regard minimalist theatricality as *nonart* as opposed to *bad art*, are Stephen Melville’s exemplary writings on Fried. Melville’s broadly deconstructive strategy is to show that when Fried tries to consign minimalism to the nonart no-man’s-land of theatre, the very gesture by which he does so immediately reinscribes that domain within the sphere of art. That is, it redraws this line *within* art rather than *between* art and everything else; insofar as the works that Fried deems successful are such, in virtue of their ability to neutralize their *inherent* theatricality as entities made to be beheld, this becomes the *internal* motor of art, according to Fried’s own account. See Stephen Melville, ‘Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the

1. *The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater. . . .*
2. *Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater. . . .*
3. *The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater.* ['AO', pp. 163–64]

Consider the final formulation; it might be thought to imply that because *this* work is bad art, no work that fails to respect the boundaries between artistic media *could* be good art, now or in the future. But given the openness of art to transformation over time, and the concomitant obligation to judge each work on its merits, this is a claim that cannot be upheld—regardless of whether Fried was right in his estimation of minimalism.¹² The latter, it should be clear, is not something I am concerned with here; disputes about the value of minimalism are a matter for criticism, and my interest here is conceptual rather than critical.¹³ That said, it bears remarking how odd a

Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism', *October*, no. 19 (Winter 1981): 55–92, rpt. Melville, *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 147–86; and Melville, 'On Modernism', *Philosophy beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 8–16.

12. Less charitably than Melville, Thierry de Duve claims that Fried's response to minimalism exemplifies a *refusal* to judge aesthetically, which has dogged the criticism of modern art, rather than a negative judgement. As such it comes into effect, if de Duve is correct, *prior* to judgement. See Thierry de Duve, 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 241. Thus, where de Duve sees Fried's relation to minimalism as a refusal of aesthetic judgement that reveals the limits of his theory as to what *can* count as art and hence as an object of aesthetic judgement, arising from the fact that judgements honed on the *specific* practices of painting and sculpture can find no purchase on it, Melville reads 'Art and Objecthood' not as a conclusion derived from a theoretical position about what can and cannot count as an object of aesthetic judgement (namely, work in, and work between, artistic media respectively) but as a description of the experience of minimalist works that is *itself* the elaboration of a judgement to the effect that this is not an experience of art. These comments were made in correspondence with the author, but Melville makes a similar point in his 'Michael Fried', in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (Oxford, 2007), pp. 71–73. I believe that Melville and de Duve are both right and hence, of course, both wrong. Melville is right about the argument from theatricality; it is nothing if not a negative aesthetic judgement to claim that minimalist works set up an invidious relation to their spectators. De Duve, on the other hand, is right about the argument from theatre; for the programmatic claims Fried makes towards the end of his essay suggest an a priori view to the effect that the concepts of quality and value *cannot* be predicated of works that fall between artistic media. But both are wrong about what the other is right about because neither disentangles the argument from theatre from the argument from theatricality.

13. Thus it is my intention that everything I say here be as compatible with the critical view that Fried was entirely right about minimalism as it is with the view that he was entirely wrong. Whether I have succeeded in adhering to this stricture is another matter; I just want to point out that no assumptions about my own critical views are warranted one way or another simply because I criticize Fried's theory. Fried's objections to Greenberg operated at this level, and I would like to do Fried the courtesy of responding in kind.

claim this would be for *Fried* to make if we interpret it in this way, given his *own* insistence on the openness (albeit within limits) of artistic media to transformation over time. This should give us pause before unhitching this claim from its historical moment—namely, ‘theatre and theatricality are at war *today* . . . with art as such.’ On an even-handed reading of Fried, the fact that ‘Art and Objecthood’ was intended to intervene polemically in a now historical debate has to be kept in mind. Taking this into account, Fried’s equation of medium-specificity with the possibility of good art might be read, in a more minimal spirit, to mean only that contemporaneous work (namely minimalism, circa 1967) that blurs the boundaries between artistic media is not (good) art.¹⁴ Reading Fried’s claims in this more minimal spirit is to retrieve their *critical*—that is, normative rather than prescriptive—force, despite the more contentious claims he goes on to raise off the back of them.¹⁵

That said, the minimal reading of Fried just proposed does not capture the *force* of the claims Fried makes in ‘Art and Objecthood’ or explain the art world furore they unleashed. In sum, it is hard to ignore the more pro-

14. To say that Fried’s claims, read minimally, need only entail that minimalism is not (good) art remains equivocal between claiming that minimalism is *bad* art and minimalism is *not* art. I put it this way because Fried himself equivocates as to whether minimalism fails *as* painting or sculpture and hence is merely meretricious as art or, more damningly, fails to even *be* art. Ultimately, the former is too close to Greenberg’s view, which Fried rejects, to be his own. Thus Fried writes, apropos Greenberg’s claim in ‘After Abstract Expressionism’ that “‘a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one,’” that

it is not quite enough to say that a bare canvas tacked to a wall is not ‘necessarily’ a successful picture; it would . . . be more accurate . . . to say that it is not *conceivably* one. It may be countered that future circumstances might be such as to *make* it a successful painting, but I would argue that, for that to happen, the enterprise of painting would have to change so drastically that nothing more than the name would remain. . . . It is, I want to say, as though unless something compels conviction as to its quality it is no more than trivially or nominally a painting. [‘AO’, pp. 168–69 n. 6]

Here Fried does not equivocate between the descriptive and evaluative but (intentionally) collapses them. Under the testing conditions of Fried and Cavell’s modernism, a work that fails to compel conviction as painting, as sculpture, and so on courts the charge of fraudulence tout court. On Cavell’s account, in the absence of established criteria for judging whether or not something is a painting, sculpture, and so on, modernism raises the issues of fraudulence and sincerity with a vengeance; not only is the work but also the judge put on trial in the act of judging. A work judged fraudulent on this account is no work at all; it is at best the illusion of one. See Cavell, ‘Music Discomposed’ and ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 180–212, 213–37. Whether the fact that this seems to rule out the possibility of *bad* art constitutes a problem for this account, given that a situation in which there is *only* good art and nonart arguably evacuates the meaning of the notion of *good* art. The question, Good as opposed to what? I leave open.

15. This pattern of critical insights generating unwanted theoretical commitments is familiar; Fried himself draws attention to it in Greenberg. See Fried, ‘How Modernism Works: A Reply to T. J. Clark’, *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Sept. 1982): 217–34.

grammatical dimensions of the essay altogether—not least because these are undeniably part of its force. Perhaps it is more plausible to say that the idea of medium-specificity functioned for the *young* Fried in this respect much as it did for Greenberg, that is, as a necessary though not sufficient condition of a work possessing aesthetic value. This thicker reading retains the more substantive implication that art that falls between media is void as art. Not surprisingly, reading it in this more substantive spirit led many theorists and critics aligned with later, non-medium-specific art to reject Fried's theory outright. Indeed, this response has been so pervasive that it may be called the orthodox response from the antiaesthetic wing of postmodern theory. What is wrong with this standard response is that it rejects Fried's modernism *externally*; it insists on the merits of what his conception of artistic value is thought to exclude. The most obvious problem with responses of this kind, to my mind, is that they invert the normative dimension of Fried's criticism, while leaving its underlying structure in place. As a result, they remain internal to the very framework they mean to contest; though they champion art that Fried might be expected to dismiss, they continue to view it through the optic of his theory.¹⁶ But nothing *Fried* need regard as a serious challenge to modernist theory follows from the fact that his detractors rate various artistic practices more highly than he does; from *his* perspective it could all be so much more theatre.¹⁷

Given this, I suggest that the only way to seriously challenge Fried's modernism is to examine the framework underwriting the evaluation rather than the evaluation itself. This entails revisiting the foundational move in

16. This is true, for example, of Douglas Crimp's 'Pictures', a foundational text of postmodern theory that takes its point of departure from Fried's critique of theatre. Crimp valorizes what Fried denigrates but fails to take issue with the theory underpinning these valuations; as a result he inverts the normative dimension of Fried's criticism while leaving its underlying structure in place. See Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures', *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88. The same can be said of Rosalind Krauss's relation to Greenberg. On this, see Stephen Bann, 'Greenberg's Team', *Raritan* 13 (Spring 1994): 146–59, and Costello, 'Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (Spring 2007): 217–28. Fried has commented on this tendency of hostile critics to invert the normative dimension of his criticism while leaving its fundamental claims untouched; see Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism', p. 52. James Meyer makes a similar point about Annette Michelson and Krauss's relation to Fried's account of Robert Morris. See James Meyer, 'The Writing of "Art and Objecthood"', in *Refracting Vision*, p. 81. Despite his nuanced account of the historical background of 'Art and Objecthood', in particular the subtle transformations in Fried's position between 1963/64 and 1967, Meyer runs together *theatre* and the *theatrical* as routinely as those he opposes.

17. Arthur Danto recalls Greenberg making an analogous claim in his own terms in 1992. Namely, that for thirty years art history had been 'nothing but pop' (Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* [Princeton, N.J., 1997], p. 105).

Fried's theory of modernism, the amendments he proposed in 1966–67 to Greenberg's conception of medium-specificity. Here Fried develops a distinctive philosophical foundation for his own theory, one that owes more to Stanley Cavell's interpretation of the later Wittgenstein on convention than it does to Greenberg's recourse to Kant to underwrite a teleological conception of artistic self-criticism. Of course, Fried does not reject Greenberg's idea of a self-reflexive medium-specificity outright; he reformulates it. The question I want to pose here is whether these revisions leave room, conceptually, for his denigration of minimalism as theatre. This is to ask whether the more programmatic claims of Fried's essay, to the effect that what lies 'between' artistic media cannot be an object of aesthetic judgement or a vehicle of aesthetic value, are even *compatible* with its critique of Greenberg's essentialism. I shall suggest that what is wrong with Fried's response to minimalism may be gleaned from his *own* reformulations of Greenberg. If this is correct, Fried's critique of minimalism turns out to be problematic on Friedian grounds. Hence, rather than sanctioning early Fried for his restrictive view of what could count as (good) art—this being what I call post-modernism's *external* rejection of modernism—I shall try to bring out a fault line *internal* to Fried's modernism itself.

3. Fried and Cavell contra Greenberg on Medium-Specificity

Greenberg's theory of modernism as a self-critical practice is by now well known, and space precludes rehearsing it here.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that by the time he wrote 'Modernist Painting' and 'After Abstract Expressionism' (in 1960 and 1962 respectively) Greenberg believed modernism worked by gradually sloughing off all norms and conventions that prove *inessential* to a work's instantiation of a given art form. On this account, modernism is a process of immanent self-criticism through which each art sets its house in order by shedding everything it shares with any other art. Only by laying claim in this way to an 'area of competence' that is neither shared with any other art nor capable of being abandoned without abandoning the activity itself, Greenberg believed, would each art show that it offered its own, intrinsically valuable form of experience and thereby guarantee its continued existence. As is well known, Greenberg identified this 'unique and irreducible' source of value with the intrinsic properties of each art's medium;¹⁹ in

18. This is something I address in greater detail in part 1 of my forthcoming monograph, *Aesthetics after Modernism*. Chapters 1–2 provide a conceptual reconstruction and internal critique of Greenbergian theory.

19. See Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960), *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1993), 4:86.

the case of painting this turned out to inhere, notoriously, in the flatness of the support and the delimitation of that flatness by the support's framing edges:

Under the testing of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture.²⁰

There are several assumptions built into this account. The two most obvious are that each art *has* an irreducible essence and that modernism may be understood as a teleological process through which each art seeks it out (irrespective of whether this was apparent to its executors). It is on these points that Fried, initially Greenberg's leading follower, takes issue with his theory. But before turning to Fried's criticisms, I want to point up a deeper assumption that he does not question and that returns to haunt his own theory as a result. It is that the process of self-criticism operates *within*, but not *across*, the individual arts. This is premised on the assumption, shared by Greenberg and Fried, that the individual arts are individual in principle and not merely in practice, hence that they *can* be parsed on non-question-begging grounds. Thus, although Fried takes issue with Greenberg on the question of whether the arts have *timeless* essences, he nonetheless endorses his view that the arts have *distinct* essences.²¹ This theoretical commitment was, arguably, to prove hostage to fortune once minimalism had forced the question: what grounds are there for assuming the arts may be distinguished in principle just because to date they have been distinct in practice?²²

Fried, by contrast, came to view minimalism as a result of drawing the wrong conclusion from Greenberg's reductive conception of modernism: the conclusion that to foreground the essence of painting, say, understood

20. Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962), *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4:131.

21. For a discussion of this in terms of ahistorical versus transhistorical conceptions of essence, see Vickery, 'Art and the Ethical: Modernism and the Problem of Minimalism', in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Oxford, 2003), pp. 124–25. Fried and Cavell hold the latter. On the more general differences between them and Greenberg see Meyer, 'The Writing of "Art and Objecthood."'

22. One way of understanding minimalism is to see it as a practical counterexample, forged in a spirit of critical self-interrogation typical of modernism, to this very assumption. For de Duve this explains the bastard Greenbergianism of Judd's idea of the specific object, which is Greenbergian insofar as it claims a kind of specificity, but anti-Greenbergian insofar as its specificity is that of an object and hence neither distinct from nonart nor sanctioned by an established modernist medium. See de Duve, 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', pp. 230–37.



FIGURE 4. On the wall, Donald Judd, *Untitled* (galvanised iron and blue lacquer on aluminium, 4×101.6 cm. square units separated by 25.4 cm. intervals) and, on the floor, *Untitled* [subsequently destroyed] (galvanised iron and aluminium, same dimensions, no lacquer), both dated 19 April 1966, as exhibited at *Primary Structures*, Jewish Museum, New York, 27 April–12 June 1966.

in terms of the literal properties of its support, is to stop short of foregrounding art's literal nature per se, its existence as an object.²³ On this understanding of minimalism it is an *extension* of modernism's reductive logic, albeit pushed beyond the point at which Greenberg would have seen it halted, such that it tips over from the specific into the generic or from art into objecthood. In Fried's terms, this is to mistake modernism's 'acknowledgement' of the properties of the support as simultaneously both enabling and limiting conditions of the production of paintings as vehicles of pictorial meaning, for their hypostatization as brute facts about paintings as empirical objects.²⁴ For Fried, if an art such as minimalism could arise as

23. See the section entitled 'My Double Critique of Greenberg's Theory of Modernist Painting and of Minimalism's Greenbergian Advocacy of Literalism' in Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism', pp. 33–40.

24. On the difference between acknowledging and hypostatizing the literal properties of the support, which for Fried distinguishes Stella from minimalism, see Fried, 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings', *Artforum* 5 (Nov. 1966): 18–27; rpt. as 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons', *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 77–99. The question of how to acknowledge the shape of the support pervades the essay, but see especially pp. 88, 92–95. *Acknowledgement* is a term Fried takes over from Cavell; see, for example, Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledgement', *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 238–66. On the concept of acknowledgement in Fried and Cavell more generally, see Vickery, 'Art and the Ethical.'

an unexpected consequence of Greenberg's theorisation of modernism, then Greenberg's conception of modernism had to be amended.

Hence, while Fried has always acknowledged his debt to Greenberg's *criticism*, by 1966 he was already taking issue with Greenberg's *theory* of modernism.²⁵ It is important to realize that Fried does not contest Greenberg's claim that modernism *is* each art's attempt to locate the essence of its medium through a process of immanent self-criticism. Instead he argues, drawing support from Cavell's interpretation of the later Wittgenstein, that the perceived essence of an artistic medium is itself a product or projection of convention and hence open to revision over time. Reviewing his early criticism on the occasion of its collection, Fried cites Wittgenstein directly in support of this understanding of essence:

I say . . . : if you talk about *essence*—, you are merely noting a convention. But here one would like to retort: there is no greater difference than that between a proposition about the depth of the essence and one about—a mere convention. But what if I reply: to the *depth* that we see in the essence there corresponds the *deep* need for the convention.²⁶

25. This is where I would want to draw a line between my own critical engagement with Fried and Caroline Jones's recent exchange with Fried in *Critical Inquiry*. Jones's reconstruction of the significance of Kuhn for modernist theory is a genuinely illuminating and original contribution to understanding the period, but her critique of Fried begins from a bizarre underlying premise, namely, that by 1966, when Fried was still a graduate student in his mid-late twenties and had been writing art criticism regularly for all of four years, it was *already* 'manifestly too late' to mark his differences from Greenberg or to change his mind about how modernism should be theorized (Caroline A. Jones, 'The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn', *Critical Inquiry* 26 [Spring 2000]: 495). Regardless of whether Jones's reading of Fried circa 1965–66 is correct—and to my mind it appears to conflate Fried's idea of perpetual revolution with Greenberg's idea of reduction to essence, with which it is incompatible because the very idea of permanent revolution, though overblown, conceptually precludes the idea of an enduring nature—Jones's motivating assumption raises a prior question. That is, *were* Jones right, and Fried had indeed changed his mind, are we supposed to regard it as somehow intellectually inculpating to finesse or develop one's views over time? This betrays a strange view of intellectual development; were we not generally inclined to hold the contrary, we would have to revise our view of more than a few major thinkers. See Fried, 'Response to Caroline A. Jones' and Jones, 'Anxiety and Elation: Response to Michael Fried', *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Summer 2001): 703–5, 707–15.

26. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1956), pt. 1, §74, p. 23e. In the introduction to his criticism, Fried, quoting his own 'Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro', uses this remark of Wittgenstein's—taken from a discussion of the kind of conviction elicited by geometrical proofs—to underwrite his claim that Anthony Caro's *Deep Body Blue* (1966) captures the abstract nature or 'essence' of a door, which he goes on to gloss as 'discover[ing] the *conventions*—corresponding to *deep* needs—which make something a door' (Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism', p. 30). The previous remark of Wittgenstein's reads, 'it is not the property of an object that is ever "essential", but rather the mark of a concept' (Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, pt. 1, §73, p. 23e). This recalls Wittgenstein's remarks on grammar from *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Essence is expressed by grammar' and 'grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe [Oxford, 1953], §§371, 373, p. 116e; hereafter abbreviated *PI*).

On this account, essence is a reflection of an underlying need for conventions on which to ground human practices. This way of conceiving convention and of thinking about the relation between what is 'conventional' and what is 'natural'—the depth of the former grounded ultimately on the tyranny of the latter, that is, on the 'very general facts' about *human nature*—pervades Cavell's interpretation of the later Wittgenstein.²⁷ Cavell's early work, particularly his interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on convention, was crucial to the formation of Fried's theory of modernism.²⁸ According to Cavell, 'Wittgenstein's discovery, or rediscovery, is of the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of human society but . . . on the conventionality of human nature itself' (*CR*, p. 111). This includes what might be thought of as our 'natural reactions' to certain kinds of situation, and our 'natural understanding' of certain sorts of instruction. All of which, as Cavell reads Wittgenstein, is indexed to the development, or 'natural history', of various forms of human practice over time. Being indexed to the development of human societies, such practices are, in principle, open to revision—though not through mere agreement or fiat.²⁹

27. See, for example, Cavell, 'Natural and Conventional', *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 86–125; hereafter abbreviated *CR*. Though Fried presents this way of thinking about convention as a clear departure from Greenberg, something very like it is often implicit in Greenberg's thought—albeit in tension with those aspects of his thought that Fried rejects. Compare, in this regard, Greenberg's 'the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions' (Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 92) with Cavell's 'underlying the tyranny of convention is the tyranny of nature', by which he ultimately means human nature (*CR*, p. 123).

28. That this was not a one-way process may be gleaned from the contrasting treatments of Caro and pop art in Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', p. 222, and what amounts to the philosophical endorsement of Fried's canon in *WV*.

29. Again, it bears remarking that Cavell's view that conventions may not be changed by mere fiat—as if they were contracts mutually consented to, rather than practices that have gradually evolved over time in response to human needs and capacities—is consonant with Greenberg's thought that only an artist who is thoroughly immersed in, and so possessed of, existing conventions can truly transform them. Greenberg's example, influenced by Fried himself, is Caro's 'breakthrough' sculptures of the early sixties: 'Caro's art is original because it changes and expands taste in order to make room for itself. And it is able to do this only because it is the product of a necessity; only because it is compelled by a vision that is unable to make itself known except by changing art' (Greenberg, 'Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro' [1965], *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4:208). Greenberg later elaborated on the more general point as follows:

The record shows no case of significant innovation where the innovating artist didn't possess and grasp the conventions that he changed and abandoned. Which is to say that he subjected his art to the pressure of these conventions in the course of changing or shedding them. Nor did he have to cast around for new conventions to replace those he had shed; his new conventions would emerge . . . simply by dint of his struggle with the old ones'.

(Greenberg, 'Convention and Innovation', *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* [Oxford, 1999], p. 53)

Building on the idea that the conventions on which human practices are based evolve over time, Fried argues that the essence of a practice such as painting will be open to transformation through the ongoing practice of the discipline itself. It is important to recognise that, to Fried and Cavell's way of thinking, this does not make the essence of an artistic medium somehow arbitrary or insubstantial—as would be implied by calling it merely conventional—as that would suggest there is something *deeper* than convention to which the latter might be unfavourably contrasted. On the contrary, conventions—to echo *Philosophical Investigations* on the conventionality of following a rule—constitute 'bedrock' (*PI*, §217, p. 85e). Rooted in forms of life—that is, deep and pervasive patterns of underlying agreement or attunement in the absence of which we could neither understand one another nor share a world—and constrained, in the last analysis, by the natural capacities and limits of human beings (the 'very general facts of human nature'), conventions are all we have.³⁰ This is the sense of convention at stake in Fried's well-known formulation that the antitheatrical tradition in French painting sought to 'neutralize the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld.'³¹ Suggesting that the fact that paintings are

This is a revised version of Greenberg, 'Seminar Six', *Arts Magazine* 50 (June 1976): 90–93 and given as one of nine Bennington seminars at Bennington College, Vermont, April 1971. If the Caro example is too indebted to Fried to serve as independent confirmation of the affinity between Greenberg and Cavell's thought, consider Greenberg's discussion (in the later article) of Cézanne as a true revolutionary or deep—that is, reluctant rather than premature—innovator, because his vision, though revolutionized by impressionism, was subject to a conflicting desire to restore to painting the depths he felt impressionism had prematurely sacrificed:

It was because Cézanne never stopped regretting the light and dark of illusionist tradition, because he kept on trying to rescue the conventions that his Impressionist vision compelled him to undermine—it was in some very important part because of this, the back-drag of the quality of the past—that Cézanne's art steadied itself as it did . . . on an extraordinarily high level. It was almost precisely because of his greater reluctance to "sacrifice" to innovation that Cézanne's newness turned out to be more lasting and also more radical than that of other post-Impressionists. [Greenberg, 'Convention and Innovation', p. 54]

This perfectly embodies Cavell's thought that 'only masters of a game, perfect slaves to that project, are in a position to establish conventions which better serve its essence. This is why deep revolutionary changes can result from attempts to conserve a project, to take it back to its idea, keep it in touch with its history' (*CR*, p. 121).

30. For Cavell's use of this remark in the context of the conventionality of language, see Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', *Must We Mean What We Say?* p. 50.

31. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, 1980), p. 93. This is the central topic of the book; see also pp. 103, 131, 153, and 157–58. For an overview, see Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism', pp. 47–54. Melville teases out the contradictions elicited by trying to resist or deny 'the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld' in 'On Modernism' and 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism.' I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing out that I underplayed this aspect of Fried's theory and its relation to Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein in an earlier version of this paper.

made to be beheld is a *convention*, albeit a 'primordial' one, is in this respect a claim about our natural history. As Cavell reads Wittgenstein, such conventions rest on nothing more, but also nothing less, than our agreement in forms of life—a fundamental level of attunement grounded in the natural history of human beings.

For Wittgenstein, forms of life must therefore be taken as *given*: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*' (*PI*, p. 226e). But what does this mean? Cavell tends to gloss the idea of forms of life by invoking Wittgenstein's cognate idea of 'agreement . . . in judgements.'³² This does not pick out individual instances of agreement so much as what must already be presupposed by the fact that we *can* take ourselves to be in agreement (or otherwise) about anything at all. This is not to say, as Cavell's reads Wittgenstein, that 'agreement in judgements' resides, mysteriously, somewhere 'below' our actual agreements in a relation of condition to conditioned; it is rather to draw attention to the pervasiveness of agreement in judgement that manifests itself *in* and *through* shared understanding in everyday life. As such, the idea of agreement here is not one of coming to agreement on particular occasions so much as already being, in a more fundamental sense, in agreement or attunement throughout.³³ It is,

32. 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements' (*PI*, §242, p. 88e). For a detailed discussion of 'agreement . . . in judgement' and its relation to forms of life, see Steven G. Affeldt, 'The Ground of Mutuality: Criteria, Judgement, and Intelligibility in Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell' and Mulhall, 'The Givenness of Grammar: A Reply to Steven Affeldt', *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998): 1–44; see also Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules', in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 79–106.

33. In one of his earliest essays, Cavell implicitly invokes the notion of such a thoroughgoing attunement in judgement, apparent in our day-to-day actions and interactions, in the context of a discussion about what must be presupposed for us to be able to project words into contexts other than those in which we learnt them. It is, Cavell writes,

a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. [Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', p. 52]

See also Cavell, 'The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and in Kripke', *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, 1990), p. 80 for a later discussion of the same passage. For Cavell on 'agreement . . . in judgement' and 'forms of life' more generally, see *CR*, esp. pp. 29–36, and 'Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture', *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, 1989), pp. 40–52.

one might say, the very *capacity* to make sense of one another at all, without which we could not inhabit a shared world. One might be tempted to call such agreement in judgement or forms of life a priori or even transcendental, though one would have to be careful to qualify this in terms of their rootedness in the natural history of the species.³⁴

On the notion of conventionality that, I have been suggesting, flows from this perception of agreement in judgements or forms of life, to say that essence is ‘conventional’, is to say that while it is not immutable—that is, not a fixed feature of the furniture of the world—it is nonetheless clearly not arbitrary. Rather, as a product of human needs and a reflection of human practices, as our convention-bound practices change over time so too will the perceived essence of those practices. This, it should be clear, amounts to a *historicisation* of essence, construed as product or projection of the deep conventions on which human practices are based, rather than its rejection. Applying this thought to art, Fried arrives at the following conclusion: the idea that the arts have *distinct* essences is retained, as is the belief that modernism is an attempt to isolate them; what is dropped is the thought that the essence of a given art endures *independently* of its ongoing practice. The upshot for theorizing artistic media is clear: to conceive the essence of any given art as timeless, for example, to understand modernist painting as an attempt to uncover the ‘*irreducible* essence’ of painting once and for all, is to misconstrue the nature of modernist painting as a historical enterprise. In Fried’s words:

Flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be thought of as the “irreducible essence of pictorial art,” but rather as something like the *minimal conditions for something’s being seen as a painting*; . . . the crucial question is not what those minimal and, so to speak, timeless conditions are, but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding as painting. This is not to say that painting *has no* essence; it *is* to claim that that essence—i.e., that which compels conviction—is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past. The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, *alone* are capable of establishing his work’s identity as painting. [‘AO’, p. 169 n. 6]³⁵

34. For a reading of forms of life in this spirit, that is, as a priori or transcendental, despite being part of our natural history, see Newton Garver, ‘Naturalism and Transcendentality: The Case of “Forms of Life”’, in *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Souren Toghiani (Bristol, 1994), pp. 41–69.

35. Fried’s presentation of the difference between his own and Greenberg’s position here is arguably overstated. His claim that ‘flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be

In Cavell's words: modernist art

is trying to find the limits or essence of its own procedures. And this means that it is not clear a priori what counts, or will count, as a painting, or sculpture or musical composition. . . . We haven't got clear criteria for determining whether a given object is or is not a painting, a sculpture. . . . The task of the modernist artist, as of the contemporary critic, is to find what it is his art finally depends upon; it doesn't matter that we haven't a prior criteria for defining a painting, what matters is that we realize that the criteria are something we must discover, discover in the continuity of painting itself.³⁶

If there are no a priori criteria that guarantee something will count as a painting, then modernism cannot be understood as an attempt to locate the 'unique and irreducible' properties of artistic media; instead, modernist artists are best understood as seeking to discover those criteria capable of securing their work's identity as painting, sculpture, and so on, at a given historical moment. In Fried's terms, what is at stake in modernist painting is not a quest to reveal the timeless essence of painting as a medium but an attempt to make works in the present capable of *withstanding comparison* to the highest achievements from the history of the discipline, the quality and identity of which is not in doubt: 'Unless something compels conviction as to its quality', Fried writes immediately prior to the remarks cited above, 'it is no more than trivially or nominally a painting.'³⁷ There are no hard and fast constraints as to what might compel conviction in this way that

thought of as the "irreducible essence of pictorial art," but rather as something like the *minimal conditions for something's being seen as a painting*, for example, which he presents as a criticism of Greenberg, is reminiscent of Greenberg's claim, in 'Modernist Painting', that 'the essential norms or conventions of painting are at the same time the limiting conditions with which a picture must comply *in order to be experienced as a picture*' (Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 89), though the thought is less philosophically fortified in Greenberg's account. This lack of fortification may be seen, for example, in the way Greenberg slides from talking about modernist self-criticism as an attempt 'to determine the irreducible working essence of art and the separate arts', a thought that can be read as consonant with Fried's own (and has been so read by de Duve), to talking about 'irreducible essence' per se, which cannot (Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', p. 131). De Duve maintains that Greenberg's qualification of this as a 'working' (hence necessarily provisional) essence counts against Fried's depiction of his position (de Duve, 'Silences in the Doctrine', in *Clement Greenberg between the Lines*, trans. Brian Holmes [Paris, 1996], p. 70). For Fried's reply, see Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism', pp. 65–66 n. 51.

36. Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', p. 219.

37. Fried first made this point in 'Shape as Form': 'What the modernist painter can be said to discover in his work—what can be said to be revealed to him in it—is not the irreducible essence of *all* painting but rather that which, at the present moment in painting's history, is capable of convincing him that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and the premodernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question' (Fried, 'Shape as Form', p. 99 n. 11).



FIGURE 5A. Jackson Pollock painting. Photo: Nans Namuth, July–October 1950.

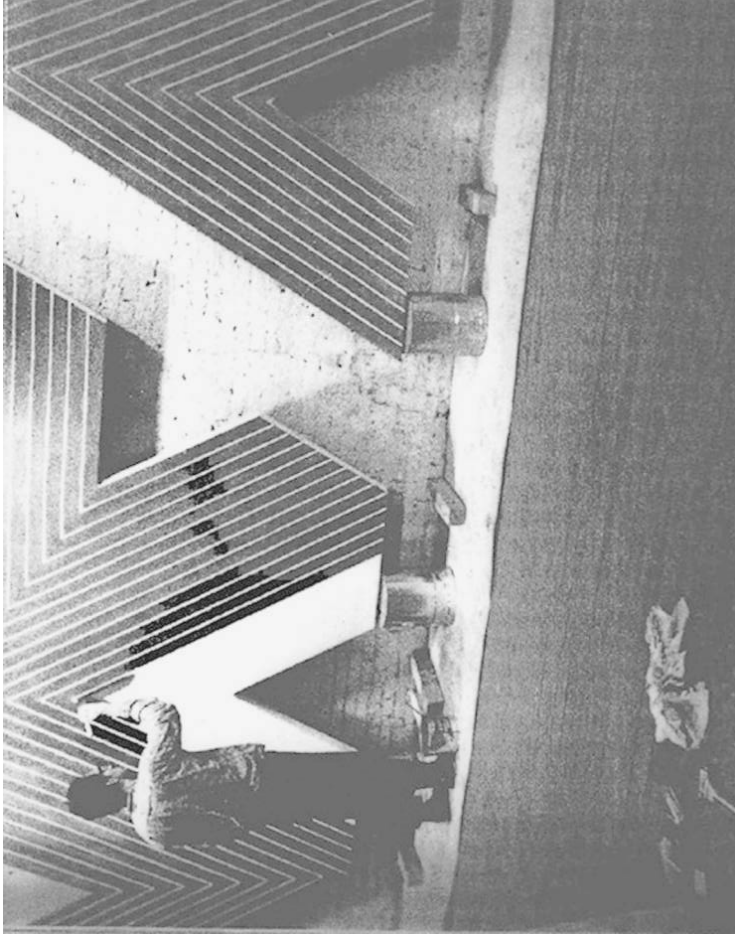


FIGURE 5B. Frank Stella working on *Quathlamba*, 1964 (84 Walker Street Studio, NYC). Photo: Hollis Frampton.

may be stipulated in advance; rather, it is a function of the ongoing development of art to bring these out. In Cavell's words: 'It is the task of the modernist artist to show that we do not know a priori what will count for us as an instance of his art' (*CR*, p. 123).³⁸ This leaves open in principle, if not entirely in practice, what *might* count as an instance of painting and thereby bear comparison to its greatest past achievements.

The point is to purge Greenberg's conception of medium-specificity of its *ahistorical* essentialism; it is *not* to dispute the idea of medium-specificity per se. On the contrary, Fried and Cavell remain committed to that idea in their early writings. Neither takes issue with Greenberg's view that self-criticism operates *within*, but not *across*, artistic media. For all their differences, then, all three concur at a deeper level that the arts are distinct in principle and not merely in practice and hence that they *can* be parsed on non-question-begging grounds.

4. Jeff Wall as a 'Painter', Gerhard Richter as a 'Photographer'

But consider the following possibility: if a photograph should succeed in rivaling the highest achievements of past painting, would that make it a great painting on Fried's account? Conversely: were a painting to rival the highest achievements of photography, would that make it a great photograph, again on Fried's account? Recall that what *counts* as an exemplary work in a given medium, according to Fried, is one that 'compels conviction' that it can stand comparison to the past achievements of that medium. *Prima facie*, this might seem to preclude a painting, say, being compared to past photography because they are (allegedly) in distinct media. But Fried and Cavell also maintain that we are unable to say a priori what may count as an instance of a given medium, it being a function of the ongoing development of a medium to bring this out. Hence it is not open to Fried to respond that a given work *cannot* be a painting because it is not made of paint, since that would be to fall back into a version of the essentialist account of artistic media that his own theory was meant to outflank. Given this, if it turns out that a photograph *can* be made to stand comparison to past painting, or vice versa, in the relevant sense, what happens to the idea of medium-specificity in Fried's account? If a photographer can make paintings using the technical means of photography or a painter make photographs by

38. In this sense, a painter like Frank Stella may be seen as aspiring to the highest achievements of past painting in a contemporary idiom. In Cavell's terms, it would be because Stella 'craves the conservation of [his] art that [he] seeks to discover how, under altered circumstances, paintings . . . can still be made.' In Cavell's words, 'Only someone outside this enterprise could think of [this] as an exploration of mere conventions. One might rather think of it as (the necessity for) establishing new conventions. And only someone outside this enterprise could think of establishing new conventions as a matter of exercising personal decision or taste' (*CR*, pp. 121, 123).

painting, thereby blurring the boundaries between media in practice, is it still plausible to suppose that artistic media are distinct in principle?

To show that this is not just a hypothetical possibility on Fried and Cavell's conception of an artistic medium, but an empirical reality, I want to briefly consider the practices of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter. I want to suggest that if one pushes hard on Fried's critique of Greenberg, the photographer Jeff Wall emerges, albeit with important qualifications, as a 'painter', who paints photographically, and the painter Gerhard Richter emerges as a 'photographer', who makes photographs with the means of painting. If this is correct—which is to say, if it is a plausible extrapolation of Fried's early conception of an artistic medium—then his critique of minimalism would seem to fall foul of his own objections to Greenberg. For once artistic media are shown to be *this* porous there can only ever be provisional boundaries between them; what constitutes a given medium today need no longer do so tomorrow. Indeed, what counts as a work in one medium today need no longer count as a work in the same medium tomorrow; as a corollary, what counts as a work in, between, or across an artistic medium or media will be continually up for grabs.³⁹

Now, it might be objected that it is anachronistic to take issue with Fried's early criticism through the optic of later art. But my claim is that Wall and Richter bring out an *intrinsic* conceptual possibility of Fried and Cavell's early conception of an artistic medium, even if it took subsequent artistic developments to make this fact apparent. I take this claim to be isomorphic to Fried's own: that minimalism was an intrinsic possibility, given Greenberg's conception of an artistic medium, even if it took later developments to make that apparent. This is why I said at the outset that Fried's 'photographic turn', notably his tendency to read recent art photography through the optic of modernist painting, is not the turnaround it may initially seem. Or, to put the point more forcefully, it is nothing if not an *extension* of his early criticism. Given that Fried understands an artistic medium as a structure of intention on the part of artists to elicit a certain conviction in their audience vis-à-vis the standing of their work in relation to the achievements of past art, it follows that if a given artist seeks to rival the achievements of one medium through the means of another their work will count as an example, and if great an exemplar, of the former. So the problem is not one of *consistency* between early and later Fried, as Elkins is no doubt right to suppose many will believe, but whether Fried's critical work as a whole

39. This cannot be regarded in any straightforward sense as a *criticism* of Fried, since, if not quite his own view, it is—at least on my interpretation—very close to his view's repercussions. But it does suggest the more programmatic claims of 'Art and Objecthood' are at odds with the best interpretation of Fried's theory.



FIGURE 6. Jeff Wall, *Overpass*, 2001. Transparency in light-box, 214 cm. × 274 cm.

threatens to dissolve the very idea of an artistic medium as something that imposes *any* substantive empirical constraints from within.

There is a second objection to my account that can only be met by coming to examples: namely, that it is at best counterintuitive and at worst willful to describe Wall as a painter and Richter as a photographer, even on such an avowedly antiessentialist and historicised a conception of an artistic medium as Fried's own; hence to suggest that his conception of medium-specificity contains the seeds of its own dissolution by adverting to the examples of Richter and Wall is implausible. But consider the evidence. Wall has repeatedly described his goal as being to revive the project, marginalized by modernist painting's stress on autonomy, of the 'painting of modern life.'⁴⁰ Here is Wall describing his involvement with this idea in conversation with T. J. Clark and others:

40. Wall is a highly strategic artist, and it is notable how this aspect of Wall's self-presentation, which saw him aligned in certain respects with T. J. Clark and the social history of art, has receded as he more recently emphasized the 'near documentary' goals of his work. This is the move that Fried has picked up on, though it has taken a virtuoso critical reading on Fried's part to show the consonance of this ambition with the antitheatrical tradition, which would otherwise have been far from apparent.

Some of the problems set in motion in culture not only in the 1920s, but in the 1820s and even in the 1750s, are still being played out, are still unresolved. . . . That's why . . . I felt that a return to the idea of *la peinture de la vie moderne* was legitimate. Between the moment of Baudelaire's positioning this as a programme and now, there is a continuity which is that of capitalism itself.



FIGURE 7A. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 130 × 190 cm.

And again, from the same interview:

When the concept of a painting of modern life emerged with particular crystal clarity in the nineteenth century, it changed the way the history of art could be seen. . . . Manet's art could be seen as the last of the long tradition of Western figuration, and of course at the same time, as the beginning of avant-gardism. . . . So it seems to me that the general programme of the painting of modern life (*which doesn't have to be painting, but could be*) is somehow the most significant evolutionary development in Western modern art.⁴¹

Wall, a photographic artist trained in art history and steeped in the history of painting in particular has taken on one genre of painting after another in his work, the scale of which is explicitly keyed to painting rather than that of the photographic plate, print, or album, as traditionally conceived—Wall's recent protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.⁴² But above all he has sought to rival the pictorial ambition, scale, and mode of address of

41. Jeff Wall, 'Representation, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency: Interview with T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut, and Anne Wagner' (1990), in *Jeff Wall*, ed. de Duve et al., 2d ed. (London, 2002), pp. 112, 124; my italics.

42. I have in mind Wall's recent autobiographical piece, 'Frames of Reference', in which he claims, to my mind unpersuasively: 'People who write about art often think my work always derives in some direct way from the model of nineteenth-century painting. That's partly true, but it has been isolated and exaggerated in much of the critical response to what I'm doing. *I'm totally uninterested in making reference to the genres of earlier pictorial art*'. Wall goes on to say that what he derives from painting is chiefly 'a love of pictures' and 'an idea of the size and scale proper to pictorial art' (Wall, 'Frames of Reference', *Artforum* 42 [Sept. 2003]: 191; rpt. *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné: 1978–2004*, ed. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef [exhibition catalog, Schaulager, Basel, 30 Apr.–25 Sept. 2005], pp. 444–45). If the latter seems convincing, the former seems overstated—perhaps as a result of trying to offset an equally overstated claim in the opposite direction (say, that he is *only* interested in referring to the genres of past painting). But to deny *any* such interest flies in the face of both his practice, and his previous claims for it.



FIGURE 7B. Jeff Wall, *Stereo*, 1980, detail. Transparency in light-box, 223 × 223 cm.

the highest genre of painting, history painting, often deriving the compositional strategies of his most ambitious works (such as *Dead Troops Talk [A Vision after an Ambush by a Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986]*, 1992) from this tradition. That said, it would not be quite right to describe Wall as a contemporary history painter; it would be more accurate to say that he has brought the compositional resources, mode of address, and scale of history painting into dialogue with Baudelaire's call for a painting of modern life to produce a 'painting' of everyday contemporary scenes and events, and hence modern life, *as* historical—that is, historically freighted, significant, worthy of the closest inspection. I put painting in scare quotes to indicate that I am not claiming Wall *is* a painter; the claim is rather that there may be no reason *not* to regard him as such, given Fried and Cavell's account of how artistic media develop over time. In fact, it may be more accurate to call this a *picturing* than a *painting*, something I take to

be consonant with what Fried himself might say of Wall's practice—namely, that it is essentially pictorial—but I shall come to that.

For all the differences in Wall's oeuvre, not least what might be regarded as its basic oscillation between the rhetoric, or mode of address of the documentary and the staged, the straight and the manipulated (which has clearly tilted towards the former over the last decade), what his images share

is a commitment to the depiction of everyday life. More specifically, they share a conception of what it is to depict everyday life keyed, if not exclusively to painting, then certainly more to painting, photography and cinema construed as a pictorial continuum than to photography, conceived as a discrete medium. Wall himself has recently made this clear: 'Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the aesthetic criteria of each are informed by the other two media to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms. The only additional or new element is movement in the cinema.'⁴³ On Fried's conception of an artistic medium, a conception grounded not in any literal properties of the medium in question but rather on a work's participation in what I have called a 'structure of artistic intention'—as embodied by its mode of address to a particular artistic tradition and the kind of conviction it seeks to elicit in its viewers as to its standing in relation to past work in that tradition—this would make Wall as much a painter, cinematographer, or perhaps 'pictographer' as it would make him a photographer proper; it is as much the achievements of not only past painting but of a more inclusive, non-medium-specific conception of the *pictorial*, as it is photography per se that Wall seeks to rival in a contemporary idiom.

Conversely, consider the case of Gerhard Richter. Richter, who worked as an assistant in a photographic laboratory before training as a social-realist painter in former East Germany, describes his practice of painting from photographs as 'photo-painting.' By this Richter has in mind something much stronger than painting pictures of photographs or painting pictures



FIGURE 8A. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818–19. Oil on canvas, 491 cm. × 716 cm.

43. Wall, 'Frames of Reference', p. 190.



FIGURE 8B. Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk* [A Vision after an Ambush by a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986], 1992. Transparency in light-box, 229 cm. × 417 cm.

from photographs, something more accurately thought of as putting painting in the service of photography—to the extent of *making photographs by painting*: Photography has

no style, no composition, no judgment. It freed me from personal experience. For the first time, there was nothing to it: it was pure picture.

That's why I wanted to have it, to show it—not use it as a means to painting but use painting as a means to photography.

When the interviewer then asks: 'How do you stand in relation to illusion? Is imitating photographs a distancing device, or does it create the appearance of reality?' Richter replies:

I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means: I'm not producing paintings that remind you of a photograph but producing photo-



FIGURE 9. Jeff Wall, *A Woman with a Covered Tray*, 2003. Transparency in light-box, 164 cm. × 209 cm.

graphs. And, seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs.⁴⁴

So Richter understands his practice as an attempt to make photographs—or what he calls ‘pure pictures’—by hand. If we take Richter at his word (and perhaps we shouldn’t) this effectively turns him into an ‘automatic’, or perhaps ‘quasi-automatic’, recording device or transcription machine, mimicking the mechanical apparatus—strictly speaking that of the enlarger rather than the camera insofar as Richter’s practice is one of enlarging existing images—with the laborious work of the hand in an attempt to escape the strictures of subjectivity and personal experience. *Automatism* is Cavell’s term for what has been glossed by numerous theorists over the years as photography’s mechanical or causal nature. It captures the widespread intuition that in photography something, perhaps even the most important

44. Gerhard Richter, ‘Interview with Rolf Shön’ (1972), *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993*, trans. David Britt, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 73; my italics. Though this interview dates from 1972, the sentiment it expresses about photo-painting is as common as Wall’s professions to a painting of modern life and runs like a leitmotif throughout Richter’s interviews and notes on painting.

thing—the formation of the image itself—takes place automatically, without human intervention or manipulation, but simply in virtue of tripping the mechanical apparatus.⁴⁵ In Cavell's terms, Richter's practice mimics both the automatism and the 'sterility' of the photographic apparatus by virtue of bracketing out his own subjectivity (or at least attempting to do so) and in terms of its inhuman, mechanical nature (at least once the image to be transcribed has been chosen).

But Richter also partakes of what Cavell calls photography's automatism in a deeper sense. In *The World Viewed* Cavell often alludes to the necessity of getting to the 'right depth' of the question concerning photography's automatism:

It is essential to get to the right depth of this fact of automatism. . . . So far as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied a wish not confined to painters, but the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation—a wish for



FIGURE 10. Gerhard Richter, *Administrative Building*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 97 cm. × 150 cm.

45. Theorists who have held this view, or versions of it, include Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin, Walter Benjamin, and Roger Scruton, among others. The notable exception to this way of approaching photography is, of course, Joel Snyder, who has made it something of a mission to defeat this approach to the medium. Of the many relevant papers, see the classic Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, 'Photography, Vision, and Representation', *Critical Inquiry* 2 (Autumn 1975): 143–69; Snyder, 'Photography and Ontology', in *The Worlds of Art and the World*, ed. Joseph Margolis (Amsterdam, 1984), pp. 21–34, and, most germane to Cavell himself, Snyder, 'What Happens by Itself in Photography', in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock, Tex., 1993), pp. 361–74.



FIGURE 11. Gerhard Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 87 cm. × 50 cm.

the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another. ['B', p. 21]

In other words, the 'right depth' of the fact of automatism is photography's relation to *scepticism*. On Cavell's understanding of the latter, Richter's attempt to circumvent his own subjectivity, by mimicking the camera's automatism, in order to produce a 'pure' (subjectively uninflected) picture, would be of a piece with the sceptic's desire to arrive at an indubitable knowledge of the world unconstrained by the limits of human finitude. Richter's bid to outwit the limits of subjective experience by turning himself into a transcription machine—'no style, no composition, no judgement. [Photography] freed me

from personal experience'—would be a species of scepticism, viewed through this optic.⁴⁶ As such it partakes of scepticism's fundamental paradox, namely, that by removing the constraints of subjectivity from the reproduction of reality, photography facilitates its perfection, but the price to be paid for such perfection is a world that subjectivity, mechanically cut adrift from it, cannot acknowledge as its own.⁴⁷ To the extent that Fried shares Cavell's philosophical outlook—to the extent, for example, that minimalism might be thought to reflect an analogous denial of authorial subjectivity and intention—Richter's scepticism, if that is what it is, may bear on Fried's apparent aversion to his work to date.⁴⁸

46. 'Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction' (WV, p. 23).

47. I owe this way of glossing Cavell's understanding of the relation between photography and scepticism, and much else, to Stephen Mulhall. See Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 228–30, and WV, pp. 20–23.

48. I say 'if' because, for all the allure of the 'automatic' reading of Richter pursued here, I remain reluctant to assert (in my own voice, so to speak) that Richter *is* a sceptic—not least because it flies in the face of his well-documented hopes for painting. But there is a further, more substantive point to be made here about the shared temperament of Fried and Cavell's thought



FIGURE 12. Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Picture*, 1992. Oil on aluminium panel, 100 cm. × 100 cm.

Now what I, or Richter, or both have just claimed may sound ludicrous, taken literally, and taking these remarks metaphorically would, to my mind, not only be a dodge but would deprive the project of all interest. For how could something that is so *obviously* a painting count as a photograph? This is especially pronounced in the case of Richter's numerous *Abstract Paintings*, but the point generalizes. For the claim is not that we might *mistake* Richter's paintings for photographs: I take it that we won't, and this is just as true for the photographically derived ones. Similarly, the claim about Wall was not that we might *mistake* twelve-foot-long-glossy cibachromes mounted on fluorescent light-boxes for oil on canvas. The claim is rather

about photography: insofar as the camera *records automatically* for Cavell and so could not *not* record what falls within its field of view, there is a notable consonance between Cavell's and Roland Barthes's conceptions of photography at this juncture—at least on Fried's reading of the latter. In the reading of *Camera Lucida* from which I began, Fried makes much of the fact that the *punctum* is a detail that the camera cannot *not* record in recording a given scene in its entirety. On this reading, the *punctum* is something *seen* by the viewer, without being *shown* by the photographer. As such it functions, according to Fried, as an 'ontological guarantee' of a given photograph's nontheatricality ('B', p. 553). See Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London, 1981), p. 47, and 'B', p. 546, where Fried comments: 'The *punctum*, we might say, is *seen* by Barthes but not because it has been *shown* to him by the photographer, for whom it does not exist.'

that Richter's paintings *are* photographs—at least on Fried and Cavell's understanding of an artistic medium.

To make good this claim it is necessary to remove some of the more obvious obstacles to endorsing Richter's perception of what he does as photography. The first is that aspect of photography he specifically and, one might think, egregiously elides, namely, its indexicality: 'if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practising photography by other means.' But can we *justifiably* disregard this 'assumption'? That photographs are, considered causally, the result of reflected light (focused by a lens and captured by a shutter) impacting on a light-sensitive surface is generally thought to be a distinguishing feature of photography. This seems to rule out Richter's claims a priori: if photographs have a direct casual dependence on what they depict, then this cannot be photography. But taking indexicality as a necessary mark of photography is not an option for Fried or Cavell—and it is their account that I am interested in—since, on their theory, artistic media are not defined materially, causally, or ontologically, but in terms of compelling conviction, first in the artist and then in their audience, that a given work stands up as an exemplar of its kind.

Indeed, *were* one to define photography in terms of indexicality, that would immediately rule out Wall, many of whose images are manipulated to such an extent that the final image (as opposed to its constituent parts) no longer functions as an indexical guarantor of the past existence of what it depicts in any straightforward sense. Of what one sees in Wall's images one can never say with certainty 'that has been.'⁴⁹ One cannot tell simply by looking at them and may never know. Even the most seemingly naturalistic images often consist of any number of fragments, shot in different times or places, and stitched together in the computer.⁵⁰ In sum, recourse to C. S.

49. Barthes famously dubbed the conviction, elicited by photographs, that 'that has been' the *noeme* of photography: 'Painting can feign reality without having seen it. . . . In Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of photography. . . . The name of Photography's *noeme* will therefore be "That-has-been"' (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 76–77). Analogously, Cavell speaks of the photograph presenting a 'world past', a world that is present to me at the cost of my absence from it: 'Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless absent. . . . is a world past' (*WV*, p. 23).

50. Wall's use of the medium in its digital form is the very antithesis of surrealism—not for Wall the striking juxtaposition. For this reason one cannot be sure of even the most naturalistic images, which may consist of fragments shot over a number of months or years, and in various locations, such that they neither document a place nor a time. This is by now well-documented in interviews: see, for example, Wall's discussion of *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993) in Wall, 'Wall Pieces', interview by Patricia Bickus, *Art Monthly*, no. 179 (Sept. 1994): 3–7, which turns



FIGURE 13. Jeff Wall, *The Flooded Grave*, 1998–2000. Transparency in lightbox, 229 cm. × 282 cm.

Peirce's much-abused distinction between icons and indexes, that staple of photo theory, no longer serves to underwrite categorical distinctions between photography and other media with the advent of digital technology—if it ever did.⁵¹ Taking this route would exclude the 'photographer' Wall, rather than just the 'painter' Richter, which is too severe; whereas understanding photography more broadly, in terms of what Cavell calls its au-

out to consist of some fifty digitally montaged fragments shot over several seasons so that each component could be photographed under similar lighting conditions. More recently, interviews have been accompanied by 'production stills' that graphically demonstrate the artifice behind Wall's images; see, for example, Wall, 'The Hole Truth', interview by Jan Tumlir, *Artforum* 39 (Mar. 2001): 112–17.

51. For arguments to the effect that this distinction, as it stands in the full complexity of Peirce's own work, never really did this work, see Elkins, 'What Does Peirce's Sign System Have to Say to Art History?' *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 44 (Apr. 2003): 5–22, and Snyder, 'Pointless', in *Photography Theory*, ed. Elkins (London, 2007), pp. 369–400. In Peirce, see, for example, Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs', *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (London, 1940), pp. 98–119 and 'The Icon, Index, and Symbol', *Elements of Logic*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), pp. 156–73.



FIGURE 14. Gerhard Richter, *Atlas: Panel 8*, 1962–66. Black and white, and other clippings, 52 cm. × 67 cm.

tomatism, rules in much of Richter, given the quasi-mechanical nature of his process, while ruling out much of Wall, most of whose works are anything but automatic, and so presumably cannot count as photographs on Cavell's account.

This brings me to the second obstacle to accepting Richter's claims for his own practice. Richter may (arguably) bracket out his own subjectivity, or at least attempt to do so, but that is a feat the camera itself manifestly need never accomplish. But this is no obstacle to regarding Richter as a photographer on Fried's conception of an artistic medium. Given that Richter consistently aims to achieve just this, and Fried understands artistic media to be *constituted by* just such structures of artistic intention, this would seem to count in favour, rather than against, the thought that Richter aspires to record what he pictures automatically—that is, *like a camera*. While the full significance of Richter's attempt to do this may only come into view as a negation of the previous conventions of painting (that is, as 'not-painting'), Richter carries through this project of making photographs by painting with the same degree of seriousness as Wall attempts

to update the tradition of history painting with the means of photography.⁵² This is just what structures of artistic intention entail for Fried. The equally obvious fact that Richter has to *choose* his source material is also no obstacle to regarding what he does as photography, understood in the minimal sense proposed here, since even the photographer must, at the very least, decide *where* to point his camera—a fact that Cavell's account of automatism need not deny.

Not only can one argue these artists invert their ostensive media's standing with respect to specific issues like automatism or mechanicity, they also do so with respect to several more general values and functions attributed to

them. If one sees Richter as a *painter*, the banality and absence of affect of his images sits uncomfortably with standard intuitions about painting as an expressive art, in virtue of its causal history—however one cashes out expression. Against such expectations, Richter positively embraces the anomie of the photographic document. Conversely, if one sees Wall as a *photographer*, the way his work brackets photography's documentary function, by constructing images in a manner more reminiscent of painting, con-



FIGURE 15. Andy Warhol, *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, 1962. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint and oil on canvas, 211 cm. × 145 cm.

52. I am grateful to the audience of the 2006 British Society of Aesthetics annual conference, notably Carolyn Wilde, Aaron Meskin, and John Hyman, none of whom would endorse the view advanced here, for pressing me on the relation between Richter's photo-paintings and the negation of previous conventions of *painting*. One of the most interesting treatments of this issue I have come across is Rosemary Hawker's work on the 'idiomatic' in Richter's complex negotiation of photography and painting. See Rosemary Hawker, 'Blur: Gerhard Richter and the Photographic in Painting' (Ph.D. diss., Griffiths University, Australia, 2007). See also Hawker, 'The Idiom in Photography as the Truth in Painting', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (Summer 2002): 541–54 and 'Idiom Post Medium: Richter Painting Photography', given at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand in December 2006. Hawker argues that it is precisely because Richter's work *fails* to translate photography into painting that it succeeds in revealing what is idiomatic (and hence irreducible) to photography. For an Adornian account of Richter's practice in terms of the negation or double-negation of painting, see Peter Osborne, 'Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives', *October*, no. 62 (Autumn 1992): 102–13.

finds standard intuitions about photography as an art of recording rather than constructing—however one cashes out the idea of a document.⁵³ Hence, where Richter undercuts painting's status as an expressive medium, by producing pictures so devoid of personality—so automatic—as to be unsettling as paintings, Wall undercuts photography's documentary function by constructing images in such a way as to sow doubt that they may be taken for documents, no matter how straight they appear. If this is granted, it seems difficult not to conclude that, *at least on Fried and Cavell's conception of an artistic medium*, Richter counts as a photographer and Wall as a painter.

Clearly, more would have to be said to clinch my claim that, when pushed, Fried and Cavell's conception of an artistic medium turns out—against all expectations—to be so *accommodating* as to undercut the very idea of a specific medium it is meant to capture; or, according to Fried's conception of an artistic medium, that Wall may be understood as subsuming painting, photography, and cinema into a generic (non-medium-specific) conception of the pictorial, with the means of digital photography, and Richter as aspiring to reproduce the anomie and automatism of the photographic document with the means of painting. But what I have said should at least suffice to head off its *prima facie* implausibility.

5. On the Very Idea of a 'Specific' Medium

I will close by considering one final and more fundamental objection to the account I have offered. It is that, on Fried and Cavell's account, a work in a given medium needs to bear a perspicuous relation to past work in *that* medium. Cavell has been particularly explicit on this point, rejecting pop art *in toto* for failing to demonstrate a commitment to painting as an art and thereby failing to count as a transformation *of painting*:

53. Hence Wall's coinage, in 2002, of 'near documentary' to describe his recent work. Fried has paid close attention to this coinage, finding in Wall's claim that such works purport to show what the events depicted were like when they passed *without* being photographed, an antitheatrical intention. See 'Being There', p. 53. See also Fried's discussion of *Adrian Walker, Artist, Drawing from a Specimen in a Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992) in 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday.' Wall addresses the issue of his relation, past and present, to what he calls a 'classical aesthetic of photography as rooted in the idea of fact' in a fascinating 1998 interview (Wall, 'Boris Groys in Conversation with Jeff Wall', in *Jeff Wall*, p. 152). There are many aspects of that interview that are relevant here, not least Wall's claim that he tried to put this issue in suspension 'by emphasizing the relations between photography and other picture-making arts, mainly painting and the cinema. In those the factual claim has always been played out in a subtle and more sophisticated way. This was what I thought of as a mimesis of the other arts' (*ibid.*, pp. 152, 154). See also Wall, 'Three Thoughts on Photography' (1999), in *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné*, pp. 441–42.

This is not painting; and it is not painting not because paintings *couldn't* look like that, but because serious painting doesn't; and it doesn't, not because serious painting is not forced to change, to explore its own foundations, even its own look; but because the *way* it changes—what will count as a relevant change—is determined by the commitment to painting as an *art*, in struggle with the history which makes it an art, continuing and countering the conventions and intentions and responses which comprise that history.⁵⁴

Like Cavell, Fried builds in a *prior* commitment to the medium of a given art form in the claim that for something to stand comparison to past work in a discipline it must respond to work in *that* discipline. At bottom, then, for both Fried and Cavell, change only counts, is only worth taking seriously, if it is *internal* to a given medium. And, if that is correct, so this objection runs, the extrapolation of their theory that I have proposed here does not even get off the ground. But, given Fried and Cavell's conception of the conventionality of artistic media, the idea of 'internality' must be understood accordingly. Thus it cannot stipulate any means or materials in advance; it cannot, for example, *require* that paintings be made from paint any more than that they be made with a brush. Similarly, it cannot stipulate that for something to count as a photograph it must be made with the mechanical and chemical means of photography. If it means anything, the idea of change internal to medium can only mean internal to a structure of intention operating within and against the constraints laid down by exemplary past work. If Fried and Cavell seem to want their idea of an artistic medium to lock in more substantial empirical constraints than this, on occasion, I suggest this amounts to implicitly trading off what their own theory explicitly rules out, namely, an essentialist conception of an artistic medium. Once artistic media are understood according to their own model of a historical a priori, then what *counts* as internal to a medium will be a function of the structures of intention underwriting a given practice rather than how, or from what, its exemplary past works were made. And that requirement, I suggest, is fully met in the case of Richter as a photographer and Wall as a 'pictographer', in the sense outlined above, neither of whose attachments to the disciplines I have attributed to them comes lightly.

Were Fried willing to grant this point, he would also have to grant that his own revisions of Greenberg show why the more programmatic aspects of his critique of minimalism are problematic according to his own theory. Once the consequences of his reformulations of Greenberg are cashed out, it is apparent that a principled demarcation between artistic media is no

54. Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', p. 222.

longer possible. What lies between artistic media today may no longer do so tomorrow; indeed what counts as a work in one medium today may no longer count as a work in the same medium tomorrow. It follows that nothing may be said to 'fall between' artistic media once and for all and thereby rule itself out as art of high aesthetic ambition. On his own theory, there are neither historically nor ontologically fixed media *between which to fall*. With this the idea of medium-specificity as a necessary condition of artistic value and with it the 'argument from theatre' unravels—and it does so on Friedian grounds.