Within the solar systems of our libraries, photography usually moves in a lesser, outer orbit. In his newest book, the eminent Michael Fried shows forcefully how the younger medium fits into one of the traditions—and traditional problems—of art making. Fried describes himself as a latecomer to writing about photography, and treats specifically the “new art photography” that has emerged since the 1970s. He credits Jean-François Chevrier for identifying the new form—the “restitution of the tableau form” in large-format works made to be hung on the wall. Given their critical and commercial success, these will be mostly familiar pictures.

Fried rehearses the trajectory of the trope documented in his trilogy (Absorption and Theatricality, Courbet’s Realism, Manet’s Modernism): how “absorption,” or “anti-theatricality,” the fiction of painted figures’ denying a beholder’s existence became the sine qua non for realism in the west, until its derailment by Manet, through his subjects’ shocking “facingness.” In this rather demanding polemic, Fried demonstrates compellingly how art photography has taken up the issues of absorption and theatricality—and, inescapably, the conflict between high modernism and minimalism laid out in his 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood.” Of the “core oppositions” that rise in the space between flat surface and viewer, Fried presents no single strain, but rather enlivening variety in the work of a dozen and a half photographers. First and foremost: Jeff Wall’s lightboxes, Thomas Struth’s museum series and family group portraits. Then the prints of Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Luc Delahaye each offer complications. The chapter on Rineke Dijkstra’s beach portraits of teenagers elevates her stunning solutions to the problem of “control” and “self” in portraiture. Thomas Demand’s sculptural “allegories of intention,” and the comparative arrays of industrial structures by Bernd and Hilla Becher also allow us to recognize great “complementary axes,” and lead to Fried’s peroration on what is at stake in the dialectic—nothing less than our understanding of notions of existence.

Fried draws deeply from artists’ statements, interviews, and personal acquaintance to describe their working methods. He mines Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Hegel, and Barthes for challenging but useful categories and convergences. The book is illustrated with appealing reproductions of some 200 photographs—each ironically reduced, yet rising altogether as a tribute to the value of the printed book. Fried reliably pauses to describe each picture with care and enthusiasm before launching into theoretical discussion, and these lucid readings themselves constitute a gift to any reader. Certainly Fried intends to be provocative. Throughout, one senses the author’s triumphal vindication, but that is exiguous in relation to the valuable renewal and extension of his ideas as productive critical tools. This magisterial contribution to the literature ensures that another generation will have to reckon with Fried.

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