

## Letter to the Editor, *Artforum*, October 1967

Sirs:

France has given us the anti-novel, now Michael Fried has given us the anti-theater. A production could be developed on a monstrous scale with the Seven Deadly Isms, verbose diatribes, scandalous refutations, a vindication of Stanley Cavell, shrill but brilliant disputes on "shapehood" vs. "objecthood," dark curses, infamous claims, etc. The stage should subdivide into millions of stages.

The following is a "prologue" from an unwritten TV "spectacular" called *The Tribulations of Michael Fried*.

...there will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery; when you look forward you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts.

—Jonathan Edwards

Michael Fried has in his article "Art and Objecthood" (*ARTFORUM*, June 1967) declared a "war" on what he quixotically calls "theatricality." In a manner worthy of the most fanatical puritan, he provides the art world with a long-overdue spectacle—a kind of ready-made parody of the war between Renaissance classicism (modernity) versus Manneristic anti-classicism (theater). Fried, without knowing it, has brought into being a schism complete with all the "mimic fury" (Thomas Carew) of a fictive inquisition. He becomes, I want to say, in effect the first truly manneristic critic of "modernity." Fried has set the critical stage for *manneristic modernism*, although he is trying hard not to fall from the "grip" of grace. This grace he maintains by avoiding *appearance*, or by keeping art at "arm's length." Fried discusses this "grip" in *Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland—Some Notes on Not Composing* (The Lugano Review, 1965/III-IV). What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely being himself theatrical. He dreads "distance" because that would force him to become aware of the role he is playing. His sense of intimacy would be annihilated by the "God" Jonathan Edwards feared so much. Fried, the orthodox modernist, the keeper of the gospel of Clement Greenberg has been "struck by Tony Smith," the agent of endlessness. Fried has declared his sacred duty to modernism and will now make combat with what Jorge Luis Borges calls "the numerous Hydra (the swamp monster which amounts to a prefiguration or emblem of geometric progressions)...", in other words "Judd's Specific Objects, and Morris's gestalts or unitary forms, Smith's cube..." This atemporal world threatens Fried's present state of temporal grace—his "presentness." The terrors of infinity are taking over the mind of Michael Fried. Corrupt appearances of endlessness worse than any known Evil. A radical skepticism, known only to the dreadful "literalists" is making inroads into intimate "shapehood." Non-durational labyrinths of time are infecting his brain with eternity. Fried, the Marxist saint, shall not be tempted into this awful sensibility, instead he will cling for dear life to the "surfaces" of Jules Olitski's *Bunga*. Better one million *Bungas* than one "specific object." Yet, little known "specific demons" are at this moment, I want to say, "breaking the fingers" of Fried's grip on *Bunga*. This "harrowing" of hellish objecthood is causing modernity much vexation and turmoil—not to say "nashing of teeth."

At any rate, eternity brings about the dissolution of belief in temporal histories, empires, revolutions, and counter-revolutions—all becomes ephemeral and in a sense unreal, even the universe loses its reality. Nature gives way to the incalculable cycles of nonduration. Eternal time is the result of skepticism, not belief. Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—*ad infinitum*. Every war is a battle with reflections. What Michael Fried attacks is what he is. He is a naturalist who attacks natural time. Could it be there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried? Consider a subdivided progression of "Frieds" on millions of stages.

— Robert Smithson. New York City