PART FOUR

IDENTITY AND SUBJECTS, OBJECTS, AND LANGUAGE:
CONCLUDING REMARKS AS A PREAMBLE TO AN
ESSENTIALIST INVESTIGATION OF THE LIMITS
OF ABSTRACTION

Introduction

1. Preliminary observations

1.1. Abstraction and subjects

Abstraction to this point in art history has for the most part con-
centrated on the properties of the object to the virtual exclusion of
the properties of the subject, and by this I mean that the subject’s
relevance to the object has largely been viewed as an implicit rela-
tionship. As a result, the whole formed by the conscious subject and
the object of consciousness has not been directly investigated.

The previous assertion may sound hyperbolic and incorrect as it
stands since the nature of the object—the way it is designed at the
time at which it is designed—is purposely constructed by the artist
in a certain way to engage the observer epistemologically and not
just aesthetically. That is, the object is constructed and presented in
such a way that the observer knows what the object is in under-
standing that it is to be understood to be a work of art, and, in
knowing what the object is in this way, he is epistemologically related
to it. He is also epistemologically related to the object in knowing
which object it is that is to be understood to be this particular work
of art. In addition, it is certainly not true that artworks in general
have merely concentrated on the properties of the visual object or
have only been concerned to investigate the formal possibilities of
perceptual surfaces. Thus if we look at Las Meninas purely formally,
attending to the presence of “significant form” within it, then we
miss much of the cerebral character that Velásquez intended the
work to have. And Goya’s The Third of May, 1808 and Picasso’s
part four

Guernica are examples of works that concern the observer’s knowledge of history in addition to his appreciation of composition and color. Even more ostensibly formal objects such as the paintings that form Richard Diebenkorn’s Ocean Park series concern the subject’s understanding of art history and how Diebenkorn’s work relates to earlier paintings by Matisse, for instance; and seeing the paintings in a certain way depends on knowing that Diebenkorn saw himself, temperamentally at least, as a landscape painter. Thus what we see when we look at art is not determined solely by the visual properties of the object that our developed aesthetic sensibility can appreciate, but includes knowledge that we bring to the work, and which knowledge the work may directly or indirectly address in certain ways. I am not maintaining then that artists have always focused on the properties of the object to the neglect of the properties of the subject and things beyond the surface of the canvas. I only maintain that the properties of subjects and objects and the relations that hold between them in an artistic complex have not previously been addressed in an Essentialist manner, and hence have not been used to investigate the limits of Abstraction in art.¹

Investigations of ways in which the subject could be relevant to the object occurred with works of Minimalism and Conceptualism, and forms the basis of Modernist arguments against what Michael Fried calls “theatricality.”² The purpose of painting for Fried is to “defeat theater,” but such a victory can only be had by ignoring certain fundamental aspects of the subject’s relation to any object on which an artwork is relevantly dependent. It is to concentrate on one side of the complex epistemo-aesthetic whole of which subject

² See Fried, Michael “Art and Objecthood.” Minimalism as decried by Fried actually reflects to a greater, though incomplete, extent elements of Essentialism than does Modernism in the way in which Minimalist objects relate the subjects who apprehend them to the space in which that apprehension occurs, and, in doing so, draw attention to the subject’s relation to the object. See Robert Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture,” pp. 222–235 in the same volume. Although Minimalist sculpture is important in drawing attention to the apprehension of its objects, and apprehension is an ineliminable element of an artistic complex, it is not as Abstract as other objects that are possible to make since space can be eliminated from an artwork, or from being a property of an object that is meant to be a work of art.