Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before - by: Michael Fried
A Review by: Rachel Wolfe

Whether the book is held in the hands of someone with ten years, ten days or even ten minutes interest in photography, Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* is an excellent foundation for the understanding, contemplation and critique of contemporary photography.

Fried carefully guides readers through his intensive thought processes while delving right into the influential roles and works of artists such as Jeff Wall, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, Cindy Sherman, Luc Delahaye, Rindeke Dijkstra, Patrick Faigenbaum, Beat Streuli, Philip-Lora diCorcia, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, James Wellings, Roland Fischer, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. The works of these artists, and more, play informative and integral roles in each of the ten chapters. Analyzing the accurate photographic reproductions, Fried highlights and explores, in exhaustive detail, the works themselves and provides an abundance of support by widely accepted art history references, quotations and conversations with the artists, excerpts from *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, and comparisons on Susan Sontag and several of Fried's earlier writings.

The book is a thoroughly detailed volume of information, offering a variety of audiences a new perspective on the history and development of contemporary photography. Fried's signature approach supports the development of a thorough knowledge base to those new to contemporary photography while feeding the minds of the more experienced with challenging new conclusions. The unarguable presentation of his positions provides the basis needed for a refreshing take on the direction of contemporary photography. Fried discusses the exploration of the everyday, the role of the viewer, analyzes theatricality, Jeff Wall's distinctive "near documentary" style, and the unending analysis of "bad" and "good" photography.

Whether Fried has proved *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* still has yet to be determined, but the book and Fried's conclusions will certainly be a necessary addition to the bookshelves and minds of contemporary criticism and comprehension for years to come.

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But, why is absorption so important? Fried repeatedly refers to Susan Sontag’s assertion that there is something there in the face of a subject who is unaware of being photographed that is not there when they are. It is rare in real life for us to be able to contemplate at length a human face that is unaware of our gaze so, among other things, the absorptive tradition attempts to open a window into this world, and allow us to examine and reflect upon the apparently unobserved countenance. Photography offers new possibilities for this tradition and this has been explored at length by artists as diverse as Walker Evans, Luc Delahaye and Philip DiCorcia Lorca, all of whom have produced bodies of work based on photographing people who are unaware of being photographed. The organization of Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before is as follows. Chapter One sketches three possible “beginnings,” each of which involves three terms, by way of indicating something of the scope of the issues to be dealt with in subsequent chapters. Well, as the reader of Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before is about to discover, the gulf in question no longer looks as it previously did; put slightly differently, the present book turns our to be generically mixed—criticism and history, judgmental and non-judgmental, engaged and detached—in ways that would have been incomprehensible to me only a short time ago. Second, a word about my epigraph. This means that the photographic “ghetto” no longer exists; instead photography is at the cutting edge of contemporary art as never before. Among the photographers and video-makers whose work receives serious attention in this powerfully argued book are Jeff Wall, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Luc Delahaye, Rineke Dijkstra, Patrick Faigenbaum, Roland Fischer, Thomas Demand, Candida Höfer, Beat Streuli, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, James Welling, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. Future discussions of the new art photography will have no choice but to take a stand for or against Fried’s conclusions.