EMBODY LANGUAGE
CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD ON MICHAEL FRIED’S MENZEL


ADOLPH MENZEL (1815–1905), an improbable, cross-grained character who might have walked out of one of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s eerie tales, lacked by his own admission the “glue” that binds us to the rest of humanity. Instead he stood just to one side of the world, holding a pad in one hand and pencil and stump in the other—whether left or right did not matter, for he was graphically ambidextrous. He drew constantly. At age seventeen Menzel began a course of study at the academy in Berlin, but soon abandoned it and taught himself to paint. Eventually, with his brilliant historical mirages of eighteenth-century Prussian court life, he won celebrity. By the end of his long run, according to an obituarist, Menzel “belonged to the image of the city. This dwarflike man with his enormous head and sarcastic countenance... was pointed out to tourists as a curiosity.” The memorial exhibition mounted by the Nationalgalerie in Berlin at his death, in 1905, made room for 6,405 drawings, 291 watercolors, 129 paintings, and 252 prints.

Even that stupendous mass of material (how were the drawings displayed?) might not have satisfied Michael Fried’s appetite for Menzel. Fried has written a mellsome book that ranges all over the landscape. After Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane (1987) and Courbet’s Realism (1990), Fried completes a trilogy on his three great “realists,” by which he means that “all three were intensely bodily painters.” Menzel in particular created highly convincing fictions of “embodiment” that invite us to “project ourselves as if corporeally” into the works. Fried pleads the strongest case he can for the quality and significance of Menzel’s work. To experience these moments of what Fried calls “exchange or transfer... between persons and things” you will need to rendezvous with the works, meet them face to face in “the precious now.” So unless you remember well the great Menzel exhibition of 1997 at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC, your pleasure in this book will be deferred until your next trip to Berlin, where most of the paintings and drawings are kept. As Fried points out, Menzel’s reputation, like Eakins’s, has been stranded in his native country along with his works.

In Menzel’s Realism Fried jumps from topic to topic, contrasting or connecting the painter’s work with John Ruskin’s ideas about vision and drawing; with Kierkegaard’s conception of everyday experience as a ground of meaning; with the “empathy theory” practiced by Robert Vischer and Heinrich Wölfflin; with Georg Simmel’s thoughts on urban experience; with photography; and with much else. There is no cumulative argument, just a constellation of contexts. Fried’s voice is always unpretentious and stubbornly questing, and the book is a delight to read.

In reproduction, it is Menzel’s drawings that make the greatest impact. You can hardly tear your eyes away, as Fried puts it, from the lathery Unmade Bed, ca. 1845; Worker Eating, Several Views, 1872–74; or the precarious mountain of furniture in Moving Out of a Cellar, 1844, all in pencil; or the glowing gouaches of empty suits of armor. No less enchanting are Body of an Officer, 1873, a drawing of a Prussian soldier exhumed in a Berlin vault after a century of gaping sleep (Menzel was of course on hand, with pad), and Marks on a Urinal Wall, 1900. The immediately winning paintings are the so-called private pictures: “loose-jointed” views from back windows, impressions of empty bedrooms or the flotsam of a rural backyard, pictures admired even by Julius Meier-Graefe, Oscar Wilde, and Gerhard von Prittwitz... Fried’s voice is always deplored Menzel’s uncouth naturalism.

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Frederick the Great at Sanssouci, 1850–52. Fried is unfazed by the depth of Menzel’s ancien régime fantasy. He looks straight through the subject matter and Instead gathers the entire oeuvre under a single proposition: What Menzel was aiming at in all these works was “effects of embodiment.” Fried finds a hundred different phrases for the enigma of empathy: We feel Menzel’s “imaginative projection of bodily experience”; the works with their “somatic tenor” exert a “quasi-physical pull”; Menzel was “activating” a primal or originary relation to embodiment” that he found in artifacts; the works make “bodily valences...all but palpable”; they depict “bodily sensations...practically as vivid to us as our own.” We know what he means, I suppose, but the accumulation of paraphrases points to a risky lack of precision, the same conceptual incompleteness that led to the demise of nineteenth-century empathy theory in the first place.
Embodiment takes us back to the very start of Fried's critical path. In his recent essay “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” Fried says that Anthony Caro’s sculptures made him feel that he was “about to levitate or burst into blossom” and that the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty “provided philosophical sanction for taking those feelings seriously.” Phenomenology licensed Fried to hold up subjective experience as an authoritative ground and origin for art. The “lived body”—first Menzel’s, then the beholder’s—becomes for Fried the “source... of ‘primordial intentionality.’” Menzel’s “realism,” for Fried, is solipsism, no more, no less: All you can count on, in the end, are modalities of the self.

Art-historical scholarship in a wide range of fields has come to share many of Fried’s preoccupations. His Menzel book resonates, for example, with recent work on medieval devotional art, such as Jeffrey F. Hamburger’s The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany (1998), which casts the affective icon, with its often graphic appeal to somatic experience, as a challenge to a discursively or theologically constructed divinity. There is also important new scholarly writing on embodiment and nineteenth-century art: I will mention only Susan SuidaKas, Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting (2000), Alexander Nemerov, The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 181–82–84 (2001), and above all two powerful books by Jonathan Cray, Techniques of the Observer (1999) and Suspensions of Perception (1999).

Fried pitches directly into a debate with Cray about embodied vision. Cray says that the automatization of vision and the concomitant regulation of the spectator were contrivances designed to deactivate the truth, newly recognized in the nineteenth century, of embodied vision. Fried dislikes the paranoia of this and argues instead that the embodiedness of seeing was not suppressed but rather widely embraced in Menzel’s day and was indeed central to artmaking. He points in particular to the “empathy theorists” Vischer and Wöflin and to the work of the physicist Hermann von Helmholz, contending that Cray unfairly dismisses Helmholz as a “normalizing” figure who “conceals” the reality of the ongoing automatization project (which is also what Cray would say about Menzel, Fried predicts). This difference is not going to be resolved by more historical research, or by alignments between painters and theories of vision. For Cray’s ultimate question is historical and political: How did ideas about the embodiedness or autonomy of vision figure in the production of the modern subject? Whereas Fried’s question is philosophical: Does aesthetic embodiment provide any privileged access to the ground of being?

To pursue Fried’s question we may need to get beyond the authority of Merleau-Ponty. Fried cheerfully ignores, because it is so familiar, Jacques Derrida’s crippling critique of phenomenology. Edmund Husserl argued that the present is given to us through intuition of bodily presences. Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, wondered whether certain works of art might not guide us toward such a radical “reduction” of experience. But phenomenologists, according to Derrida, forget that signs operate precisely by leaving the present behind and that therefore intuition can never be stabilized. In the early 1960s Merleau-Ponty’s thought posed a forceful challenge to all the rash rhetoric about opticality and “pure visibility” that swirled around modernist painting. But phenomenology finds no traction today. Well, Fried’s book is nothing if not brave. In its embrace of an affirmative aesthetics it recalls Hans Robert Jauss’s epochal Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics (1977). In that book, a polemic against Adorno’s aesthetics of negativity, Jauss rehabilitated empathic identification, and the pleasure of an “enhanced, deconceptualized” perception, as grounds of aesthetic experience. In the same spirit Fried beats back any possible Marxist censure of Menzel’s “read-in” materialism. He summarizes, and then dismisses as “inapplicable” to Menzel, the warnings of Adorno and Walter Benjamin, who saw the appurtenances of bourgeois life as untrustworthy “phantasmagoria” and empathy as a modality of commodity fetishism. At one point Fried comments, “I might possibly register a modernist disenchantment with modernity, here following Benjamin and T.J. Clark, who brought in Menzel on the very first page of his recent magnum opus, Farewell to an Idea (1999). But Fried immediately retracts this and credits Menzel instead with “re-magicking” the world by saturating it with his projected bodily self.

With his phenomenological aesthetics Fried runs into a real problem, one that Jauss himself acknowledged: How is one to differentiate finally between aesthetic experience and ordinary experience? After all, we project our bodily sensations onto other people and things all the time, all day long, often to powerful effect. What, then, is the work of art other than a mere “intensification of sensuousness,” as Vischer put it? I prefer to think of the artwork working against experience and perception, not as a “realist”—as Nietzsche pointed out, all artists imagine they are realists—but as a very late rococo painter. The connection to rococo discloses the true figural themes of all of Menzel’s work: entropy, anamorphosis, arabesque. The anachronisms and the wit, the bolting painterly confusions, the indifference to “green” nature, all these themes were mobilized by the historical rococo, just as they were by Menzel, against myth, transcendence, and the academy’s iron conventions of spatial illusion and composition. There is excellent recent writing (by Werner Busch, Werner Hofmann, and François Forster-Hahn, among others) that is highly sensitive to fragmentation, complication, irony, and indeterminacy in Menzel’s work, themes that Fried keeps at arm’s length. Certainly the affirmative “embodiment effect” that Fried prefers was one of the tools in Menzel’s kit. But it was not enough, for in the end the artwork can never connect. Fried actually shows this himself in his sensational account of the great Iron Rolling Mill, 1872–75, a mighty industrial tableau. At the center, a team of workers forces an indecipherable white-hot rod, an anamorphic blur, into the maw of a laminating cylinder. The metal attracts the eye “by confounding it.” Human strength meets machine, and the eye bears down on paint, with unresolvable torque. It is an experience. »

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Adolph Menzel,
Iron Rolling Mill, 1872–75, oil on canvas, 62½ in. x 100 in.