Before the turn: anti-theatricality in the visual arts and Platonic theoría.

The central questions behind my research concern the proliferation of visual art practice that has drawn on ideas of theatricality in recent times - what I am calling 'the theatrical turn' - and what implications this might have for theatre making. I want to explore what the reasons might be behind this turn towards the theatrical within an art form that, as we will examine here, has previously exhibited clear anti-theatrical tendencies, and what visual arts practitioners might mean when they refer to theatricality as a set of ideas. I will use my own practice as an established theatre maker to explore how different ideas of theatricality can function in the contexts of visual art and theatre. This will involve creating work for theatre that seeks to explore different definitions of theatricality as well as through interdisciplinary collaborations with visual artists working in this field. In this context I want to explore contemporary definitions of theatricality in each art form and how these relate to current critical thinking in this area more generally.

Initially I will contextualise my research with examples from the broad range of work within visual art practice over the last twenty years that characterise this 'turn' towards the theatrical, and seek to generate some practice-led definitions of the different approaches to theatricality they employ. I will also look for corollary developments in the world of theatre and try to identify what relationships the two art forms have had through this period. I then hope to be able to speculate as to what might lie behind these developments in the visual arts and assess what impact they are having, or might come to have, for theatre.

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1 The term ‘theatrical turn’ is also used by Gavin Butt in After Criticism (2005) to describe how critical writing has responded to developments in visual art practice.
2 A fuller explanation of the questions behind my research and definition of terms will be given in the introduction to my final thesis.

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However, before attempting any survey of the rise of theatricality in contemporary visual arts, it is important to look at what came before. If there has been a 'turn' towards theatricality, what preceded it? What is being turned away from? This is a particularly important context if, as I will argue, what precedes the turn towards theatricality is in fact anti-theatricality. The 'turn' is all the more striking if it represents something of a reversal in attitudes within the visual arts, or at least parts of it. And if we understand anti-theatricality to be embedded in the very foundations of western thought and our conceptions of knowledge, as we will explore, then might this theatrical turn in one art form be connected to broader cultural shifts in our relationship with ideas of knowledge and truth?

Firstly, I want to take a brief look at two of the more prominent proponents of anti-theatricality within the visual arts from the last fifty years in order to establish what the grounds for their prejudice might be. I then want to explore what many consider the origins of these ideas about theatricality, Platonic philosophy, and place these attitudes within a specific cultural context of their time. By exploring the origins of anti-theatricality and what Plato offers as an alternative to the theatrical, I hope to illuminate the underlying paradigms that oppose theatre and visual art and provide a context for more recent developments in both art forms.

One of the most common touchstones for anti-theatricality in the visual arts is Michael Fried's 1967 essay, *Art and Objecthood.* In it he argues that the phenomena of minimalist

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3 It is very difficult to define 'contemporary' in this context but this research concerns developments in visual arts practice over the last twenty years that have specifically marked a 'turn' towards the theatrical as we will explore.
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(or as he calls it 'literalist') art threatens to undermine what he sees as important principles of modernist artistic practice and, importantly, spectatorship. He writes, ‘...the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art' (Fried 1967:153). It is instructive that in the course of this seminal essay Fried’s use of theatricality as a pejorative is given little direct explanation. Instead Fried concentrates on explaining why he feels minimalist work is theatrical, as if this in itself is enough to damn it as ‘non-art’ or not ‘authentic art’ as he puts it (*ibid*:152). That theatricality is the ‘enemy’ or ‘the negation or art’ is taken for granted to a large extent and the reader is offered only aphoristic explanations of why this might be the case. For example:

2. *Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre.*
3. *The concepts of quality and value are meaningful only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.*
   (Fried 1967:164)

These ideas of theatre as ‘degenerate’ and lacking in ‘quality and value’ are perhaps taken for granted by Fried because they resonate so clearly with a prejudice that dates back at least as far as Plato as we shall see. This is theatre as an impure, contaminating influence to be resisted at all costs. It is the enemy of the 'individual arts' that maintain their 'quality and value' through their purity; through how true they are to themselves - unlike theatre which can never be true to itself because of its necessarily hybrid nature. For Fried, minimalist art ‘approaches the condition of theatre' through the ‘situation’ it creates between the artwork and viewer. The threat Fried perceives from this encroaching theatricality seems potentially overwhelming and the essay amounts to a plea for resistance to its pervasive influence:
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I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness - the virtual universality - of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterised as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace (ibid:168).

This isn’t just a problem with minimalist art then, or with the theatre itself, it is what Fried sees as problematic in contemporary life in general. It is a ‘sensibility or mode of being’ that has been ‘perverted by theatre’ and from which he wishes us to save contemporary art.

Fried's central argument is that the intention of minimalist art is to create an 'event' out of the spectator’s encounter with the artwork by foregrounding the relationship between the artwork as object - it’s ‘objecthood’ - the spectator, and the space they are in. This approach, he feels, creates a theatrical experience in its use of space and time. He opposes to this the idea of the modernist artwork as a transcendent object that exists outside of time and space. If art is to ‘defeat theatre’ as Fried states, it needs to defeat its emphasis on the temporal and relational:

> the [theatrical] experience in question persists in time...This preoccupation marks a profound difference between literalist work and modernist painting and sculpture...because at every moment the [modernist] work itself is wholly manifest (ibid:166).

This is the ‘presentness’, or elsewhere ‘instantaneousness’, that Fried refers to as defining the spectator’s relationship with the modernist artwork. This is a kind of infinite moment of spectatorship that transcends conventional ideas of time and space and stands in contrast to the minimalists’ emphasis on the ‘duration of experience’. The minimalist artwork is

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4 This (minimalist ‘objecthood’) seems a fairly mild form of theatrical contamination compared to the interdisciplinary tendencies of some of today’s visual arts practice. Perhaps the current, overt theatricality would further convince Fried of the dangers of the moment of ‘infection’ that he identified in the sixties.

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revealed to the spectator in its objecthood through the ‘duration of experience’ in a similar way as one’s understanding of a play would grow through the duration of the performance. Whereas the modernist artwork is ‘wholly manifest’ in a ‘continuous and perpetual present’:

It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (Here it is worth noting that the concept of interest implies temporality in the form of continuing attention directed at the object whereas the concept of conviction does not) (ibid:167).

Being convinced and ideas of ‘conviction’ are very important to Fried in defining his ideal relationship with the artwork - ‘nothing short of conviction matters at all’ (ibid:160). Being ‘merely interesting’ is part of the minimalist work’s ‘theatrical effects’ or ‘stage presence’ (ibid:158) and is bound up with the theatrical duration of our engagement with it. We are interested in the minimalist artwork as long as it can employ its theatrical effects to hold our attention. But for Fried this falls far short of being convinced by it. In fact, the theatrical work’s reliance on an audience is a defining element of its lack of conviction:

For theatre has an audience - it exists for one - in a way the other arts do not; in fact, this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theatre generally...literalist art too possesses an audience...(ibid - p.163)

Minimalist art’s insistence on ‘confronting’ (ibid:155) the viewer belies its reliance on an audience, as Fried sees it, rendering the work irredeemably contingent on the presence of the spectator and the ‘event’ of their meeting. This contingency stands in marked contrast to Fried’s ideal of the work being in itself ‘wholly manifest...at every moment’.

From Fried’s criticisms of minimalism and its theatricality as he sees it therefore, we can start to understand what he considers to be ideals for art. Opposed to the theatrical artwork dependent on an audience and a ‘duration of the experience’, he argues for the
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transcendent artwork that exists both outside of time and space and does not rely on the spectator for its meaning and the quality of its conviction.

We might look towards those presenting performance in visual arts contexts around the same time to offer a more positive perspective on theatre and theatricality. Although the context maybe different - a gallery space instead of a theatre - surely there are similar elements and operations at work? On the contrary, performance artists such as Marina Abramovic voice perhaps some of the most vehement expressions of anti-theatricality.

This is how she describes the attitudes she and her collaborators had when they were first starting to make work in the former Yugoslavia:

> Theatre was an absolute enemy. It was something bad, it was something we should not deal with. It was artificial... We refused the theatrical structure.  
> (Abramović, in Huxley and Witts 1996:13)

Talking in 2010 during the retrospective of her work at MOMA she reiterates this same antipathy:

> To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else's life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. It's a very different concept. It's about true reality.  
> (Abramovic, in Ayers 2010)

Performance in a visual art context then, at least on Abramovic's terms, is the opposite of theatre. It is real instead of fake, it gives us ‘true reality’ instead of pretence. This distinction between a ‘true’ and ‘fake’ reality is one of the cornerstones of anti-theatrical thought. It is clear from the tone of these remarks how important it is for performance artists such as Abramovic to be seen to be rejecting theatre, both as a set of procedures and a physical context for their work. Any similarities between what happens in
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‘conventional’ theatre and performance are aggressively ruled out, and indeed ‘hating’ theatre becomes an essential pre-requisite in defining what a performance artist is.\(^5\)

At the heart of these remarks from Fried and Abramovic we see two of the key objections to theatricality in the visual arts; that the theatrical encounter between a spectator and the artwork is diametrically opposed to an idea of the transcendent, non-contingent artwork; and that theatre is essentially fake while art offers us truth. Modernist art has to ‘convince’ us and performance art has to give us ‘true reality’. Theatre can only ever pander to its audience with its pretences and theatrical effects.

This basic opposition to theatre as an inferior art form can be seen to exist in the theoretical writings of critics like Fried, but can also be said to characterise the attitudes prevalent in the visual arts more generally, at least until recently:

> Theatre, of course, is rubbish. It happens in the evenings, when there are more exciting things to do, and it does go on a bit. It typically involves people dressing up and pretending to be other people, putting on accents and shouting too much. Since visual art practice has so decisively repudiated, problematised, complicated the whole business of pretending, it’s hardly surprising that the theatre, still apparently a way of representing away in complete naivety, should be given a wide berth, involving, not infrequently, disdainful glances. (Ridout, 2007:1)

Nicholas Ridout’s stereotype of these attitudes, written to contextualise Tate Modern’s exhibition *The World as Stage* which sought to survey the growth in theatricality in the visual arts, is intended as a provocation. Nonetheless, it points towards theatre’s fakery - its ‘representing away in complete naivety’ - as a widely felt embarrassment. Its formal language of mimesis is seen as crude and childlike compared to the sophistication of the

\(^5\) It is interesting to note Abramovic’s potential softening to the overtly theatrical in recent years in the form of her collaboration with Robert Wilson and Willem Dafoe, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic*, a theatre show dramatising events from her life. It might also be argued that the re-staging of performance artworks from the 60’s and 70’s, such as those shown in the recent MOMA retrospective, complicate her otherwise dismissive relationship with the theatrical.
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visual arts. Theatre, in this characterisation, is again something to be looked down upon and avoided.

Of course, this set of oppositions between pretending and truth, mimesis and reality are at the heart of an anti-theatricality that extends far beyond the visual arts. Concerns about theatre and its mimetic powers have co-existed with theatre practice throughout its history, in aesthetic, political and religious debates, and in popular as well as academic contexts.

As Jonas Barish suggests in his historical survey *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, it is the pervasiveness of anti-theatricality that is one of its defining characteristics:

> The fact that the prejudice turns out to be of such nearly universal dimension, that it has infiltrated the spirits not only of insignificant criticasters and village explainers but also of giants like Plato, Saint Augustine, Rousseau, and Neitzsche, suggests that it is worth looking at more closely... (Barish, 1981:2)

Barish suggests that the fact that these concerns about theatricality are so widespread may be the product of a deep-rooted ‘ontological queasiness’ about the nature of pretending and what it might mean for our stable sense of self. In fact, he argues that this prejudice is so deep rooted that it ‘reflects something permanent about the way we think of ourselves and our lives’ (*ibid*:3)

The anti-theatricality represented by the considered arguments of critics and performers like Fried and Abramovic seems in keeping with the more general attitudes within the visual arts characterised by Ridout in their disdain for theatre’s effects and pretences. But it is to one of Barish’s giants that we now look for some understanding of how these attitudes might connect with deeper, more philosophical ideas about ontology, our sense of self and our role within society.
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Plato’s are the first written expression of anti-theatrical concerns. They coincide with the first accounts of formal, western theatre practice but also, crucially, with the first attempts to formulate an idea of philosophy as the pursuit of truth. In fact, Plato’s use of theatricality as an analogy for the ways in which society deceives itself, and his proposals to counter this, form one of the cornerstones of the system of thought he puts forward in *The Republic*.

There is a fairly standard identification of Plato’s allegory of the cave from book vii of *The Republic* as a founding image of anti-theatricality in its equation of a theatre-like environment and theatrical procedures with a deluded, unenlightened society:

> And now, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: -- Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads.
> (Plato, 1976 [380BC?]:514)

The image of the cave famously resembles a theatre, albeit a very strange type of theatre where the audience has been held captive since birth. Nevertheless it contains unmistakable theatrical elements. There is an audience in a confined darkened space being presented images in which they are persuaded to believe. There is the technical manipulation of light by means of an opening at the back of the cave and a fire carefully positioned for controlled illumination, and there is a fairly elaborate performance (using puppets) facilitated by stage manager/performers:

> Some way off and higher up a fire is burning behind them and between the fire and the prisoners is a road on higher ground. Imagine a wall built along this road, like the screen that showmen have in front of the audience, over which they show puppets...(ibid :514d)
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The resemblances to theatre seem all the more striking to a contemporary reader resonating as they do with what theatre was to evolve into long after the classical era. The darkened auditorium and emphasis on technical presentation are surely more in keeping with contemporary notions of theatre than the open-air auditoria of the time of writing. However, the principles of theatricality that are relevant to Plato’s argument remain the same. Spectators are literally captivated by what is being shown them to the extent that they are unaware of how these images have been generated, and indeed that they are images at all. For Plato these images dangerously confuse mimesis with reality and distract the spectator from anything else, including the truth that lies outside the cave. This, Plato argues, is how an unenlightened society functions. People are seduced by the familiar images and experiences with which they’ve been presented from birth into believing that there is nothing more - nothing outside the cave - whereas in fact their knowledge is only a pale imitation of the truth that lies beyond their current experience.

As well as employing an image of theatricality in this cautionary allegory, Plato raises concerns directly against theatre as an art form elsewhere in The Republic (Books iii and x). These objections centre around its reliance on mimesis. If the reality that we experience is already a pale imitation of the ideal Forms that are the cornerstone of the Platonic philosophical system, then theatrical representations of that reality are yet a further step away from the truth we should all be aspiring towards. They can only ever be a ‘copy of a copy’.

Another problem for Plato is that the theatre, he argues, appeals to the emotions which are a lower part of the soul in the Platonic view. It is reason’s job to keep the emotions in check in order for it to function most effectively in the pursuit of truth. He writes, ‘It has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions’ (ibid:605). In this way theatre is a powerful medium and a dangerous one for Plato. It has the ability to

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destabilise a coherent sense of self, both in the performer who becomes another character (often of questionable morals) for the sake of the performance, and also the audience who are persuaded to emotionally identify with these fictions.

Plato acknowledges that because of its power, the theatre is a medium that many enjoy. All of us, he says, ‘...delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most’ (*ibid*:605d). But it is precisely because of this power that the theatre needs careful censoring in the ideal state to which much of his writing is dedicated.

These then are much the same concerns that we have seen in the thinking of Fried and Abramovic. Fried’s idea of the ‘endless duration’ of minimalist theatricality have a particular resonance with the life-long performance in the cave. Both rely on a continual presentation of enough ‘interest’ to hold the spectators attention throughout the theatrical experience, and both exclude the possibility of a higher, more convincing, truthful experience:

Smith’s cube is always of further interest; one never feels that one has come to the end of it; it is inexhaustible. It is inexhaustible, however, not because of any fullness - *that* is the inexhaustibility of art - but because there is nothing there to exhaust. (Fried, 1967:166)

The spectacle in the cave will also always - inexhaustibly - be of further interest to the spectators who will believe in the shadows with which they are presented. However, the cave will nevertheless remain empty - the figures and objects they are presented with having no substance. The theatrical artwork, like the cave, can only offer us a hollowed out version of the truth with just enough interest to keep us in thrall to the spectacle of its truth.

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presentation but ultimately and necessarily unsatisfying. The modernist artwork offers us conviction and fullness.⁶

Abramovic’s claim for the ‘true reality’ of performance above might be an alternate translation of the ‘really real’ (Gr: ontos on) that Plato repeatedly uses to describe the realm of the Forms he would rather the inhabitants of the cave seek outside. The knife, blood and emotions of the theatre are fake for Abramovic in the same way that the reality of the cave is a shadow of the truth outside. We are deceived in the cave as we are in the conventional theatre whereas the performance artwork can offer us truth as can the realm of the Forms.

Plato is using the image of the cave to draw our attention to the fake reality with which we are daily seduced. The unenlightened world from which the philosopher must try to escape is like the theatre in that it pretends to its spectator/inhabitant that it is the truth, whereas for Plato it can only ever be a poor imitation, the more credible it is, the more dangerous to its audience.

In voicing his concerns about theatrical representation and its role within society, as well as equating theatricality with societal deception and delusion in the analogy of the cave, Plato establishes the paradigms for anti-theatricality that persist to this day. We can read developments of the same arguments, and much of the same language, in the thinkers Barish cites such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, but also, as Samuel Weber has pointed out in his introduction to his book Theatricality as Medium, in more contemporary thinkers such

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⁶ The questions around the nature of this ‘interest’ or ‘belief’ of the theatrical spectator and ideas of ‘convincing’ and ‘empty’ truths are some of the key ones posed in this research. They will be a particular focus in subsequent chapters dealing with the ontology of theatrical performance as well as more general theorising on the nature of truth by thinkers such as Heidegger and Derrida.
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as J.L. Austin and Guy Debord in their theories of the ‘performativity of language’ and the ‘society of the spectacle’ respectively.\(^7\)

In the context of the relationship between ideas of theatricality and the visual arts it is instructive to explore what Plato opposes to the image of the cave. In the allegory the cave is the starting point of a journey which begins in darkness and dissimulation and travels towards light and knowledge - however difficult to contemplate. Eventually, as the traveller is ‘... forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? (Plato, 1976 [380BC?]1976[380BC?]:515d). As the would-be philosopher manages to leave the cave and emerge blinking into the light he is confronted with Plato’s image of the sun. The sun stands for the ultimate truth or the ‘Form of Good’ that exists in Plato’s realm of the Forms. The contemplation of these Forms is the philosopher’s primary objective and motivation for turning away from the delusions of everyday knowledge towards a higher truth:

> In the world of knowledge, the Form of good is perceived last and with difficulty, but when it is seen it must be inferred that it is the cause of all that is right and beautiful in all things, producing in the visible world light and the lord of light and being itself lord in the intelligible world and the giver of truth and reason, and this Form of the good must be seen by whosoever would act wisely in public or in private.  
> (ibid:517)

The point of the journey out of the cave of delusion is to be able to gaze upon the sun: to contemplate the Forms that are the cornerstone of the Platonic system of thought. Plato’s theory of Forms suggests a celestial realm of a-spatial, a-temporal, metaphysical beings that are the essence, or true being, that our everyday reality is merely a reflection of. A realm flooded with the light of wisdom where the ‘eye of the soul’ can ‘rejoice in seeing

\(^7\) Debord’s *Society of Spectacle* was published in the same year Fried’s seminal essay, 1967, only five years after Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* and at the same time as Abramovic was creating her first work in Belgrade.
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being’ (*Phaedrus*:247d). To conduct ‘true philosophy’, Plato argues in the analogy of the cave, we must ‘draw the soul from becoming to being’ - from the darkness and mimetic illusion of the cave to the ‘really real’ in light of the sun. (*The Republic*: 521c)

‘Becoming’ and ‘being’ are thus embedded in the opposition of the cave to the sun; of theatricality, illusion and confinement opposed to truth, the ‘really real’ and freedom. For Plato the world of ‘becoming’ is the world of constant and unreliable change and movement we see around us - the cave of the analogy. The world of ‘being’ is the transcendent, timeless world of ideas and true knowledge, represented by the light of the sun.\(^8\)

As I suggested earlier, we can recognise most of the theatrical conditions and operations Plato describes in the cave in our understanding of a conventional contemporary theatre space. I now want to explore if it is also possible to see connections between what Plato describes as its opposite - the sun or realm of the Forms - and the presentational contexts for visual arts, specifically the modernist white cube gallery.

In his introduction to Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside the White Cube*, Thomas McEvilley identifies Plato’s ideas as a key influence on the aspirations of the gallery space and modernism in general:

> It [the white cube gallery] is like Plato’s vision of a higher metaphysical realm, shinningly attenuated and abstract like mathematics, is utterly disconnected from the life of human beings here below. (Pure form would exist, Plato felt, even if this world did not.) It is little recognised how much this aspect of Platonism has to do with modernist ways of thinking, and especially as a hidden controlling structure behind modernist aesthetics. (O’Doherty, 1976:11)

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\(^8\) This will lead the research directly to Heidegger’s analysis of Plato’s Cave in *The Doctrine of Truth* and his developments of the ideas of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’.

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The pristine white space of the gallery, removed from the everyday reality of the outside world, certainly seems to fit with Plato’s attempts to describe the realm of the Forms. An environment sterilised against the contaminations of the outside world, where the white light enables a purity of contemplation, stands in marked contrast to the sticky seats of the darkened auditorium where spectators sit captivated by the illusions with which they are presented, in much the same way as Plato contrasts the cave with the sun. The white cube displays these oppositions aesthetically in its use of light as opposed to darkness to create the impression of a kind of limitless, celestial non-space as opposed to theatre’s would-be subterranean confinement. The modernist gallery allows the visual arts to attempt the transcendence and truth articulated by Fried, Abramovic and others. In this way it aspires to be theatre’s opposite - it opposes theatre’s reliance on conventional notions of time and place and its dependence on the corporeal presence of the audience:

Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial - the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of “period” (late modern), there is no time. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space occupying bodies are not...

(ibid:15)

Here, then, are the perfect conditions for the ‘instantaneousness’ of Fried’s ideal encounter with the artwork in a ‘perpetual present’. The modernist gallery transcends time in exactly the way Fried suggests is the key to defeating theatre. The privileging of sight over the body also resonates clearly with the Platonic emphasis on ‘seeing’ the Forms and ‘seeing being’. The body disappears in the gallery in the same way as it transforms from the incarcerated corporeal presence in the cave into the ‘eye of the soul’ when contemplating the sun in the realm of forms. And if the artworks of the modernist gallery aren’t in
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themselves an attempt to realise a materialisation of the Platonic forms, they can at least be said to employ approaches reminiscent of this classical system of thought:

The Pythagoreans of Plato’s day, including Plato himself, held that the beginning was a blank where there inexplicably appeared a spot, which stretched into a line, which flowed into a plane, which folded into a solid, which cast a shadow, which is what we see. This set of elements...is the primary equipment of much modern art. The white cube represents the blank ultimate face of light from which, in the Platonic myth, these elements unspeakably evolve. (O’Doherty:11-12)

There seem to be some strong connections therefore between both the context of much (late modern) visual art practice and Platonic philosophy. We can see them in the physical context of the white cube gallery as a kind of ‘higher metaphysical realm’, in the aspirations for the art form of critics and artists like Fried and Abramovic towards transcendence and a ‘true reality’, and even, as McEvilley suggests, in the mechanics or ‘equipment’ of the artwork itself.

The conventional theatre and white cube gallery have come to embody the two loci of Plato’s allegory of the cave and the sun - the two opposing ends of the journey. The theatre relies on confined bodies, technical effects, mimesis and durational interest from an audience, whereas the modernist gallery aspires to a negation of the body with the exception of the eye, ideas of purity and truth, and the transcendence of time and place. It is in this context that we can see anti-theatricality in the visual arts as having a very early progenitor in Platonic philosophy - a philosophy which has directly influenced its aspirations, procedures and environments.

There is another dimension which makes this a particularly interesting context in which to begin to frame my interdisciplinary research. The intellectual journey Plato describes out of
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the ‘cave’ of delusion towards the ‘sun’ of truth in this part of *The Republic* is based on a literal journey undertaken as part of a specific cultural practice of the day - that of *theoria*, or the *theoric* pilgrimage. As Andrea Nightingale describes in *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, *theoria* in fourth century Greece involved individuals traveling abroad from their home city or state to attend festivals, usually of a religious nature, but all involving some form of spectacle that the attendee or *theoros* would spectate upon. Often the *theoros* would be sent as, or part of, an official delegation from one polis to another to witness the events of the festival, and have a specific remit to report back on this experience and what he had seen and learnt there. Sometimes the journey would be of a religious nature to celebrate a particular deity or consult with an oracle on a particular matter, at others it seems to be more to do with the political relations between one state and another. There are also examples of individuals carrying out these types of *theoric* journeys in a private capacity without any official civic function. What's common to all these different types of *theoria* is the journey away from the known and familiar of the home environment towards a foreign destination to spectate upon unfamiliar practices in order to gain new forms of knowledge, and the reporting back via official channels so that this new knowledge can be assimilated in some way into the life and attitudes of the polis. As Nightingale argues, the cultural practice of *theoria* in *its entirety* provided Plato with an important model for his system of thought, ‘In the effort to conceptualize and legitimize theoretical philosophy, the fourth century thinkers invoked a specific civic institution; that which the ancients called ‘*theoria’* (Nightingale, 2004:3).

Plato consciously uses this *theoric* model as the basis for his proposals of what the ideal intellectual activity should be in *The Republic*. The journey the would-be ‘guardian’ makes out of the cave towards the sun in order to see the divine truth of the Forms in book vii of
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*The Republic* is a *theoric* journey. The emphasis Plato places on the need for the guardian/philosopher to return to the cave to make use of his new found insight for the benefit of others, is in keeping with the idea of *theoria* as a returning journey and having a practical application as Nightingale describes it, ‘Whether civic or private, the practice of theoria encompassed the entire journey, including the detachment from home, the spectating, and final re-entry’ (*ibid*:4).

Plato is staking a claim for the new discipline of philosophy (as opposed to the activities of the pre-socratic sophists) and a central part of his strategy is to use a well established cultural practice as a model in order to demonstrate the value of this new discipline to society. If the philosopher is allowed to pursue knowledge in this way then the republic will grow and better itself as a result, with the philosopher himself at the centre of this process. In this way we can see the allegory of the journey from the cave to the sun and back again as Plato’s proposal for the new discipline of philosophy as a kind of intellectual *theoria*. The versions and uses of theatricality upon which the allegory relies are therefore embedded within the the very foundations of what was to become the western philosophical tradition. Philosophy, Plato argues, is an intellectual journey away from the delusions and intellectual darkness of everyday experience towards the contemplation of a purer form of knowledge, in order to then put this new knowledge into practice in society. A movement then, away from theatricality and its deceptions towards transcendence and truth. The resulting knowledge can then be used to help enlighten others still deluded by the theatrical illusions of every day experience.

Plato repeatedly makes the connection between the spectatorship of the *theoros* at the religious festival to which he has travelled and philosophical contemplation of ‘truth’. He often refers to this act of contemplation as ‘seeing being’, as opposed to the ‘becoming’

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witnessed in the cave. This emphasis on ‘seeing’ is a key factor in Plato’s use of the cultural practice of theoria as a model:

But at its centre was the act of seeing, generally focused on the sacred object or spectacle. Indeed, the theoros at a religious festival or sanctuary witnessed objects or events that were sacralized by way of rituals: the viewer entered into a a “ritualized visuality” and practices. This sacralized mode of spectating was a central element of traditional theoria, and offered a powerful model for the philosophic notion of “seeing” divine truths. (ibid:4)

The ‘sacralized spectating’ that the theoros experiences as part of a ritualised spectacle, and that Nightingale suggests is an important model for Plato’s conception of contemplation of the Forms, is also useful in our correlation of the realm of the Forms with the modernist gallery. The gallery places the same emphasis on the visual as a means of gaining knowledge and creates its own sets of rituals - its own ways of looking. The objects being looked at are given a special status by their very presence in the gallery space just as religious sculptures might have divine status in their presence at a shrine. We encounter the artworks physically according to a pre-existing presentational code, whether this is the sculpture’s plinth or the video work’s cube monitor. Even in terms of atmosphere, there are clear comparisons between the hush of a gallery and reverential quiet of religious spaces such as churches. Is this because we recognise on some level that we are in a kind of ‘higher metaphysical realm’ as O’Doherty suggests allowing in some way for the quasi-religious experience of ourselves and others? Like the theoric journey of the ancient Greeks, the gallery provides us with an opportunity to distance ourselves, to journey away from, the realities of the everyday world and creates a set of conditions and codes that allows us to participate in a contemporary version of ‘sacred spectating’. It is undoubtedly secular in its character but structured around the same principles of desiring the revelation of insight and new knowledge from an unfamiliar, ritualised set of artistic practices.
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For O'Doherty, it is this ritualised spectatorship, as well as the sterile conditions of the gallery as previously mentioned, that deem the body superfluous. This creates another level of *theoria* in the relationship between the act of spectatorship and the ‘reporting back’ to our sense of self:

For the Viewer - literally something you look through - and the Eye validate experience. They join us whenever we enter a gallery...To that exact degree we are absent. Presence before a work of art, then, means that we absent ourselves in favour of the Eye and the Spectator, who report to us what we might have seen had we been there...This complex anatomy of looking at art is our elsewhere trip; it is fundamental to our provisional modern identity, which is always being re-conditioned by our labile senses. (O'Doherty:39)

In this version of the gallery experience there is a kind of personal *theoria* with the ‘ritualised spectating’ enabling a journey out of, and subsequent re-configuring of an unstable sense of self. The eye, or spectatorial presence in the gallery, becomes the theoric emissary of the original cultural practice, sent by the polis of the self to gain new insight and seek reassurances as to the nature of its identity and its place within the world.

As we have seen, the practical application of insights gained from this sacred spectating - the reporting back on the *theorising*, is at the heart of the claims Plato makes for the new discipline of philosophy, and indeed is central to the earliest definitions of the concept of *theory*. An intrinsic relationship between theory and practice, therefore, is embedded at the beginning of western philosophy as we have come to describe it. Plato’s first attempts to describe the nascent discipline of philosophy included and relied upon this applied, practical element. The separation of the two with which we are now familiar in the debates around theory and practice owes much to Aristotle’s development of Plato’s *theoric* model. Aristotle argues for the pursuit of philosophy as an end in itself without the need for practical application or a relationship between *theorising* and any form of ‘reporting back’. The model is still very much based on a *theoric* spectating of truth found in the original

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cultural practice, the basis for Aristotle’s conception of ‘contemplation’, but there is no need for the ‘reporting back’ of the ‘useless knowledge’ gained:

To these fourth-century theorists, Aristotle responds with a bold new claim: *theoria* does not lead to praxis. Narrowing the scope of theoretical philosophy, Aristotle identifies *theoria* as an exclusively contemplative activity. In fact he even separates the processes of learning and demonstration from the activity of *theoria*. To be sure the theorist will attempt to argue and account for his findings, but this is not considered part of the *theoria*. Rather, *theoria* is a distinct activity that is an end in itself, completely cut off from the social and political realm. (Nightingale:5)

In Aristotle’s refinement of the Platonic model of intellectual *theoria* we can see the crucial division of theory: the *theoric* spectating of truth; and practice: the *theoric* journey from and back to worldly affairs and everyday experience. In separating out these two previously symbiotic elements of Platonic philosophy, Aristotle creates a rift the effects of which are still obvious today in debates around the applications of philosophy and academic knowledge in general.

There are clear relevancies here with the debates, often vexed, around practice as academic research in the arts and humanities within the academy, and the oppositional use of the terms ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. The controversy around practice as research appears in a potentially different light in the context of Plato’s original claims for theorising and the philosophical life. It becomes clear that from the first conceptions of the discipline of philosophy, theory had as a part of its very definition an integral idea of practice; that one supported and informed the other, even if this was subsequently modified by Aristotle through separating these concepts. It would be interesting to further explore the Platonic version of *theoria*, which pre-dates this separation, in the context of these debates with a view to possible reconsideration of these terms.
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From a personal point of view, the model of the *theoric* journey provides a useful way of analysing my own experiences in conducting this research. It involves a repeated intellectual movement from the world of the practitioner into the academy and the world of *theorising*, and back again to the world of practice. In keeping with the Platonic definition, I see this reporting back, the practical application of insights gained, as an essential aspect of the research.

Also, if we take the cave and the sun to be in some ways emblematic of theatre and the visual arts, the interdisciplinary nature of my practice as research can be seen as having a *theoric* structure in the Platonic sense. My interdisciplinary work has taken me away from the knowns of my own discipline, the theatre, and towards another, the visual arts, in which I am necessarily an outsider (and to some extent a spectator upon alien practices) where I am trying to glean new kinds of understanding. I want to apply these new forms of understanding to my own discipline of theatre. In that sense I want to effect a kind of reporting back to my own theatre practice on my experiences in this ‘alien’ context. Of course I wouldn’t ascribe the same value judgements to the different points on Plato’s journey form the cave to the sun and back again as he does. Indeed, the perceived reversal in attitudes within the visual arts that has inspired this research suggests that these values may have radically shifted. However, the structure of moving from a world of mimesis, pretending and becoming towards one that aspires to transcendence, truth and being provides an interesting key to my own interdisciplinary explorations, even in just elucidating the founding paradigmatic conceptions of each art form.
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