Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art
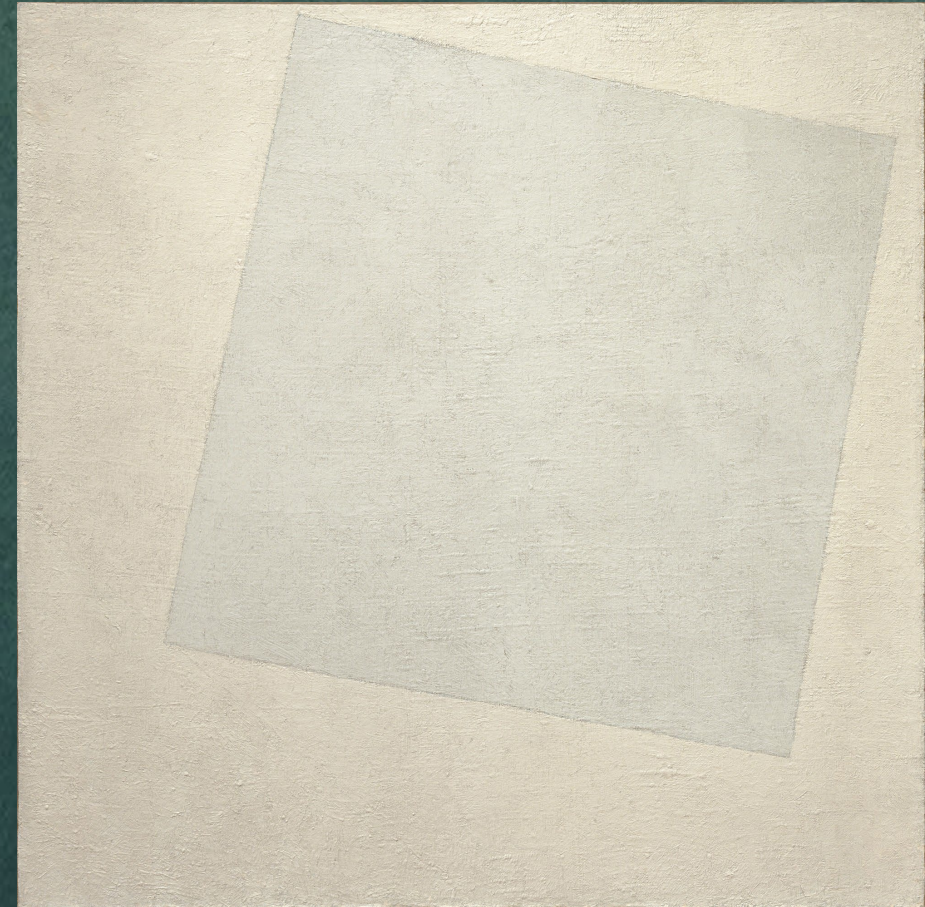
Definitions of Art

In this lecture...

- How can we define art? Is it possible to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for art status?

- *Why* is it important to attempt to define art?

- Simple functionalism: three different approaches. Expression theories, formalist definitions, aesthetic definitions.

- The problem of extensional adequacy.

- A different option: the institutional definition.

The challenge of avant-garde art…

Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917)

Kazimir Malevich, *White on White* (1918)

Notable outsiders…

Types of definitions

- Three possible ways of defining art:

1. NECESSARY CONDITIONS: If something is art, then it has the properties *P, Q, R, ...*

2. SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS: If something has the properties *P, Q, R, ...*, then that something is art.

3. INDIVIDUALLY NECESSARY AND JOINTLY SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS ("real" definition):

Something is art *iff* (if and only if) that something has properties *P, Q, R, ...*

Examples

- *Being a sibling* and *being male* are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for *being a brother*.

- A scholarship is open to both first year students and students who come from outside the province. *Being a first year student* is a sufficient condition to be eligible to apply for the scholarship, but it is not a necessary condition.

- Being enrolled in the course 艺术理论导论 is necessary to pass the course. Is it also sufficient?
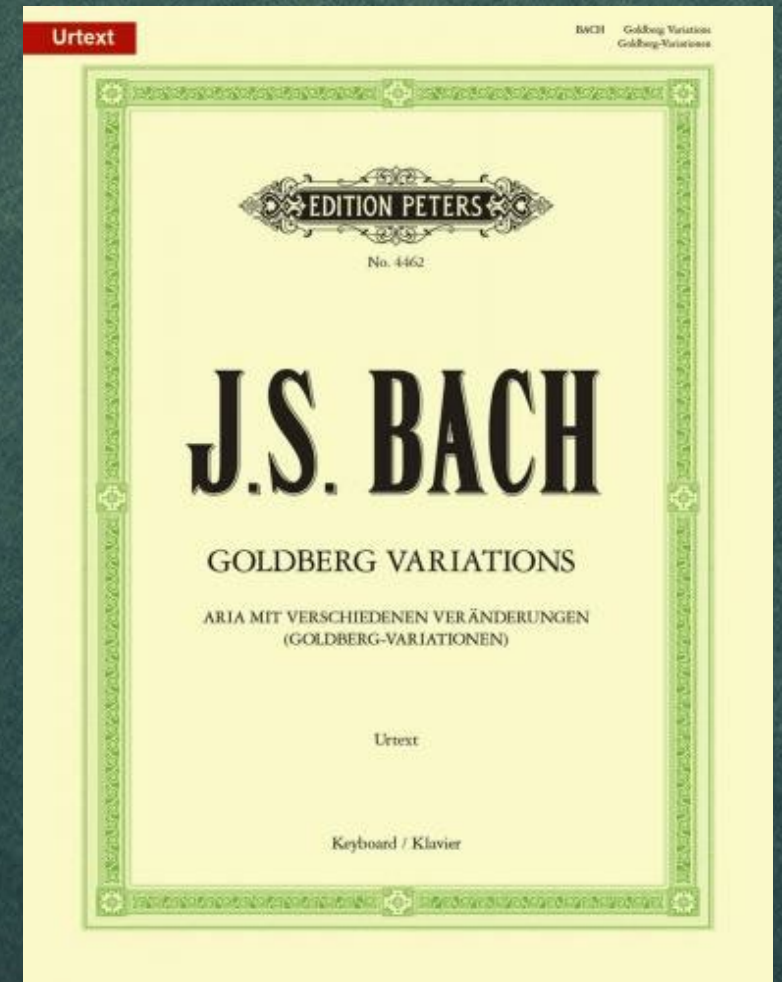
Art and representation/imitation

- 18th century: art's goal is that of imitating/copying/representing reality.

PROBLEM:

- Emergence of instrumental music, which seems to lack representational properties.

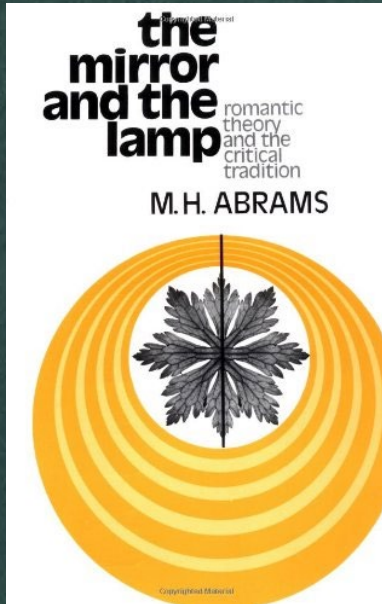Consider the property: *representing reality*.

Is this property necessary for art status? Is it sufficient?

Simple functionalism: three options

EXPRESSION THEORIES:

- Art is expression of emotion.

FORMALIST DEFINITIONS:

- Formal properties are necessary (but are they sufficient?)

AESTHETIC DEFINITIONS:

- Define art in terms of:

1. Aesthetic experience
2. Aesthetic properties
3. Aesthetic interest

Expression theories

- EXAMPLES: L. Tolstoy (1897); R.G. Collingwood (1938).

- COLLINGWOOD: Art as a process of clarification of the artist's emotion.

PROBLEMS:

1. Process is too specific.

2. Emotions expressed is not always emotion felt.

R.G. Collingwood （1889-1943）

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Formalist definitions

- FORMAL PROPERTIES are found in all kinds of art.
- They are often a focus of appreciation.

PROBLEM:

Formal properties are everywhere.

Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition V* (1911)

Stopping By Woods
by Robert Frost

Whose woods | these are | I think | I know.	A
His house | is in | the vil | lage though;	A
He will | not see | me stop | ping here	B
To watch | his woods | fill up | with snow.	A
My lit | tle horse | must think | it queer	B
To stop | without | a farm | house near	B
Between | the woods | and fro | zen lake	C
The dar | kest eve | ning of | the year.	B
He gives | his har | ness bells | a shake	C
To ask | if there | is some | mistake.	C
The on | ly o | ther sound's | the sweep	D
Of ea | sy wind | and dow | ny flake.	C
The woods | are love | ly, dark | and deep,	D
But I | have pro | mises | to keep,	D
And miles | to go | before | I sleep,	D
And miles | to go | before | I sleep.	D
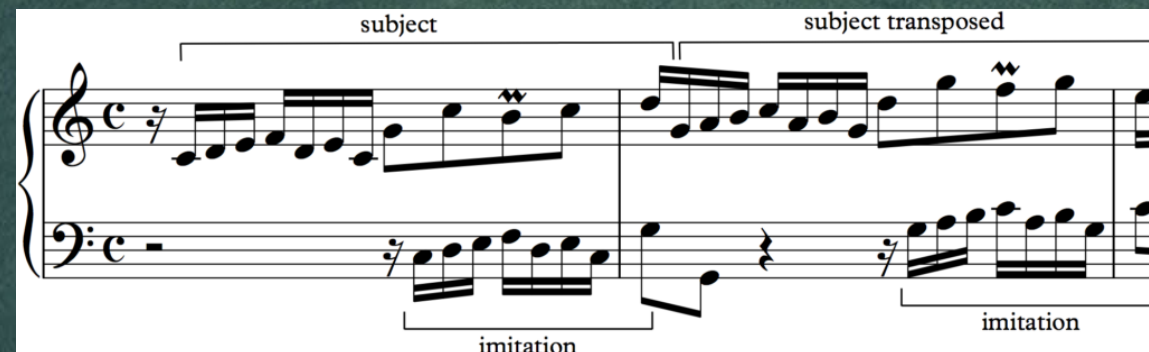
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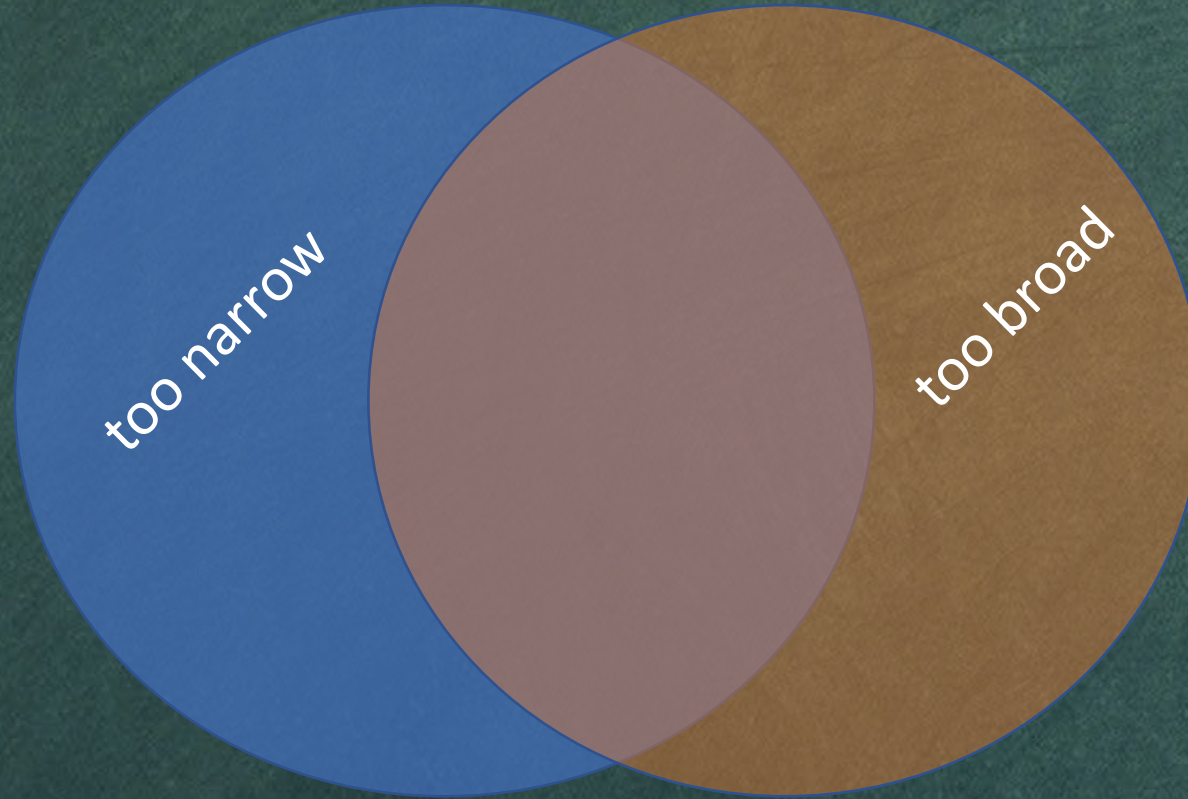

PROBLEMS:

Formal properties are everywhere.

New Year's Eve celebrations in Manchester, England (2016)

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Extensional (in)adequacy

- The EXTENSION of a concept is the set of objects the concepts applies to.

- We have an intuitive (pre-theoretical) conception of the extension associated to a given concept (we can say of things whether or not they fall under that concept).

- DEFINING the concept is partly a matter of adequately capturing enough of that intuitive conception.

- The more of that intuitive conception is captured by a definition, the more EXTENSIONALLY ADEQUATE the definition is.

- = target domain (e.g. artworks)
- = definition

too narrow

too broad

How could you express the two problems above (too narrow/too broad) using the concept of necessary/sufficient conditions?

Simple functionalism: three options

EXPRESSION THEORIES:

- Art is expression of emotion.
- Expression vs. Representation: a difference in direction.

FORMALIST DEFINITIONS:

- Formal properties are necessary (but are they sufficient?)

AESTHETIC DEFINITIONS:

- Define art in terms of:

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Aesthetic definitions

- Some examples:

"An artwork is something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy the aesthetic interest." (Beardsley 1983)

"A work of art is an artifact, which under standard conditions provides its percipient with aesthetic experience." (Schlesinger 1979)

An "artwork" is any creative arrangement of one or more media whose principal function is to communicate a significant aesthetic object." (Lind 1992).

- More extensionally adequate than other forms of simple functionalism.

Aesthetic definitions

PROBLEMS:

(1) TOO NARROW: Several examples of CONCEPTUAL ART, PERFORMANCE ART, etc. have no meaningful aesthetic properties/cannot sustain rewarding aesthetic experiences.

(2) TOO BROAD: Several kinds of objects may fall under the definition, and yet we would not consider them art (natural objects, clothing, foods and beverages, fridge magnets…).

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The institutional theory of art

"A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art-world)."

(Dickie 1969, 254)

George Dickie (1926-2020)

Groundrules in the Philosophy of Art

NICK ZANGWILL

What are the groundrules in the philosophy of art? What criteria of adequacy should we use for assessing theories of art?

1. Extension

Many aestheticians take extensional adequacy to be everything. That is, they have gone in search of a theory of art which classifies as art all or most of the things that we intuitively count as art, and which excludes all or most of the things that we intuitively do not count as art. Aesthetics is supposed to make progress by thesis and counterexample. Aestheticians conjecture theories with the aspiration that they apply to most or all of the cases that we intuitively call 'art' and they hope that they fail to apply to most or all of the cases from which we intuitively withhold the term 'art'. Other mean-spirited aestheticians then come along and try to refute such theories by offering counterexamples which the theory fails to fit. If the counterexamples are genuine and significant, then the original theory must be abandoned or modified. This is how the game has been played.