

# Freeland's *Art Theory*

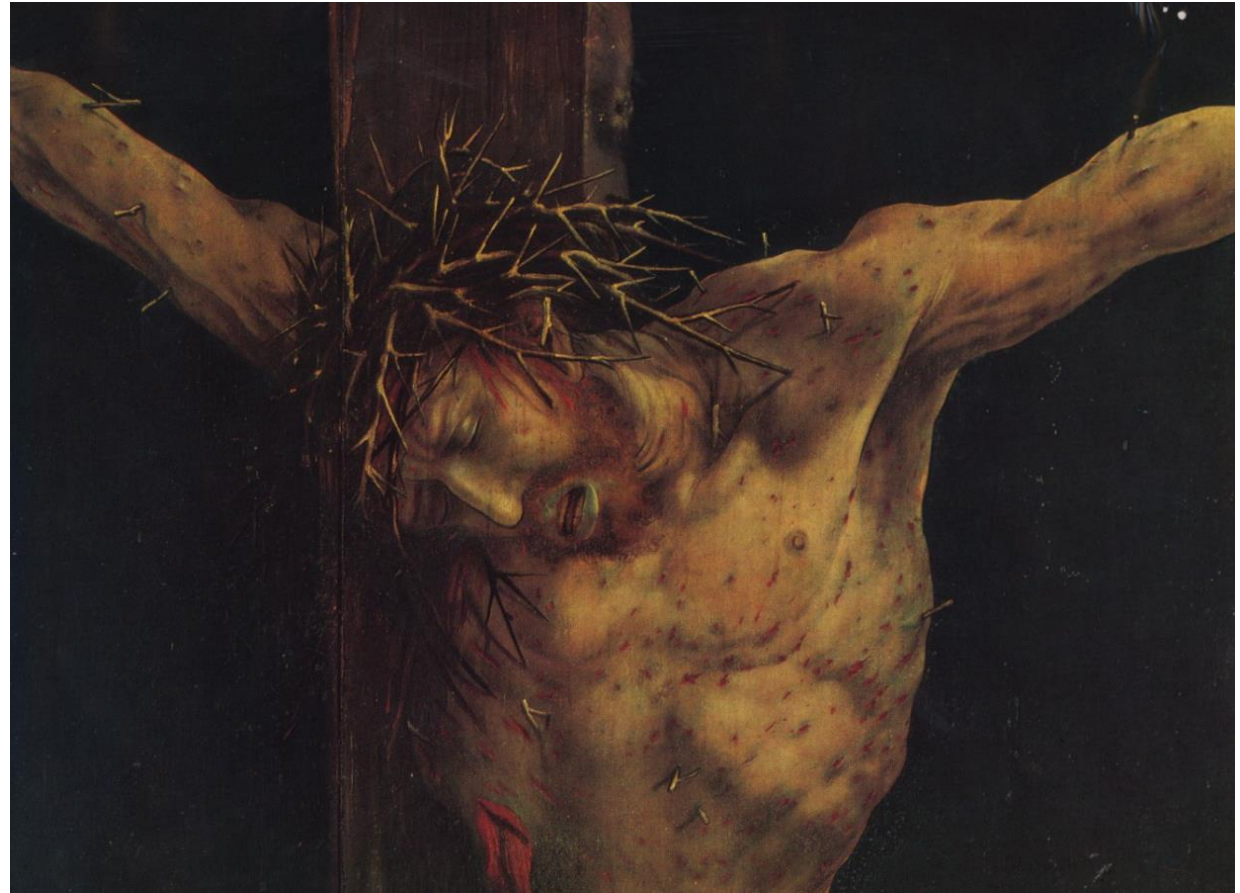
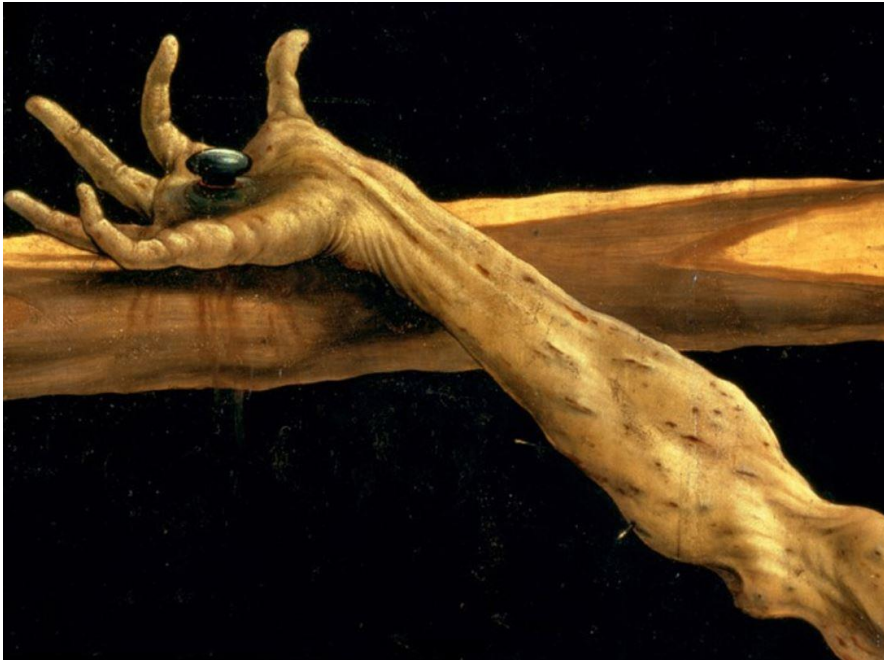
Chapter 1 – “Blood and beauty”

# Chapter overview

- This chapter considers two possible solutions to the problem of art's essence. Is there an element that is common to all artworks, so that we could build on it a **theory of what art is**?
- The chapter starts by considering the prospect of a theory of art centered on its **ritual function**. Freeland rejects this possibility by examining differences between traditional and contemporary art. There is no ritual function that is common to both.
- Another important goal of the chapter is to argue that the notions of **disinterestedness** and **formal beauty** found in classical Western aesthetic theory (for instance in Kant) may be unable to make sense of some contemporary art.

# Art and ritual

- Rituals characteristic of traditional societies typically involved groups of people. They are shocking, transformative experiences, and they often involve bloodshed, in the form of (symbolic) killings or sacrifices.
- Art has a communal dimension, it typically deals with topics of profound significance, and it often depicts violent or shocking scenes.
- These two considerations suggest that it may be possible to consider art as similar to rituals. Perhaps artistic behavior is just a special case of ritualistic behavior.
- As an example, think of attending a music concert, and the similarities of this experience with the experience of attending a religious ceremony.



Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim altarpiece* (1512-16) (details)

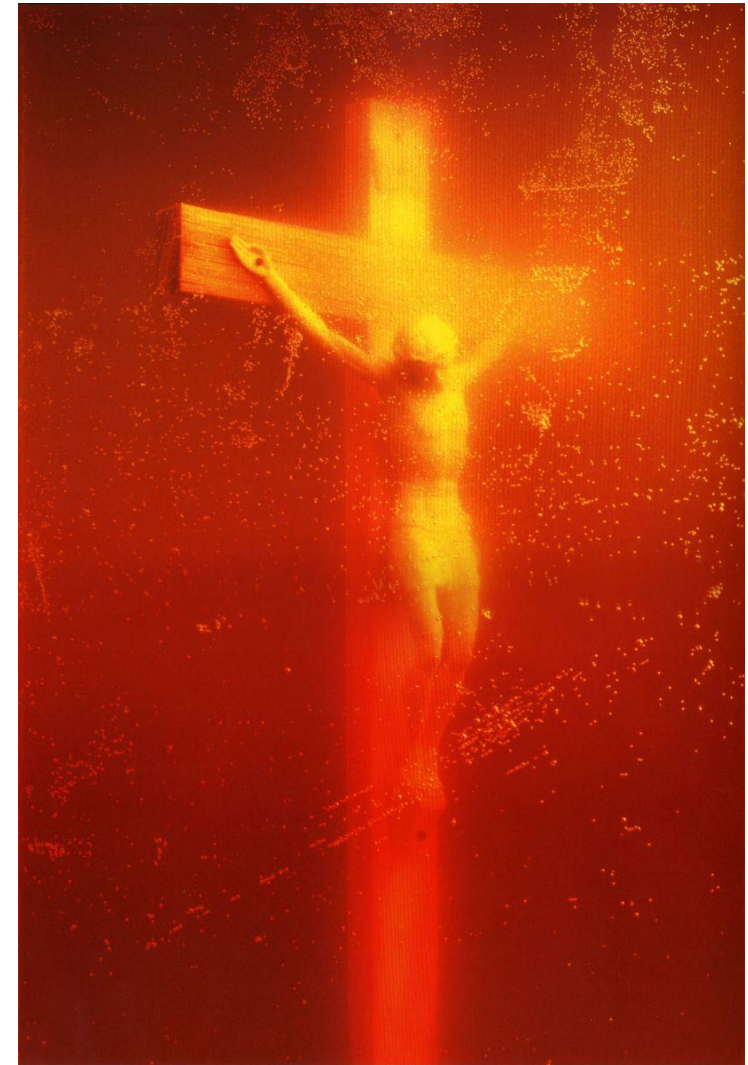




Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1599)



- Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* is a photograph depicting a cheap crucifix submerged in the artist's urine.
- The artwork caused scandal because it was interpreted as a blasphemous image: the sacred symbol of Christianity is submerged in a bodily fluid that is considered impure and disgusting.
- Serrano is a Catholic, and has declared: "I see myself as belonging to a tradition of religious art going back to Caravaggio and others"
- Regarding *Piss Christ*, Serrano said: "What it symbolises is the way Christ died: the blood came out of him but so did the piss and the shit. Maybe if Piss Christ upsets you, it's because it gives some sense of what the crucifixion actually was like."
- Despite these elements of continuity between *Piss Christ* and previous religious artworks, the ritualistic element is absent from Serrano's work. Rather than uniting a community by providing an accessible presentation of religious meaning, the work is ambiguous, divisive, and open to interpretation.



Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ* (1987)

Serrano's quotes are taken from: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/03/andres-serrano-interview-donald-trump-piss-christ>

# Aesthetic formalism

- If a theory of art as ritual cannot account for everything we call ‘art’, it might then be that the distinctive feature that sets apart artworks from other objects is found in the way they appear to those who appreciate them.
- This view is generally called **formalism** (形式主义). Formalist aesthetics holds that artworks are not valuable because of the function they have or the message they convey, but rather because they have certain appealing perceptual features.
- Freeland discusses Kant as a classical example of formalism in Western aesthetics. It is worth pointing out that this formalist interpretation of Kant’s views was very influential over the course of Western philosophy of art, but it is now challenged.

# Classical Western aesthetics: Kant

- Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) *Critique of Judgement* (1790) is a foundational book in Western aesthetics.
- Kant distinguishing between the **pleasurable** and the **beautiful**.
- The pleasurable depends on a subjective reaction of pleasure to a given object, but does not presuppose universal agreement – for example, I like vanilla ice-cream, but I do not expect anyone to do so.
- The **judgement of taste** (品味/趣味的判断) is the type of judgement that ascribes **beauty** to an object. When we judge an object to be beautiful, we feel a kind of pleasure, but we also expect anyone to be able, in the right conditions, to have the same experience.
- Beauty, in the the sense just described, is ascribed to both natural objects and human-made objects, such as artworks.



# Classical Western aesthetics: Kant

- How can the judgement of taste aim at universality, if it is based on a subjective reaction of pleasure?
- Kant distinguishes the judgements of taste from ordinary judgments, in which an object is subordinated to a given **concept** – for instance, I can say of a polygon with three sides that it is ‘triangular’, because I apply the concept ‘triangular’ to that object.
- If the judgement of beauty involved concepts, it would be possible to definitively settle every dispute about beauty. But disputes about beauty are notoriously difficult to settle. This is why Kant denies that the judgement of beauty involves concepts. To call an object ‘beautiful’ is not to say that it falls under a determinate concept, as we do when we call an object ‘triangular’.

# Classical Western aesthetics: Kant

- Concepts are also irrelevant to judgements of taste, because such judgments do not categorize objects as this or that object (that is, they do not subordinate objects to this or that concept). Because it is not categorized in this way, the object of the judgement of taste lacks a purpose – it is **purposeless**.
- Thus, Kant conceives an object's beauty to depend on its appearance, and not on the fact that the object falls under a given concept. This is why his position is sometimes classified as a kind of **formalism**.
- Because an object's beauty is purely dependent on its appearance, the object's actual existence is irrelevant to its beauty. The judgement of taste is thus **disinterested** (非功利性), that is, it does not presuppose the existence of the object that is judged to be beautiful.

# Classical Western aesthetics: Kant

- How is an object's appearance going to elicit the particular experience afforded by beautiful objects? Kant believes that such objects have the capacity to elicit the **free play** (自由游戏) of **imagination and understanding**.
- This free play is the interaction of perception, imagination, and cognition. The interaction of these faculties is 'free', in that it isn't constrained by a single, particular concept. As an example, consider the experience of looking at an abstract painting. The shapes and colors on the canvas will make you think of various things, but none of these is the "right" one.
- Thus, beautiful objects stimulate our cognitive and perceptual faculties in interesting, but ultimately indeterminate ways. That is why Kant describes the experience of the beautiful as involving **purposiveness without purpose** (无目的的合目的性).



## **PLEASURABLE**

Interested

Subjective

Purposive

Contingent



## **BEAUTIFUL**

Disinterested

Universal

Purposeless

Necessary



# In Kant's own words

“In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground **cannot** be **other than subjective**.”

为了区分某种东西是不是美的，我们不是通过知性把表象与客体相联系以达成知识，而是通过想象力（也许与知性相结合）把表象与主体及其愉快或者不愉快的情感相联系。因此，鉴赏判断不是知识判断，因而不是逻辑的，而是审美的，人们把它理解为这样的东西，它的规定根据只能是**主观的**。

(Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §1)



“But if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation (intuition or reflection).”

“One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation.”

但现在，既然问题是某种东西是否美，人们就不想知道事情的实存对我们或者任何一个人是否有某种重要性，或者哪怕只是可能有重要性；而是想知道，我们如何在纯然观察（直观或者反思）中评断它。

人们只想知道，对象的纯然表象在我心中是否伴随有愉快，哪怕就这个表象的对象的实存而言我总是无所谓。

(Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §2)



- Freeland claims that some of Goya's works elude the traditional categories of Western aesthetics, as outlined by philosophers such as Kant.
- Goya's *Black Paintings* (1820-23) are exemplary of this. In addition to their formal qualities, these works are significant because of the **content** they present to the viewer.
- The **context** in which the works were produced might also be relevant. Goya painted these pictures on the walls of his house, after a disease had rendered him deaf.
- Thus, an aesthetics centered on beauty and formal properties may not only fail to make sense of contemporary art, but also of some classical works in the Western artistic tradition.

Francisco de Goya, *Dog Buried in the Sand* (1819-23)