

What Am I Making? aka The Ontology of Art

Session 1: The Analytic Canon



Philosophy of Art with Rebecca Millsop, Ph.D.

ARTIST COMMONS

How This Works

- Not a traditional philosophy class
- No argument analysis, no debating which theory is correct

The Goal:

1. Know the major theories – understand what they claim
2. Use them as tools – apply them to your own practice

Format:

- Talk + Reflection Questions + Q&A at the end
- Drop questions in the chat as we go
- Post follow ups on Mighty Network - I'll engage there!

The Four Questions

Q1: What am I making?

"I make stuff but is it art?" →
"Here's what makes my work art and why."

Philosophical territory:
ontology and definition

Q2: How does it mean?

"I hope people understand it..." →
"Here's how my art creates meaning."

Philosophical territory:
semiotics and communication

Q3: Where do I fit?

"Everything has already been done!" →
"Here is my lineage & my contribution."

Philosophical territory:
originality and authorship

Q4: Why does it matter?

"Is my work saying anything important?" →
"Here is why my work matters."

Philosophical territory:
value and function

Two Philosophical Traditions

Analytic Philosophy

Emphasis on precise definitions, logical analysis, clear arguments.

What is X?

Trying to find the boundaries of a category.

Continental Philosophy

Emphasis on lived experience, historical context, how things actually show up for us.

What does X do?

What's at stake when we use a category?

Today's Focus:
What am I making?
Ontology of Art / Analytic Tradition

The goal: From uncertainty to clarity

Ontology is the philosophical study of what things ARE, or the study of BEING

What **kinds** of things exist? How should we **categorize** them?

Ontology of art asks:

What **IS** art? What makes something art rather than something else?

How do we define the category of art?

Four Frameworks

1. Art as Imitation/Representation 
2. Art as Aesthetic Form 
3. Art as Institutional Recognition 
4. Art as Open Concept 

Framework 1

Art as Imitation / Mimesis

Art

=

Things that imitate or
represent the world

=

Mimesis



Plato: Art as Imperfect Imitation

Forms

perfect, eternal ideals



BED



Physical World

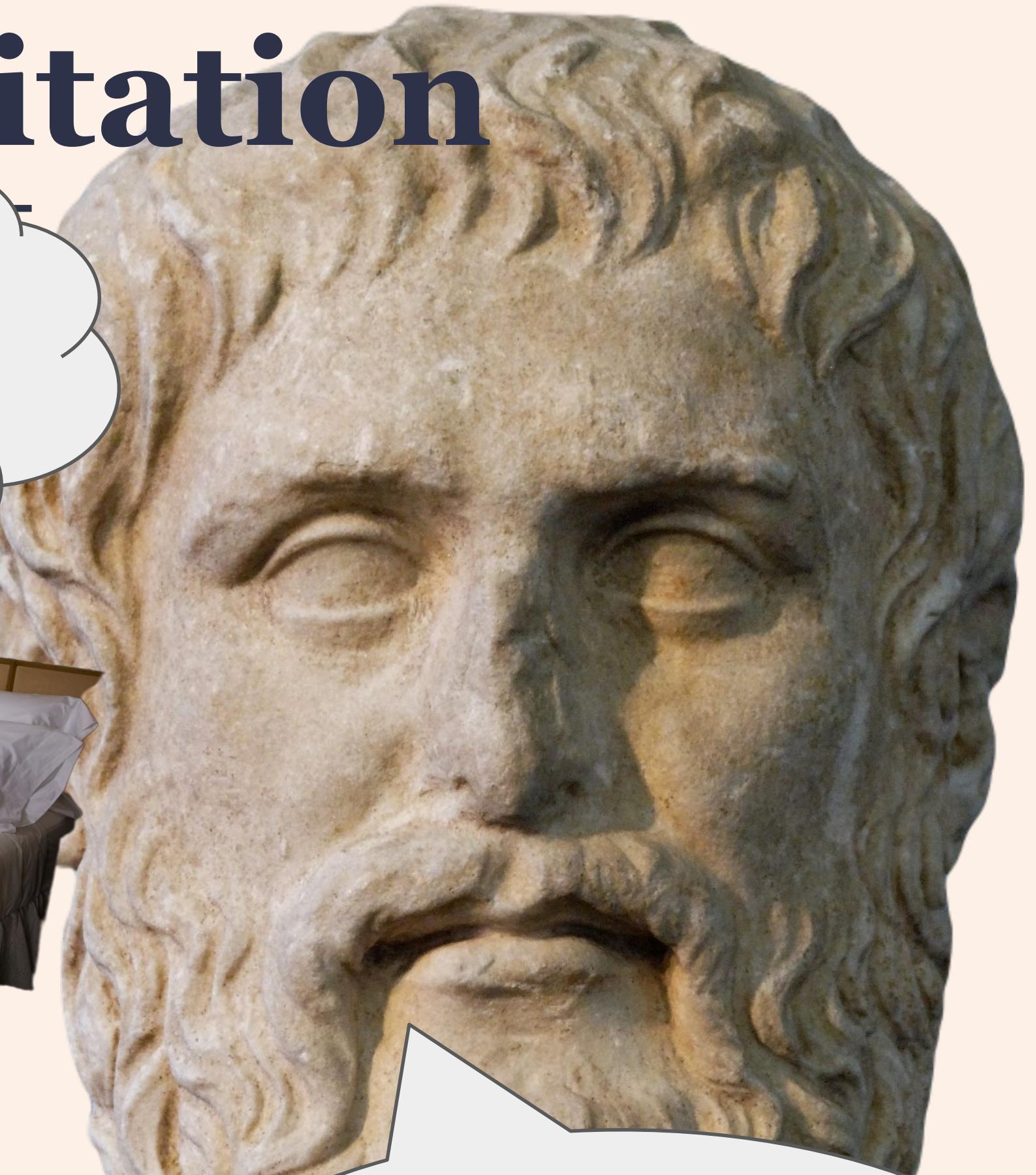
imperfect copies of the eternal ideals

Art

copies of the imperfect copies



*Artists traffic in
appearances,
not truth.*



Aristotle: Art As Teacher

Art is imitation... but...

Imitation ≠ Deception

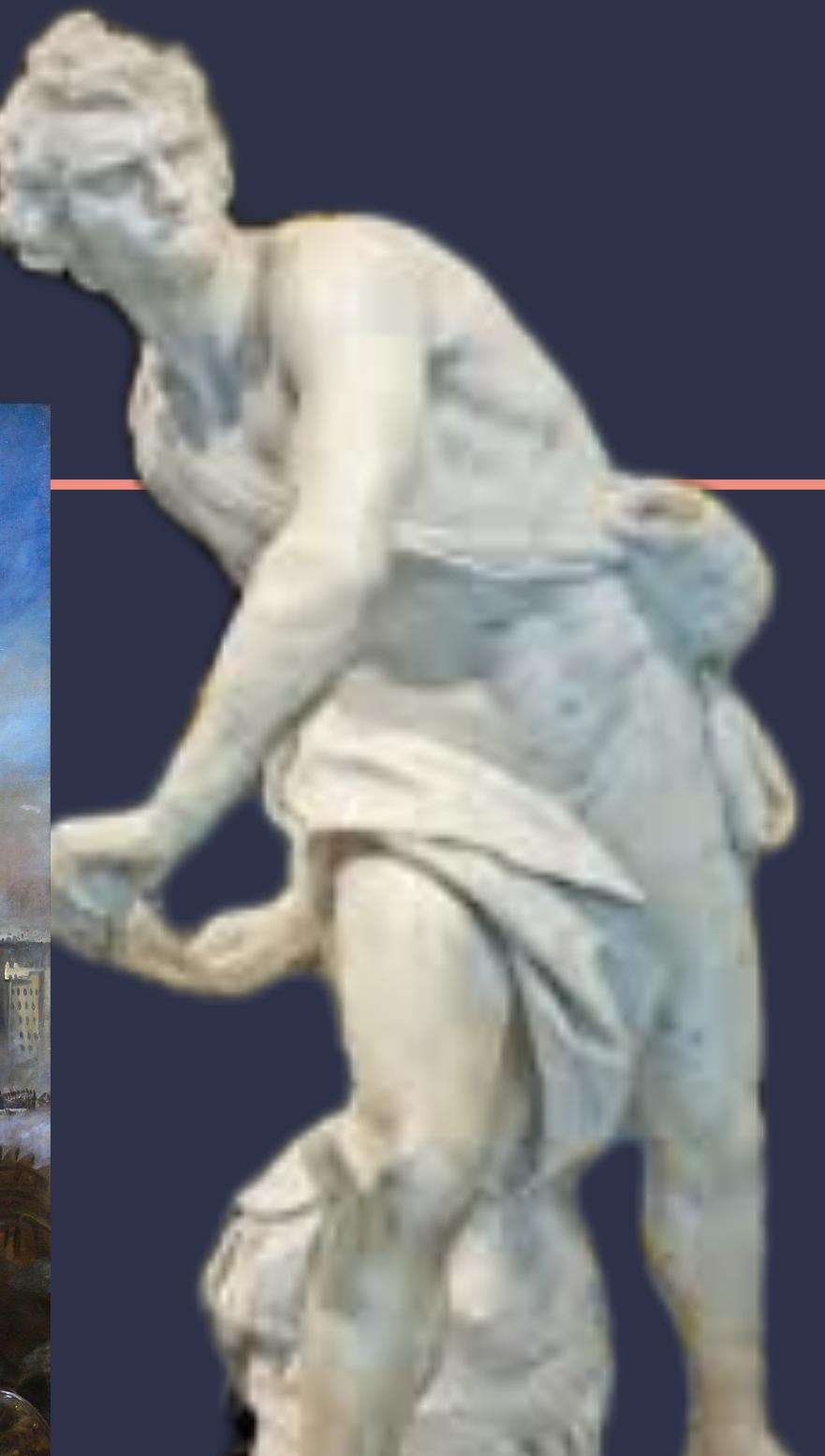
Imitation = How we Learn

Particular Instances → Universal Truths

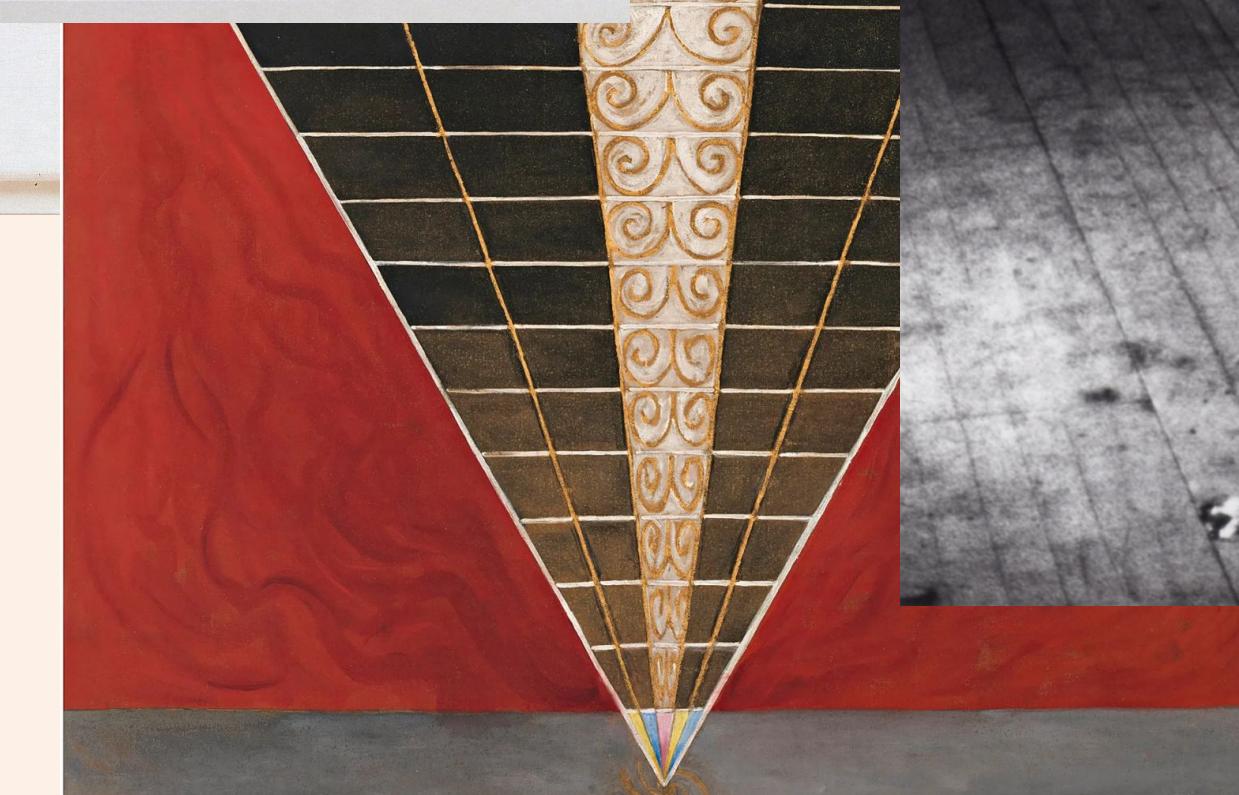
Takeaway: Art is a knowledge practice, not a lie.



Art as Imitation / Mimesis



Where It Breaks Down

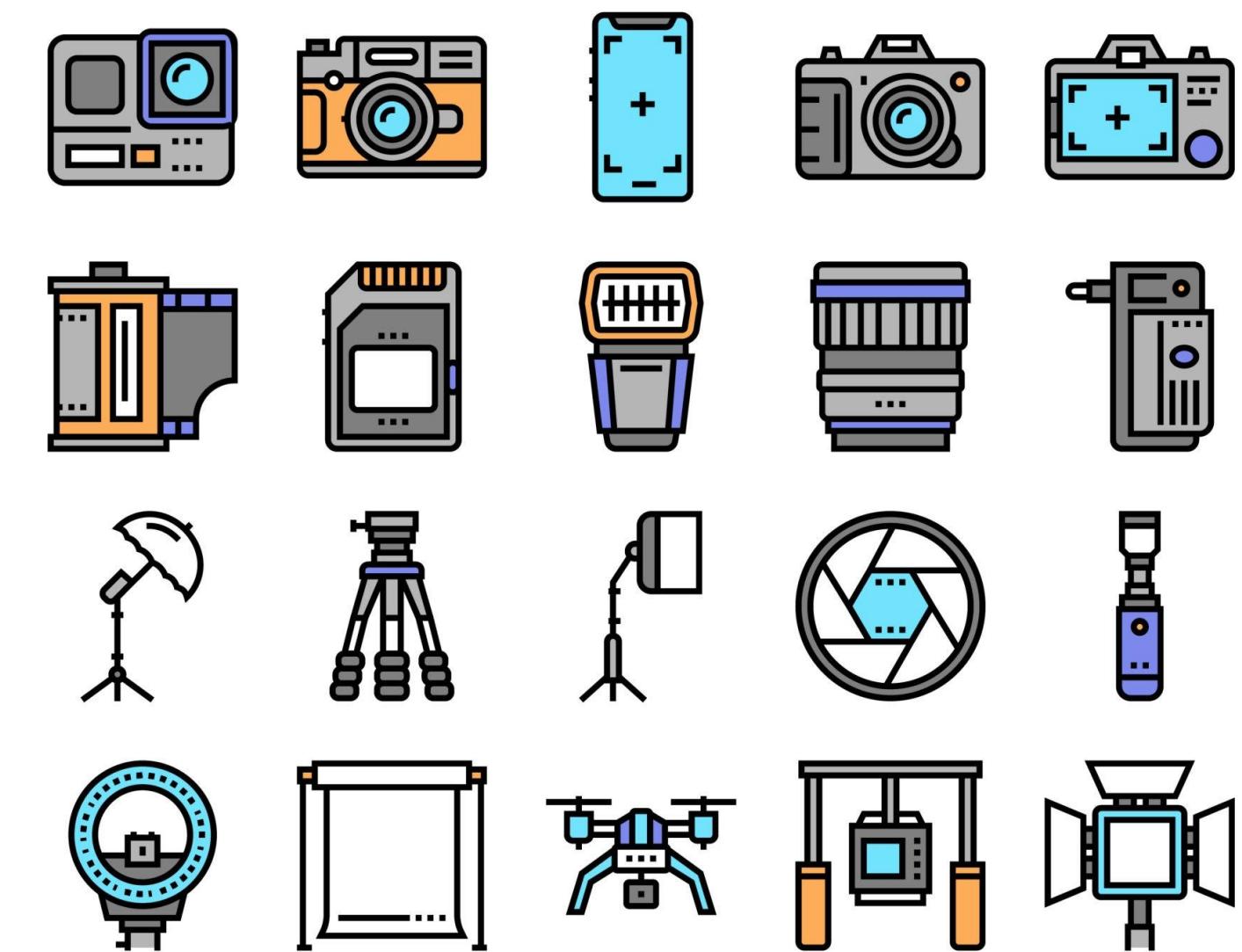


Representation & New Technologies

*Is mechanical
reproduction art?*

Photography became art by showing
it involved artistic choices,
not just pointing a camera.

PHOTOGRAPHY



Rancière's Rethinking

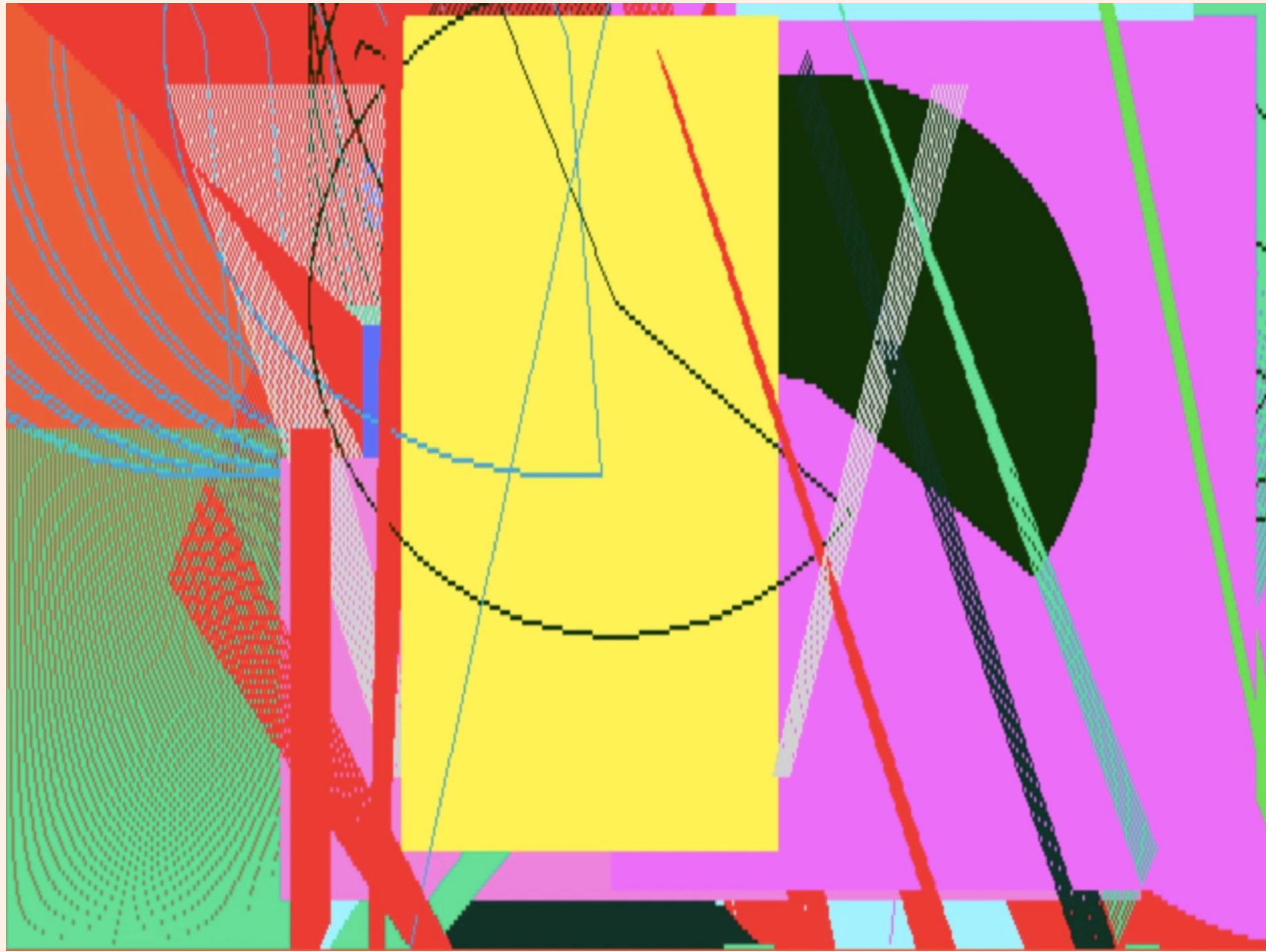
Mimesis is not just about *copying*...

it's a regime for organizing what's visible and sayable.

Representational regimes determine what is *worth* representing and how.



Samia Halaby



Constructivist 10 Still 18, 1987



Tara Donovan



Untitled (Plastic Cups), 2006



For your practice...

Takeaway Question

What are you making visible in your work that wasn't visible before?

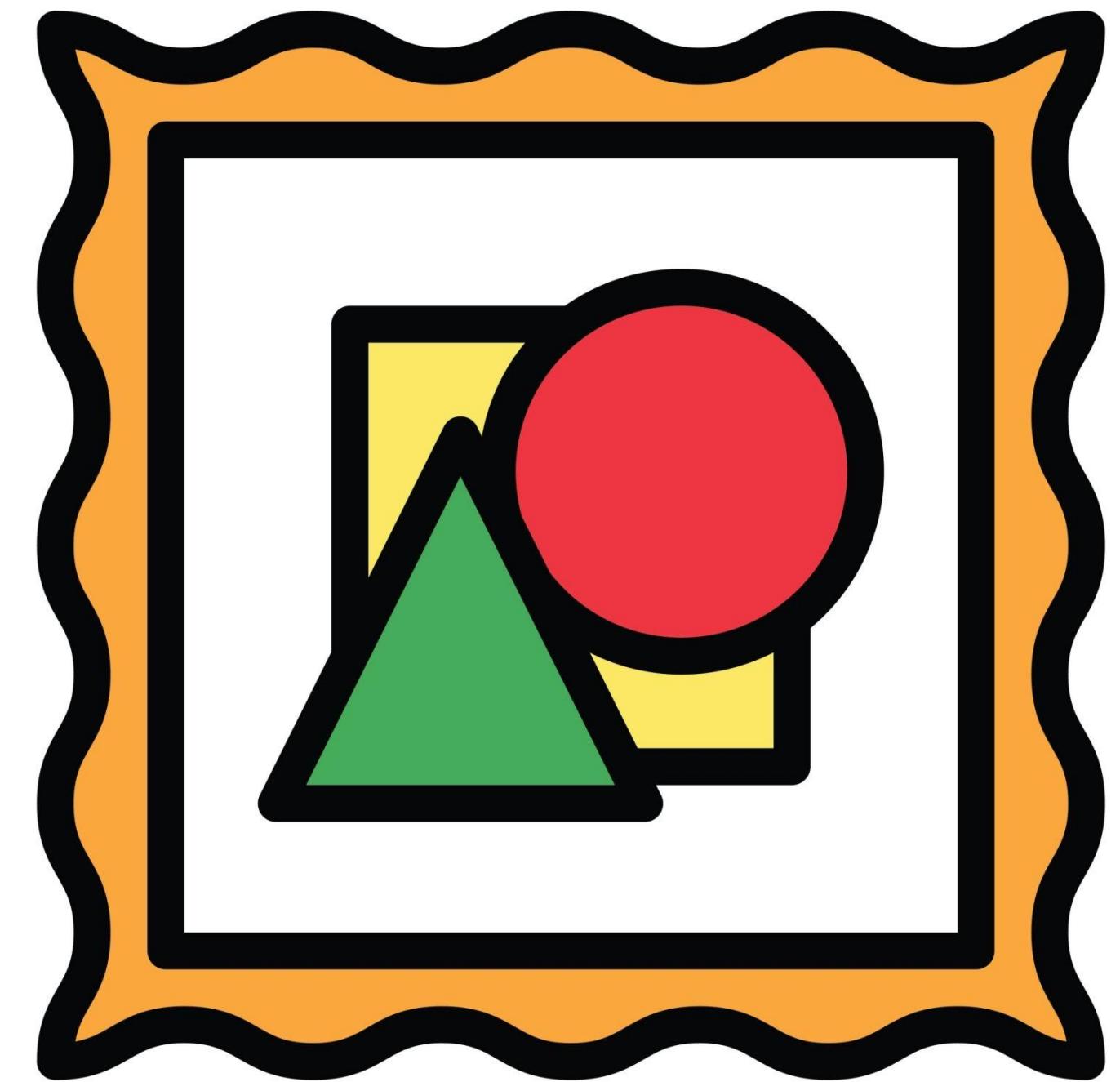
This could be a subject, a perspective, a process, or a way of seeing... or something else!

Framework 2

Art as Aesthetic Form

Art
=

Things that create aesthetic experience through formal properties



Immanuel Kant (1790)

"Disinterested pleasure"

Not asking "can I use this?" or "do I want to own this?"
Just contemplating. **Pure aesthetic attention.**

"Purposiveness without purpose"

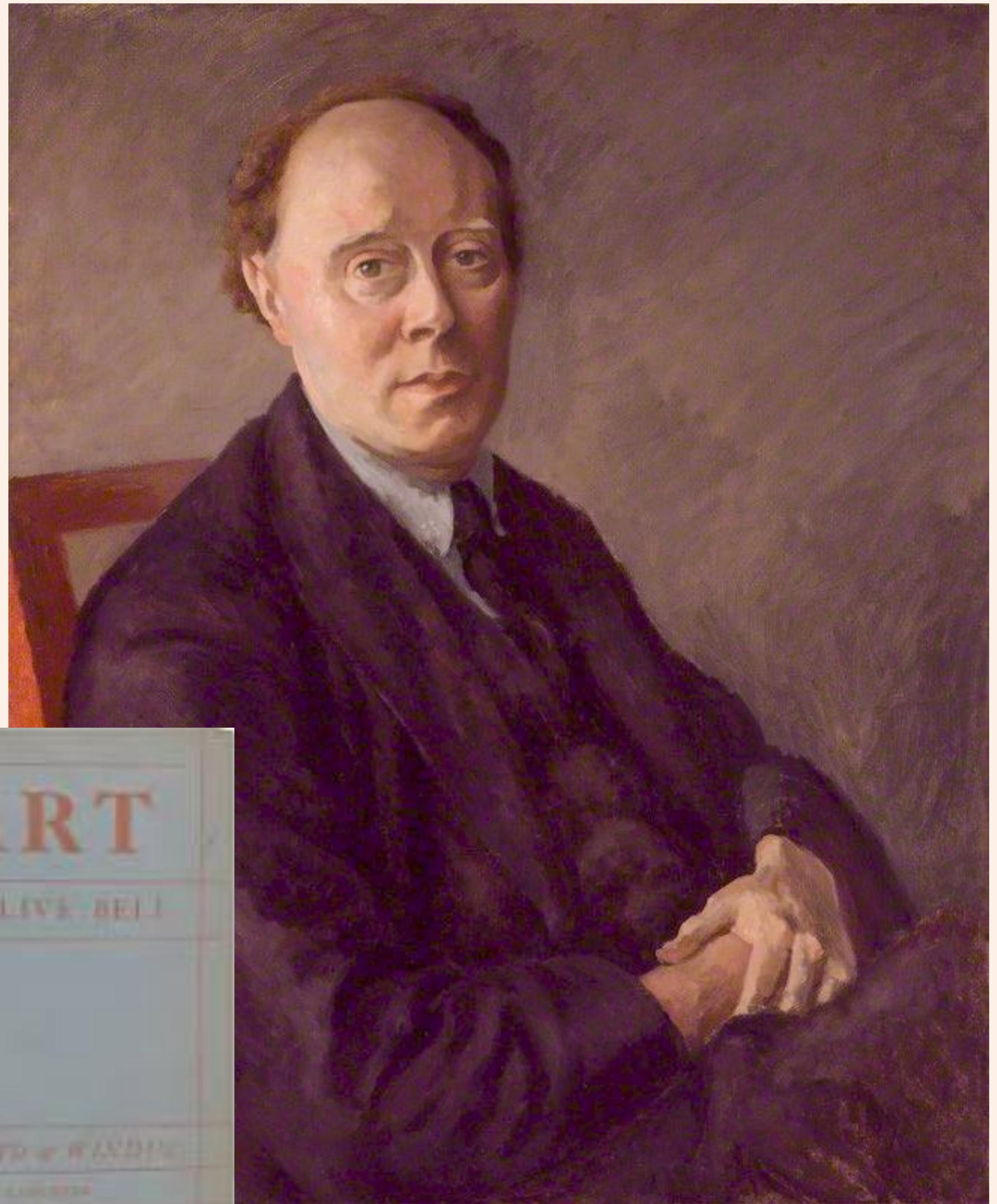
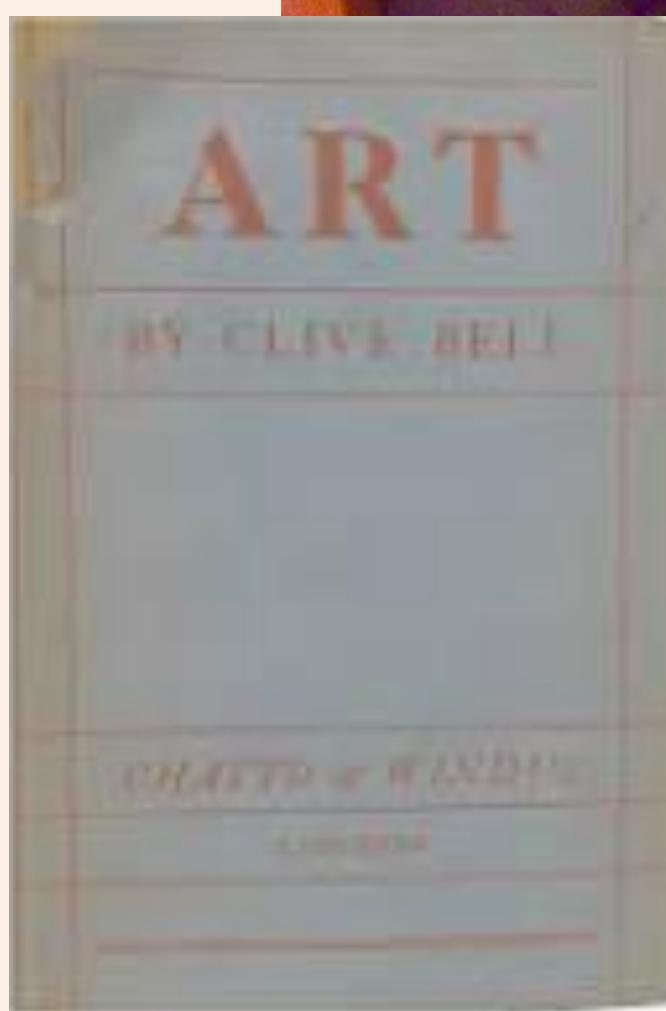


Clive Bell (1914)

"Significant Form"

What all artworks share:
combinations of lines, colors, shapes
that move us **aesthetically**.

Representational content is completely irrelevant.
What matters is the formal arrangement.



Clement Greenberg (1960s)

Medium Specificity

Each art form should pursue its unique formal properties.

For painting: flatness.

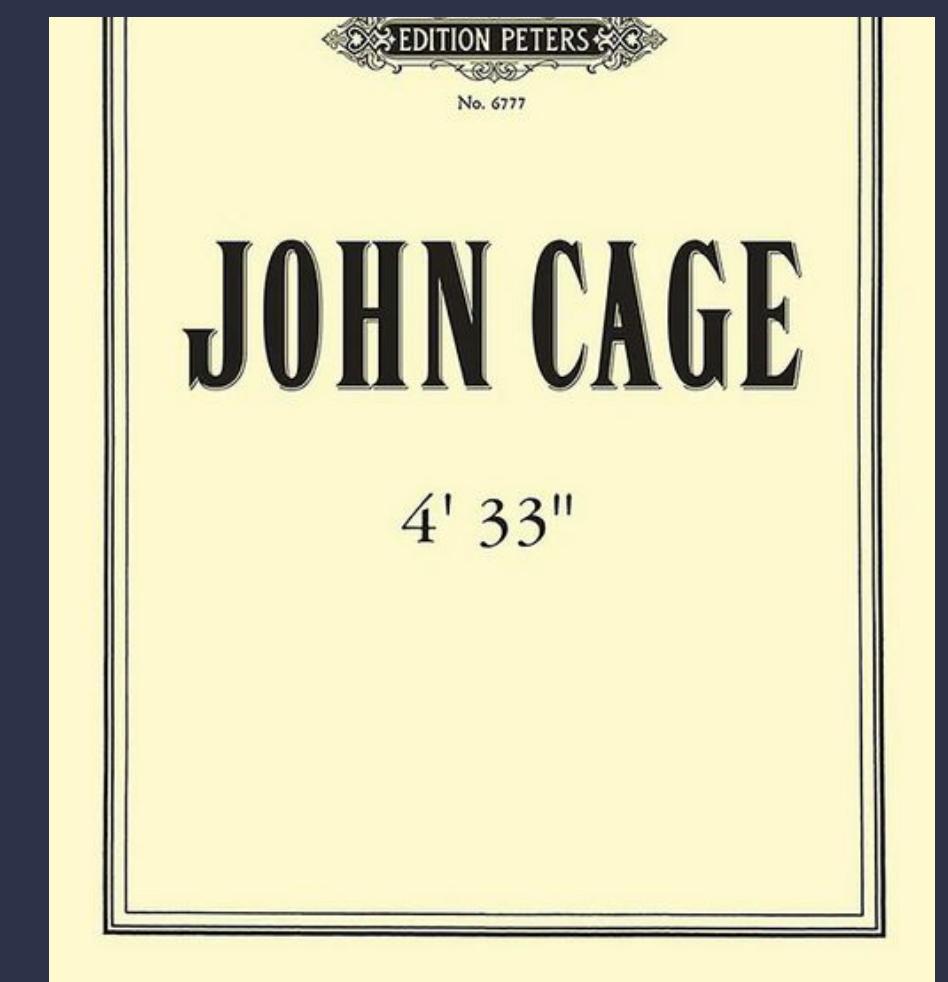
Painting is paint on a flat surface, so modern painting should emphasize flatness, not create illusions of depth.



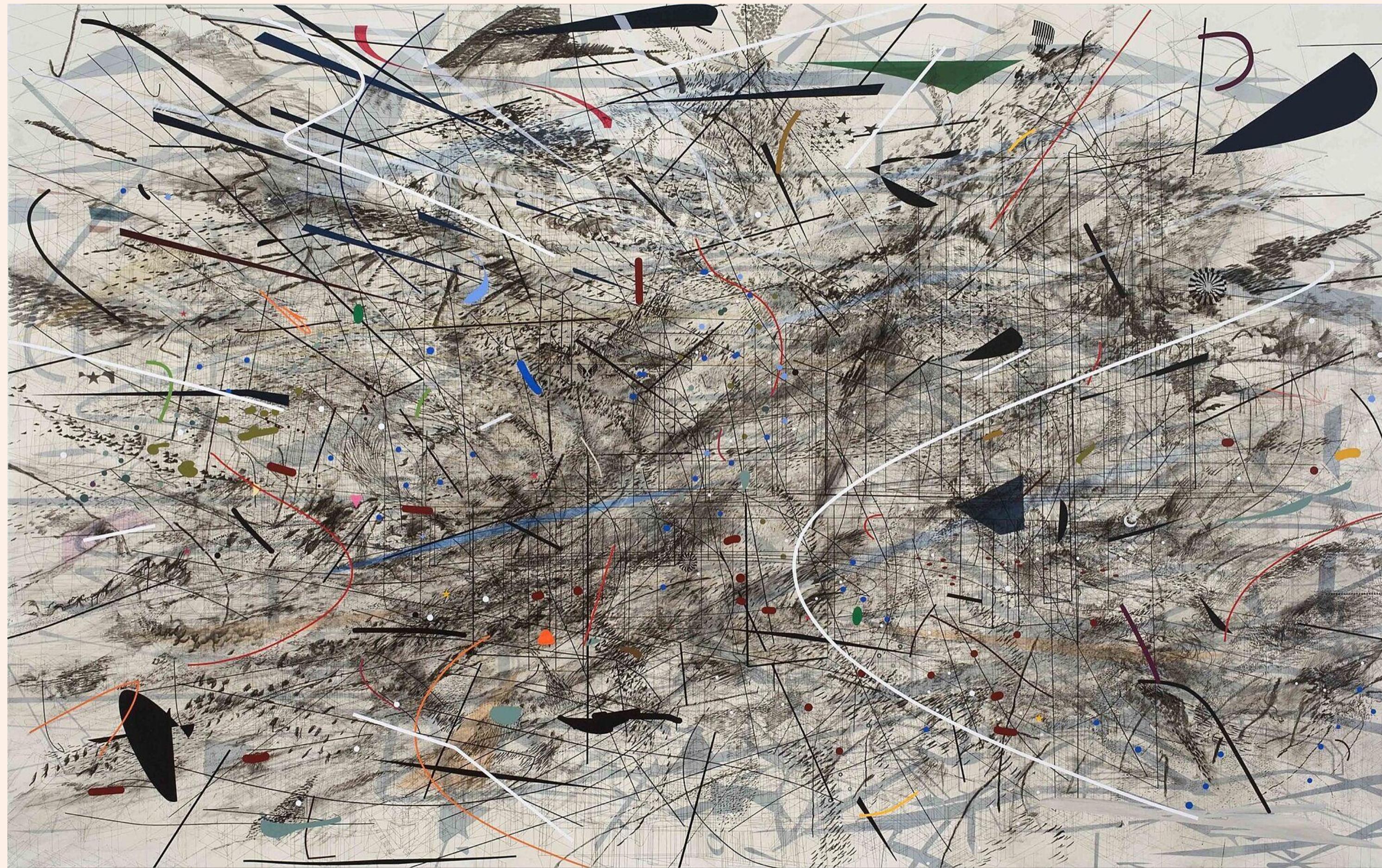
Where It Breaks Down



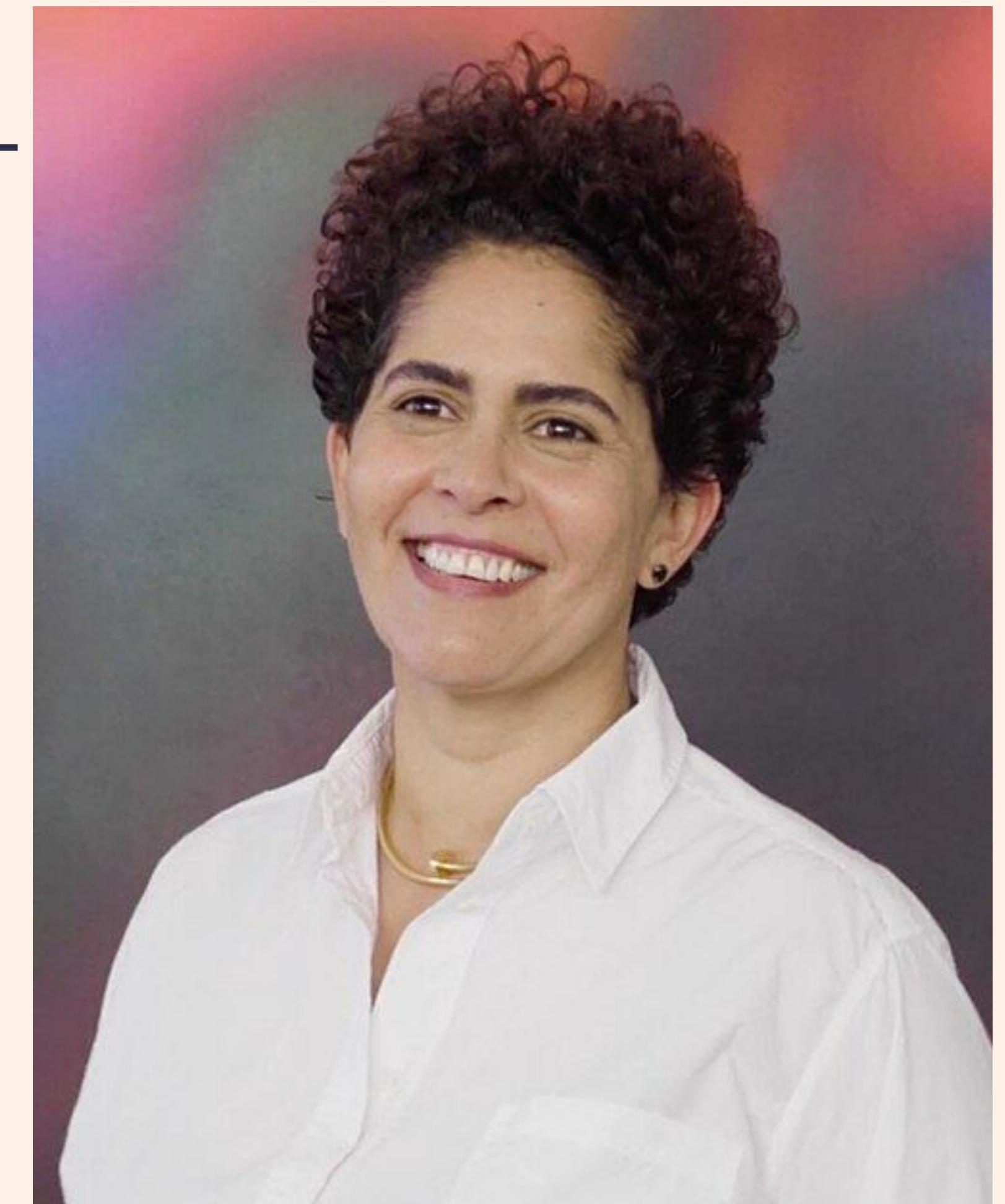
Formal concerns never disappeared...
Artists still make formal decisions...
We still have aesthetic experiences.



Julie Mehretu



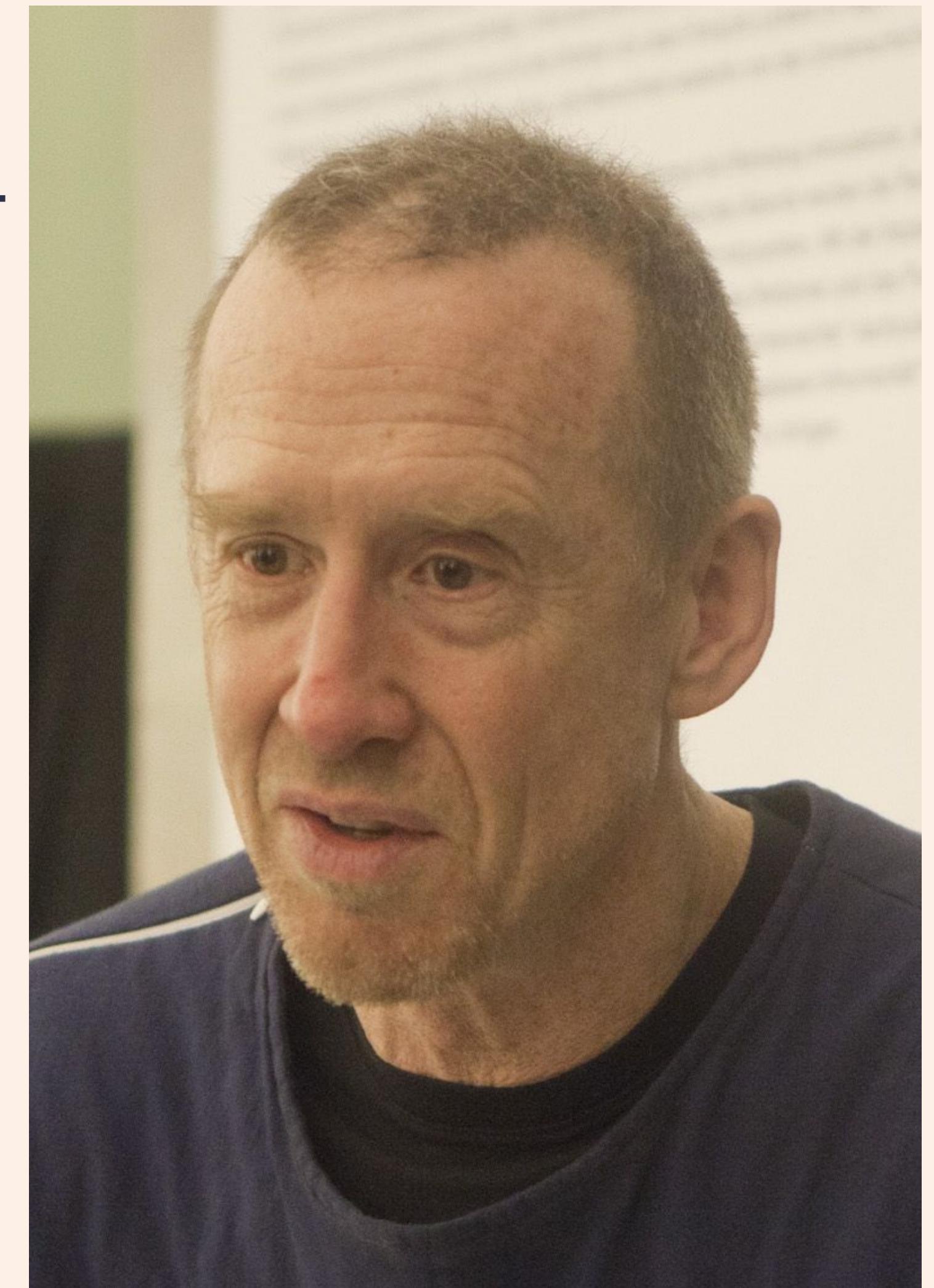
Black City, 2007



William Forsythe



In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated, Ballett Zürich



Post-Medium Condition

*Medium as the recursive
logic of your practice.*

- Rosalind Krauss



For your practice...

Takeaway Question

Where do you fall on this spectrum?

- Pure formalism (form is everything)
- Form serves concept (both matter)
- Form is secondary (concept/message is primary)

What would be lost if your work looked completely different but communicated the same idea?

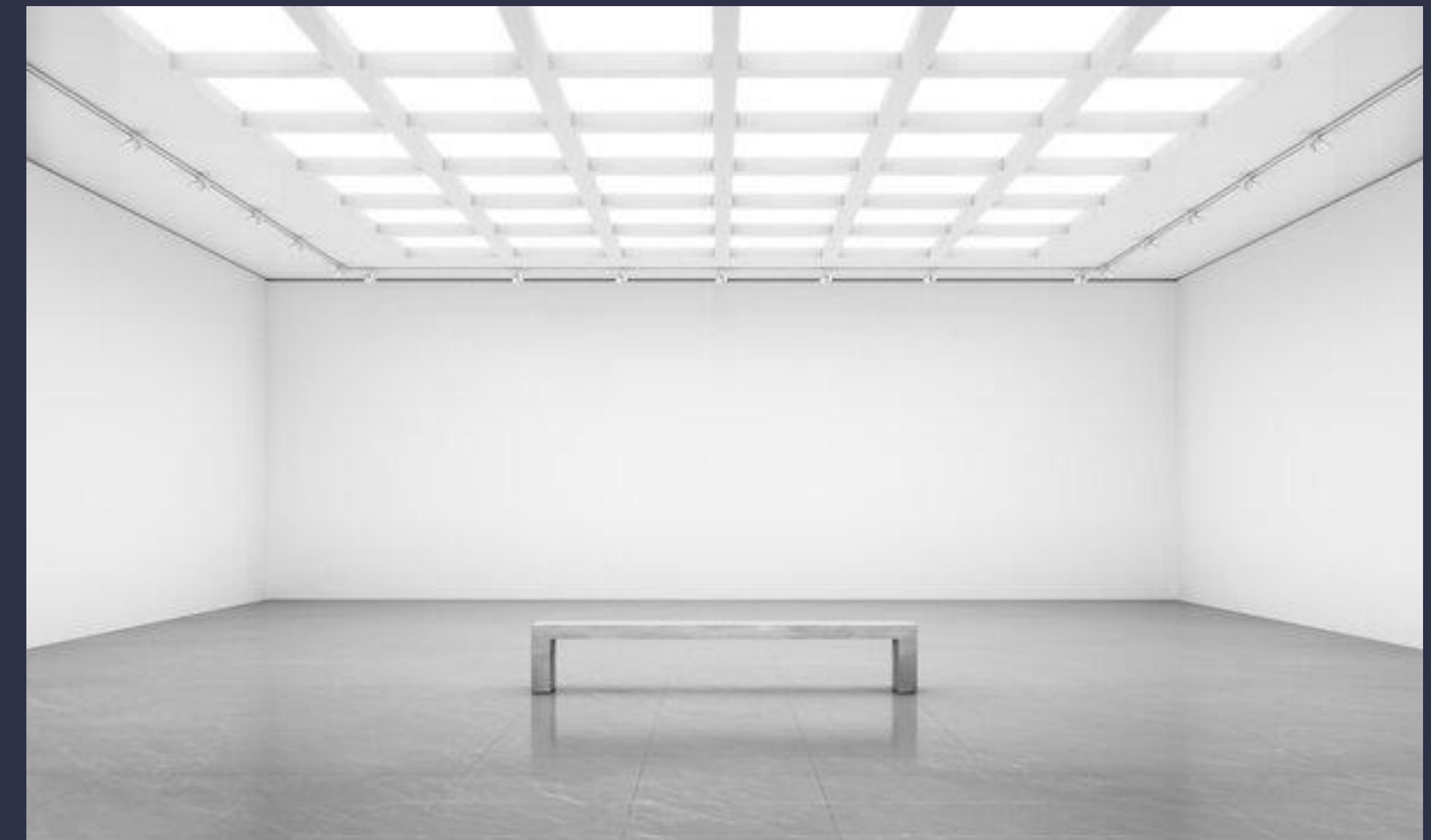
Discussion

Framework 3

Art as Institutional Recognition

Art
=

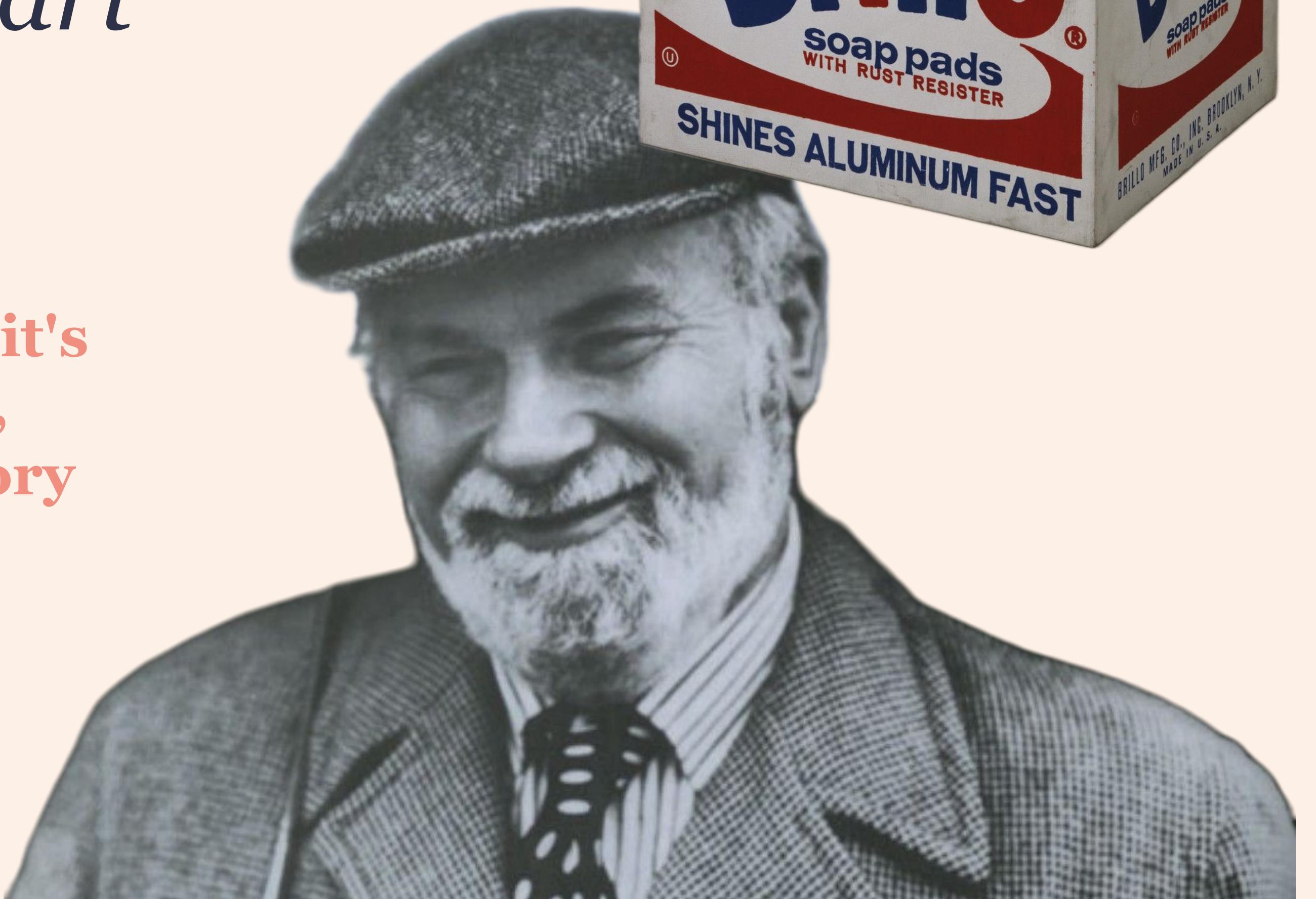
Things that get
conferred **art-status**
by the **art-world**



Arthur Danto (1964)

*You can't tell what's art
just by looking.*

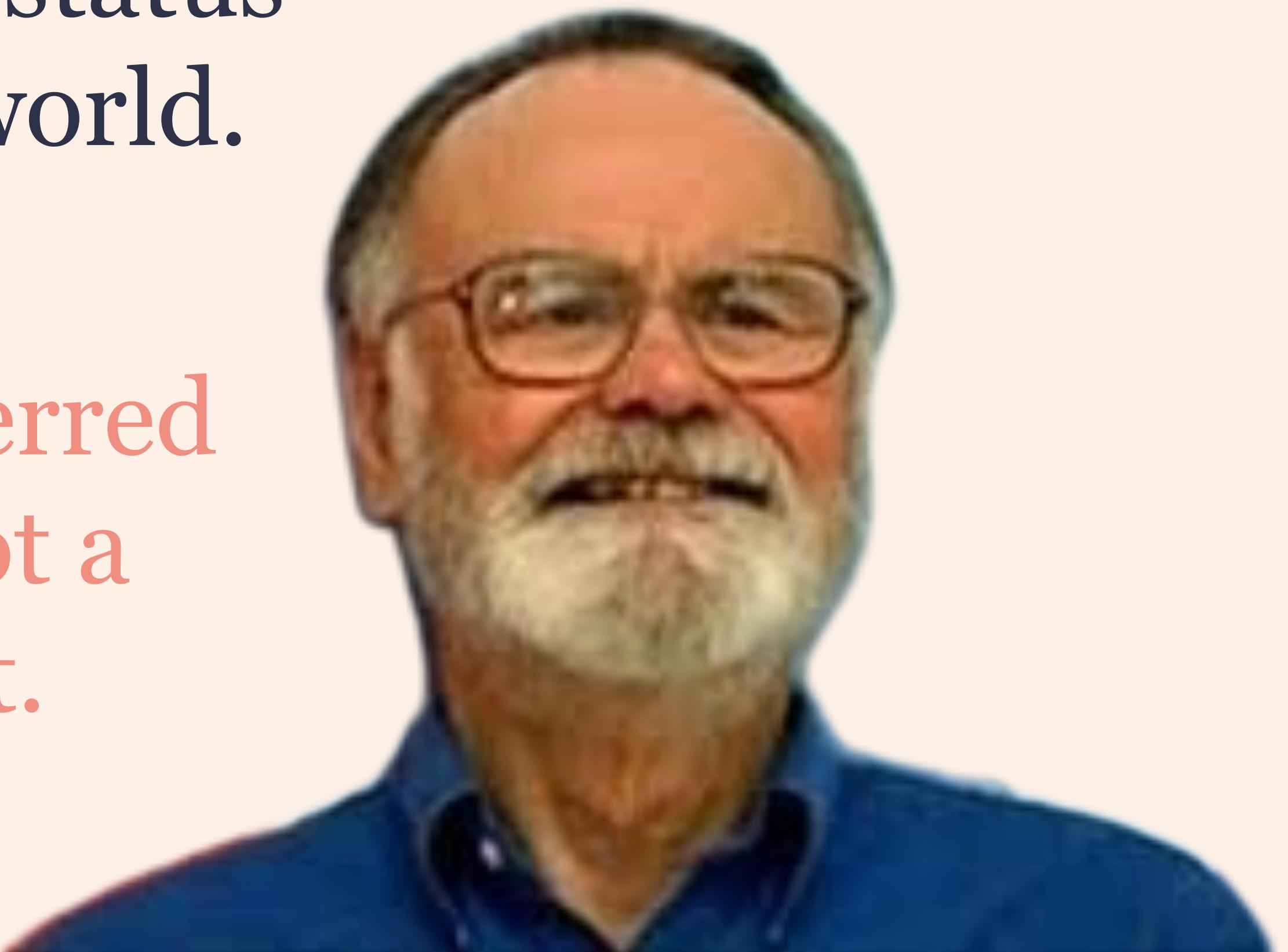
**Something becomes art when it's
presented in an art context,
with art theories and art history
behind it.**



Dickie's Institutional Theory

Art is what gets conferred art-status
by representatives of the artworld.

Art is a status that gets conferred
from outside the object, not a
quality that lives inside it.

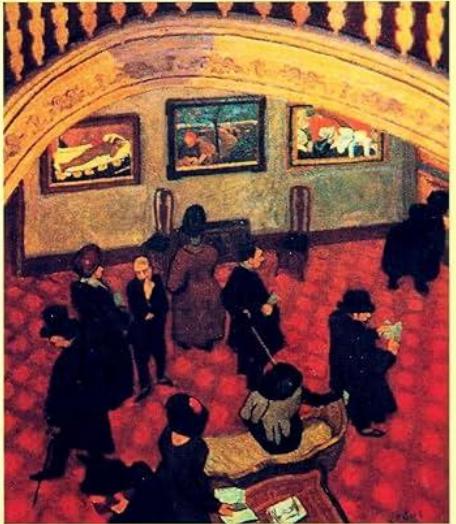
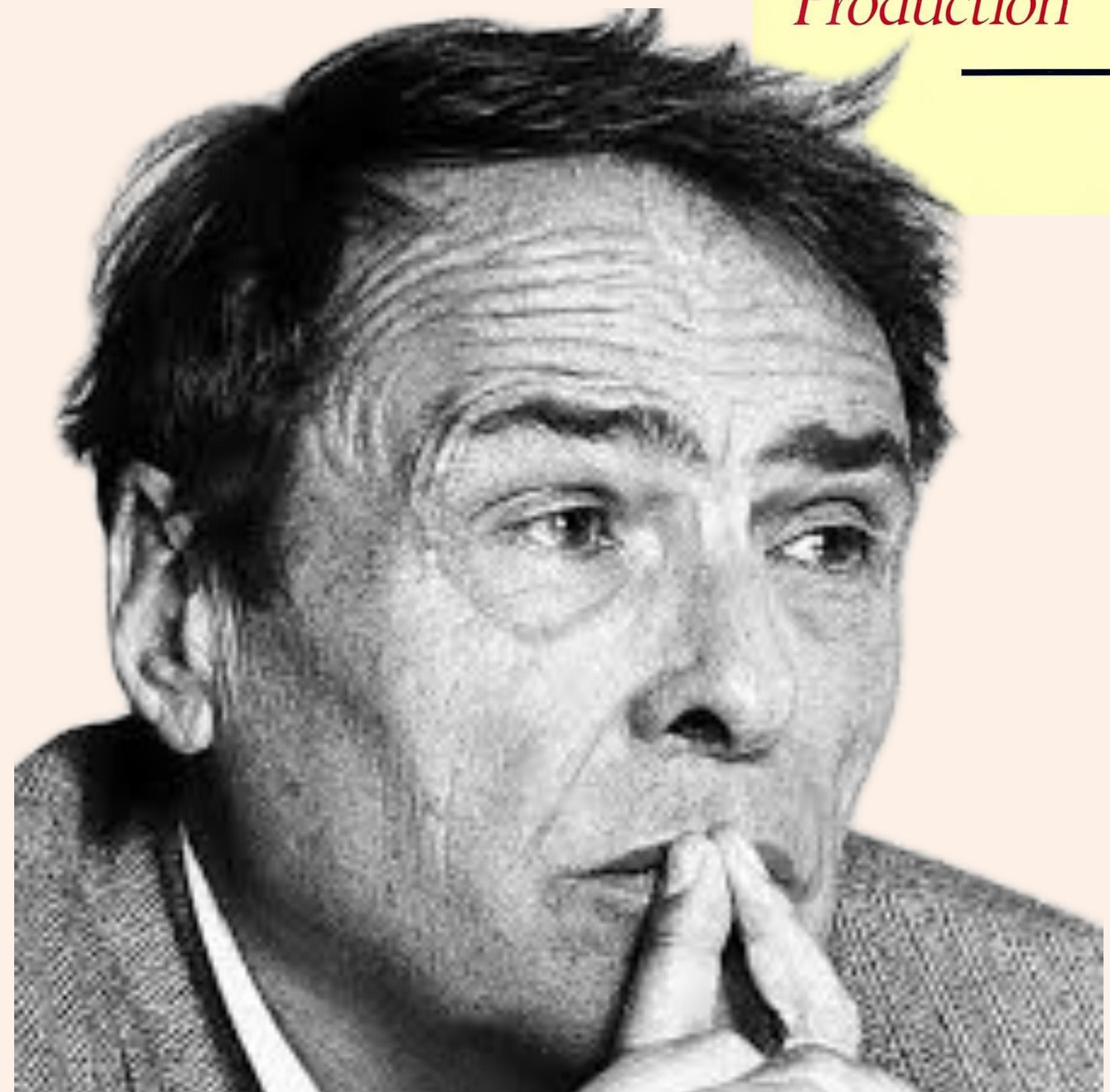


Bourdieu's Field Theory

Cultural Capital

The artworld is a field with its own logic, its own forms of value, its own gatekeepers.

*Bourdieu's insight: taste isn't natural or personal.
It's socially constructed and reinforces power structures.*



*The
Field of Cultural
Production*

Legitimation



Andrea Fraser

*It is not a question of being
against the institution. We
ARE the institution.*



Museum Highlights (1989)

Understanding Cultural Capital

- Credential Capital?
- Institutional Affiliation?
- Critical Validation?
- Linguistic Capital?
- Knowledge Capital?
- Social Capital?

For your practice...

Takeaway Question

What institutions or contexts would confer art-status on your work?

Which ones do you actually care about?

What cultural capital do you need to be recognized by them?

Framework 4

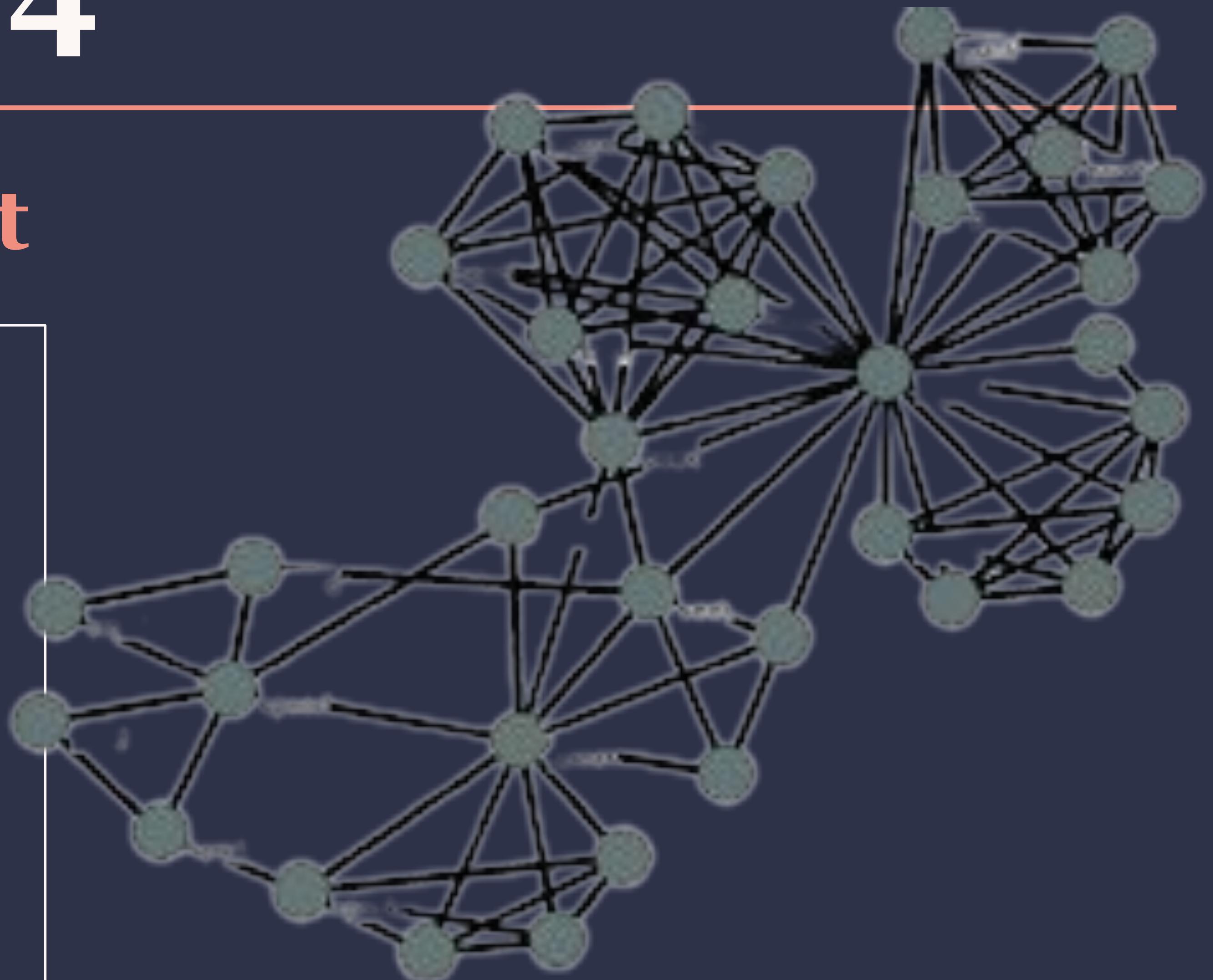
Art as Open Concept

Art

=

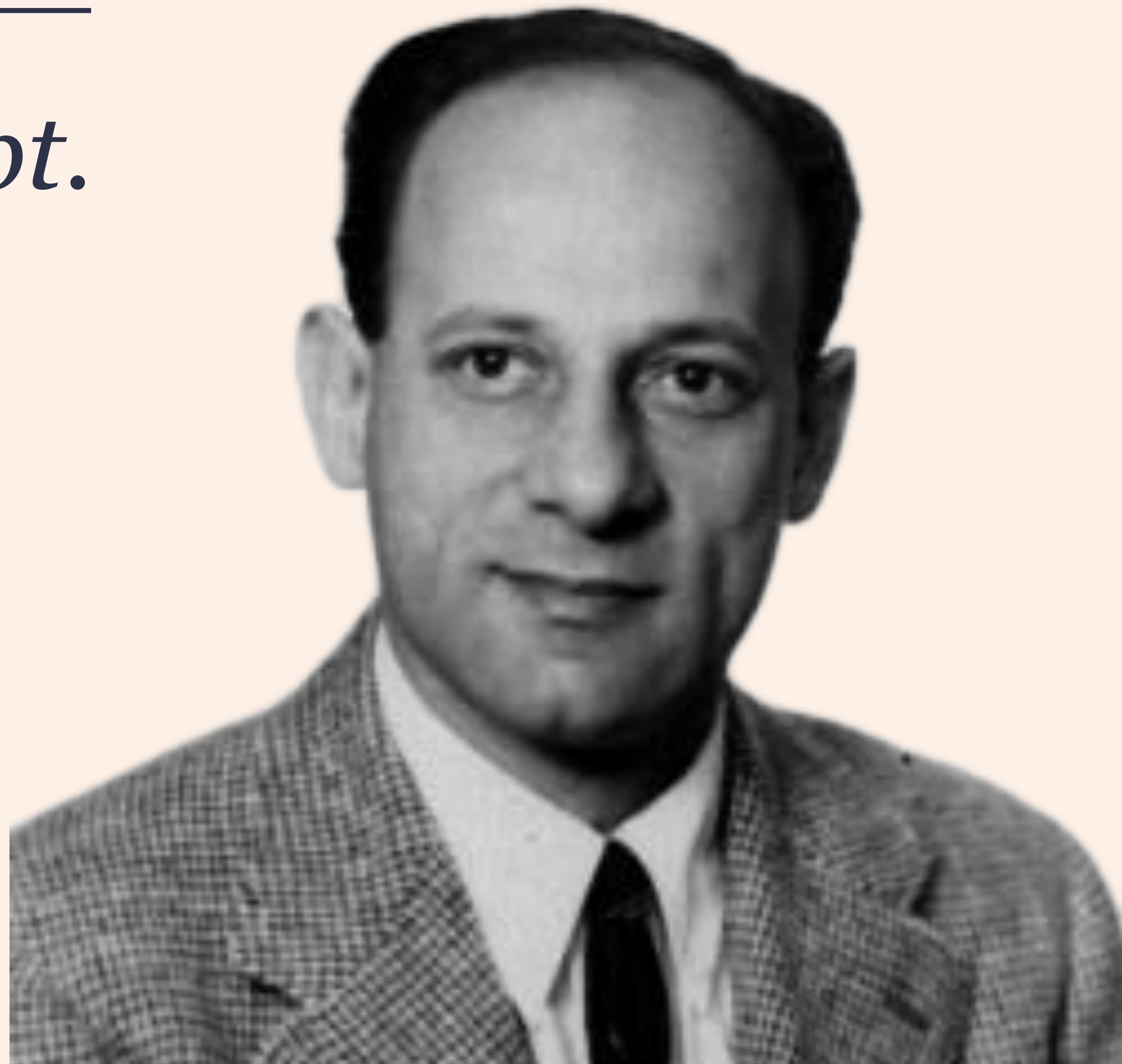
Things that share
family

resemblances with
other things called art



Morris Weitz (1956)

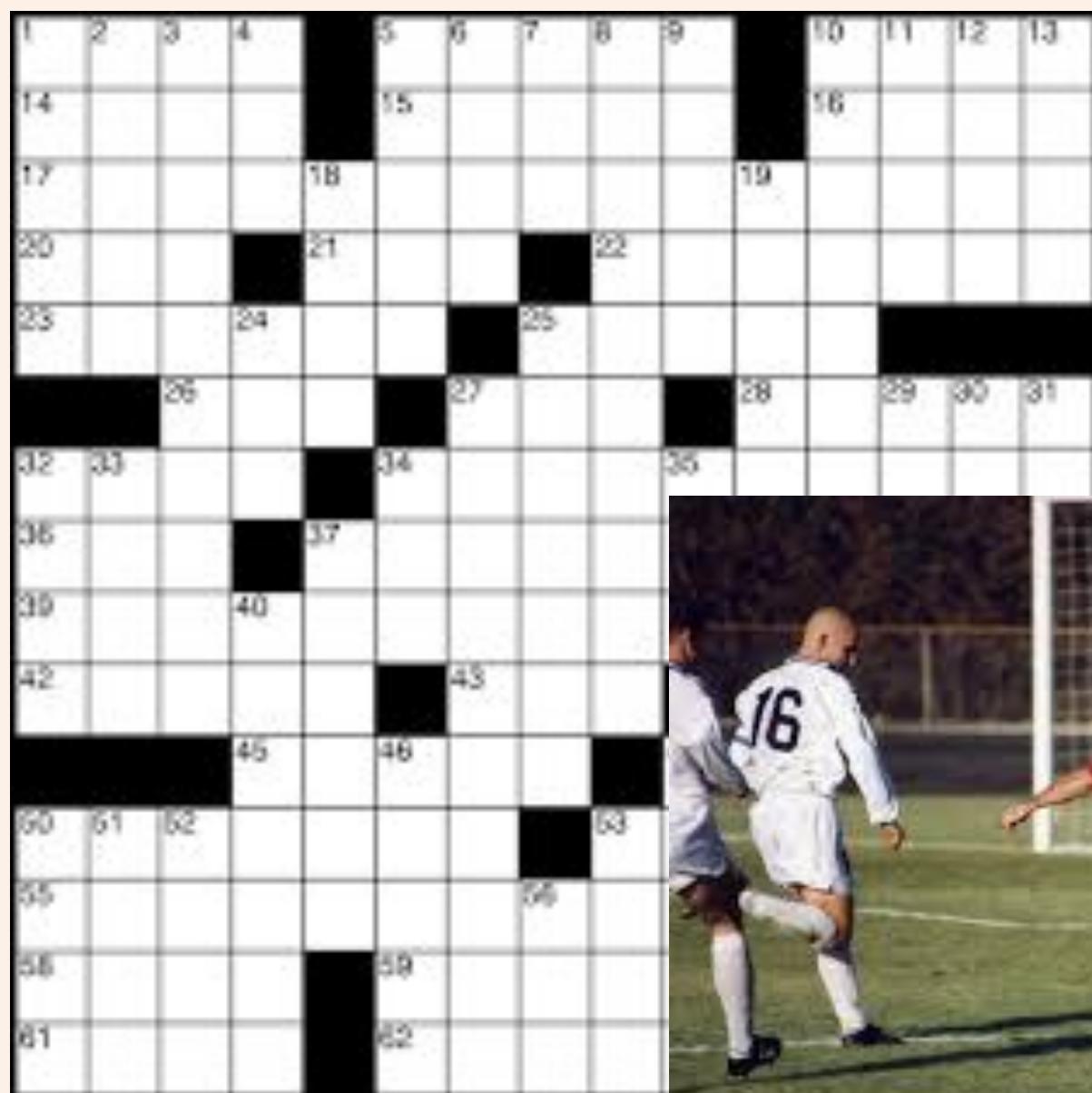
*"Art is an open concept.
You can't define it."*



Wittgenstein's Family Resemblance

What do all games have in common?

No single feature unites them all.
Instead, they have overlapping similarities.



Boris Groys

"Art is defined by producing the NEW within art discourse."

Something is new not because it's never existed before, but because it's NEW TO THE ARCHIVE.



The Archive and the Trash Heap

The Archive



Outside the Archive

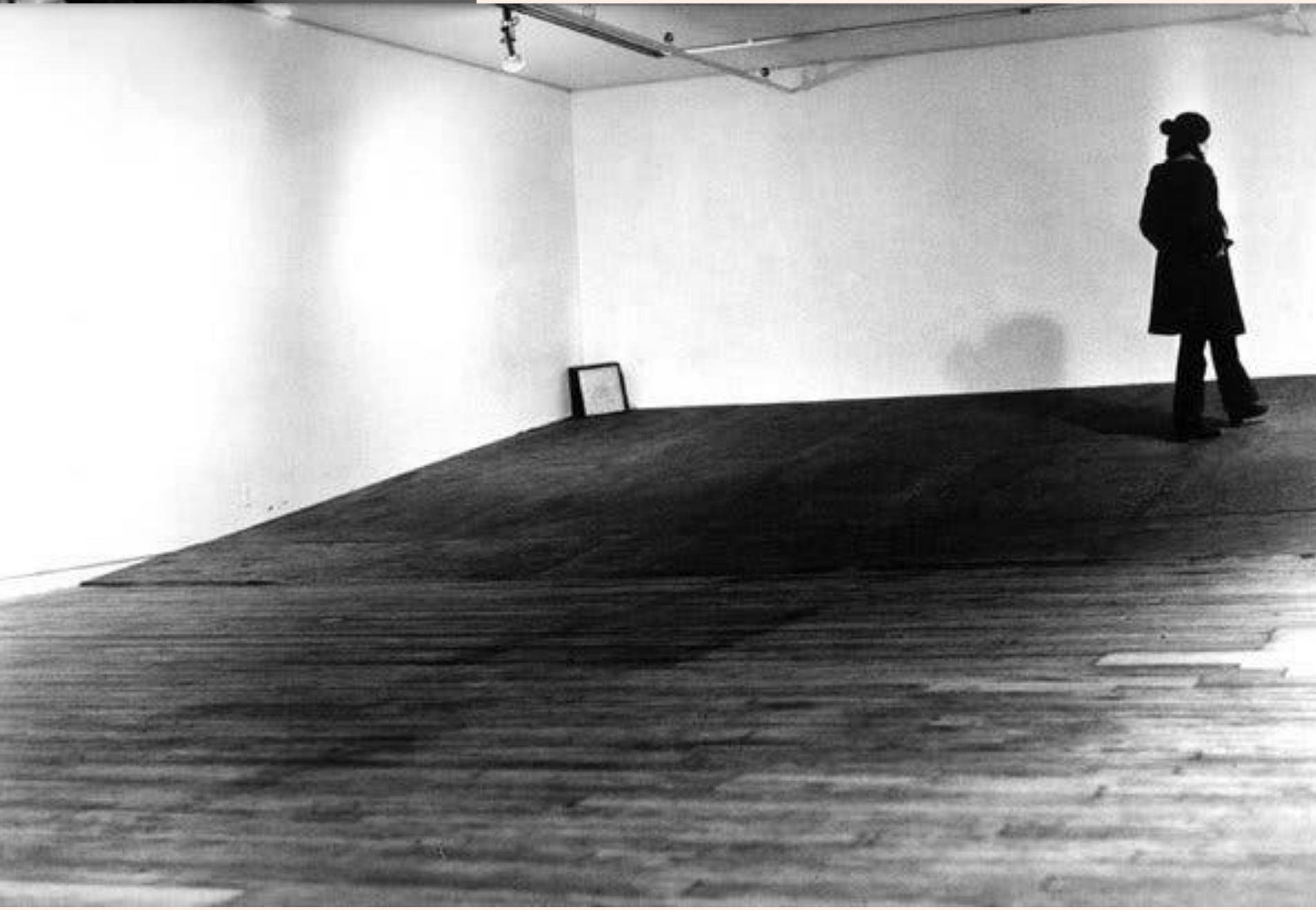


Innovation happens when something from outside gets pulled into the archive.

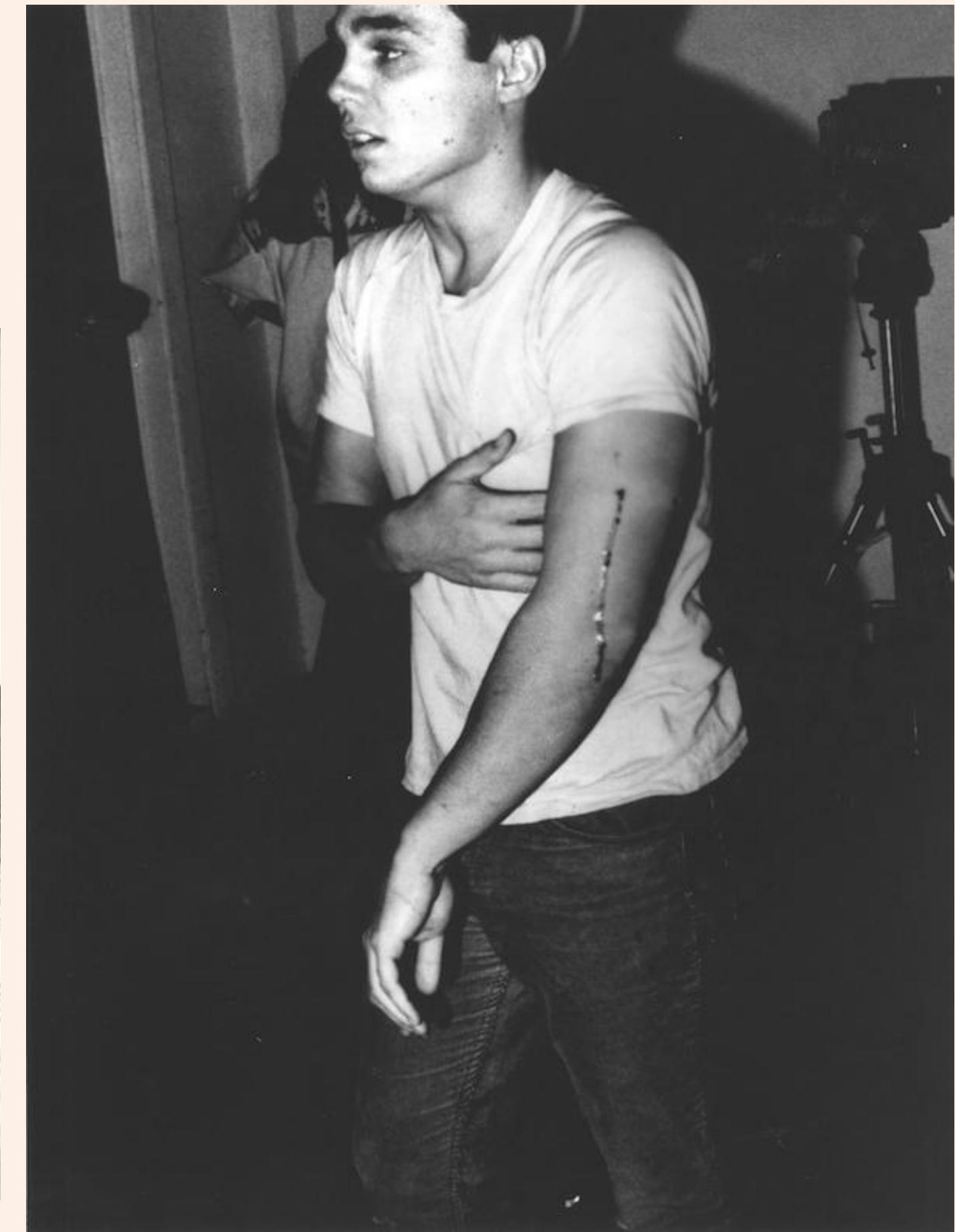
Performance Art (60's-70's)



AAA-AAA, 1978, Abramović & Ulay.



Following Piece, 1969, Acconci.



Shoot, 1971, Burden.

Hito Steyerl



How to Not Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, (still), 2013.

Cameron Rowland



Attica Series Desk, 2016.



For your practice...

Takeaway Question

What existing art practices does your work resemble?

Make a list of 3-5 artists, movements, or practices your work connects to.

Then ask: What's different? What are you doing that's NEW in relation to those practices?

Four Frameworks

1. Art as Imitation/Representation



2. Art as Aesthetic Form



3. Art as Institutional Recognition



4. Art as Open Concept



Not Competing Truths.

Different tools.

Up Next!

What am I making?

Ontology of Art / Continental Tradition

The goal: From uncertainty to clarity

Questions?
Thoughts?
All welcome!

Thank You So Much!

Ontology of Art Toolkit available tomorrow!
Questions welcome in the Mighty Networking post

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ΔARTIST CØMMONS