

BOOK REVIEW

Art and Art-Attempts, by Christy Mag Uidhir

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Reviewed by Joseph Kassman-Tod

Intentionality is widely construed as central to our conception of art; that is, artworks are the products of human intentions. But a focused and thoroughgoing treatment of the significance of this commonplace observation has heretofore been absent from the literature. In this eminently clear contribution, Christy Mag Uidhir makes significant advances toward a comprehensive understanding of the matter.

The book's signature thread is an identification of the parameters enforced by taking art's 'intention-dependence' seriously—parameters within which any minimally viable theory of art must reside. Whatever else art might be, it must be intention-dependent: for something to be a work of art, it must be dependent upon intention. That which is entailed by this commitment is what Mag Uidhir calls the *Attempt Theory of Art*. This is not itself a theory of art; rather, it stands as a condition that any minimally viable theory must satisfy.

The development of this plot is rich in argument and insight; nonetheless, various claims made in the depiction of these parameters and their art-theoretic implications are at odds with much of what we take to be important about art.

The theoretical implications for the visual and literary arts, the ontology of art, and the conceptual definition of art are explored in six chapters.

Chapter 2, ‘Works and Authors,’ holds that for agents to satisfy the conditions for the author-relation to artworks, the agent must be responsible for their work being art, which just is that the agent be the “source of the intentions directing the activities constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which that particular artwork is the product” (45). This entails, quite plausibly, that the artist-relation should be construed as a robust causal–intentional relation between agents and their works—that is, between artists and their artworks.

For an agent to qualify as an artist she must, therefore, have art-relevant intentions. However, according to Mag Uidhir intentions by themselves cannot be sufficient for the agent to so qualify; the agent must engage in the appropriate intentional actions, which might be otherwise known as ‘art-attempts.’ What we have from Mag Uidhir, then, is an account that constrains theories of art by the relationship between artists and their works.

We also have an account of authorship that has interesting implications for certain art practices. If “the artist-relation is a causal-intentional relation between an agent and the substantive products of that agent’s intention-directed activities” (45), then what are we to make of art-industry practices such as collaboration, appropriation, and commissioning?

Suppose, for example, I want to produce an artwork, artwork *A*, by appropriating the product of someone else’s, for instance John’s, successful art-attempt, artwork *B*. Are my intentions the only intentions that figure substantively in the production of *A*? Can John be rightly said to occupy the author-relation *vis-à-vis A*?

Alternatively, I might commission John to produce *A*. Here, John’s intentions will presumably figure by virtue of directing the appropriate production activities, but surely they only figure as a proxy for my own intentions. Does John thereby fail to satisfy the conditions for authorship of *A*, or do both John and myself enjoy authorship of *A*, thereby making this an instance of collaborative artistic practice?

Chapter 3, ‘Art Forms and Art Sortals,’ examines the necessary conditions for certain activities to count as art forms. An activity such as painting, literature, or photography can count as an art form only if

the way in which something satisfies the conditions for being a painting, poem, or photograph is, or can be, sufficient for its satisfaction of the condition for being an artwork. That is, we can say that painting is an art form precisely because a successful painting-attempt just is, or can be, a successful art-attempt. Controversially, Mag Uidhir denies that photography is thereby an art form.

Chapter 4, 'Artists and Art Onta,' reduces to an argument against the art-ontological doctrine that artworks can be abstract entities. Mag Uidhir assumes that abstracta and concreta, standardly construed, exhaust our ontological options. He argues from these premises that:

- 1 Artworks must be the kind of thing, "for which an agent must be directly responsible for the particular way in which that thing comes to satisfy the conditions for being art (whatever those may be)" (124-5);
- 2 Abstract objects are causally inefficacious (141);

concluding that:

- 3 Artworks must be concrete entities: "THE ARTIST-RELATION obviously cannot be other than causal-intentional, and as such cannot be other than concrete" (136).

Chapter 5, 'Repeatable Artworks and Relevant Similarity,' seeks to reconcile this conclusion with the standard art-ontological assumption that repeatable artworks (plays, musical works, novels) are abstract entities. According to this conception, such repeatable artworks are abstract objects knowable by us via their concrete, non-art instantiations: repeatable artworks are multiply-instantiable *abstracta* (178). Instead, Mag Uidhir argues that repeatability should be understood as mapping onto the relation of *relevant similarity* (179). Consider two books: *War and Peace* printed in 1900, and *War and Peace* printed in 2000. According to Mag Uidhir, these works are relevantly similar if and only if they are the products of the same uniquely identifiable art-attempt, that is, "if and only if there is no intention-directed activity

constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which one is the product that is not also constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which the other is the product" (197). Whatever makes *War and Peace* (1900) a novel just is whatever makes *War and Peace* (2000) a novel. Tolstoy is responsible for the way in which both copies are artworks: he is responsible for the uniquely identifiable, successful novel-attempt of which both *War and Peace* (1900) and *War and Peace* (2000) are products. It is this novel-attempt that fixes the similarity-conditions and thereby accounts for our properly sorting all relevantly similar novels under that name, thus making Tolstoy the author of all artworks so sorted. By this analysis, in the domain of artworks, repeatability just is relevant similarity.

I turn now to one claim that I find particularly contentious.

An important line of analysis pursued by Mag Uidhir is that, in order for art to be significantly intention-dependent, attempts must be liable to failure. That is, the significance of art's intention-dependence entails that art is the product of intentional action (e.g., made, created, played, designed, etc.):

intentions can figure substantively in the history of a thing only by directing the actions or activities of which that thing is a product . . . something is an artwork only if the way in which that thing comes to satisfy the conditions for being art (whatever those may be) must be the product of intentional action (17).

These appropriately-directed art-relevant actions constitute art-attempts and, like any other kind of attempt, they either succeed or fail—and the success or failure of these attempts are manifest in their products.

The artist must have an appropriate art-relevant intention—a goal—which is directed by an intention; and that goal must be achieved in the manner intended. These art-relevant intentions must suitably guide her actions for them to thereby constitute an art-attempt—the product of which, if successful, is an artwork. By Mag Uidhir's analysis, the art-attempt can be considered successful only

when the agent's goal obtains in the manner intended; it is, otherwise, a failed attempt. The important claim is that any minimally viable theory of art is required to account for the possible success or failure of such art-attempts (27).

The point I wish to press concerns Mag Uidhir's conception of what the substantive intention-dependence of art entails. He declares that "intentions can figure substantively in the history of a thing only by directing the actions or activities of which that thing is a product" (17). From here, it seems correct to claim that intention-dependence must feature among the success conditions for a thing's being art, but it does not follow that an art-attempt can be considered successful only if the agent's goal obtains in the manner intended. That is, we might hold that intention-dependence is necessary for a thing to be art, without holding that the specific content of those intentions must obtain.

As recognised by Mag Uidhir, artworks can be distinguished from natural entities by virtue of their tie to human mindedness: an artwork is the product of human intentional action; a natural entity is not. This requires only that there is an intention, abstractly construed, to create an artwork in a given medium, that is, to create a work in a given medium that is intrinsically valuable to experience; it does not require that the artist's specific goal obtain in the manner intended. Equally, we can hold that the artist's specific intentions are germane to the criticism or interpretation of the artwork, without holding that it was necessary for the specific goal to be realised in the resultant artefact. That is, art criticism might require us to discern or hypothesize about the artist's intentions in order to fully account for the work's artistic value, but it does not follow that the work must realise the artist's specific intentions in the manner intended for that work to meet the ontological success-conditions of art, whatever these might be.

The problem is that the substantive intention-dependence of art does not entail the account of failed-art that Mag Uidhir advances. We can say that art is substantively intention-dependent, so that for a thing to be art, "that thing must be in a substantive sense the product of intentional action" (23). We can agree that substantive intention-

dependence entails that intentions direct “the actions or activities of which that thing is the product” (23). But this does not entail that these intentions account for “the way in which that thing comes to satisfy the conditions for being art” (23). There surely can be failed art attempts, but these need not track the failure of artists to precisely realise their goals in the manner intended.

That is to say, Mag Uidhir advances a causal analysis of what it is to produce a work of art according to which the relevant intention, *I*, must precede the work, *W*; *I* must cause the work. *I* figures substantively in this causal process by directing the actions that constitute the art-attempt of which *W* is the product. By this analysis, we can compare the content of *I* with what is actually achieved in *W*. Mag Uidhir argues that there needs to be a correspondence between these two sets of content. My contention is that in accepting art’s substantive intention-dependence, we need not concur with the demand for correspondence.¹

Consider an example Mag Uidhir provides to clarify his position:

Imagine that I attempt a realistic portrait of my aunt Teresa. I am such an inept painter that the result fails to resemble her in the slightest—it, and not my aunt Teresa, looks like an irregularly shaped blob—and as such fails to be a portrait of my aunt Teresa. However, the irregularly shaped blob possesses rather striking aesthetic properties, though only as an accidental (and unbeknownst to me) result of actions intended to be in service to the portraiture. . . . While the work has striking aesthetic properties and it having those properties resulted from my art-attempt, the work did not acquire those properties in the intended manner; the work has those properties as the result of the way in which my attempt at portraiture failed and not as the result of any successful art-attempt. Although my work may appear to be an artwork, my work is a case of complex failed-art. . . . It could be the case that

¹My thanks to Maarten Steenhagen for offering this articulation of my criticism.

many things thought to be art are in fact complex failed-art. (34–5)

This is a conclusion I want to challenge. Adapting Clifford Geertz's 1973 analysis of Chartes Cathedral, consider the following analysis.² Let us call the painting, *Teresa*. This painting, *Teresa*, is constituted by certain colours and shapes, by a canvas and by paint; but these elements do not exhaust the work. *Teresa* is a painting; but it is not only a painting, it is a particular painting painted at a particular time by a certain member of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of colour, shape, canvas, and paint. You also need to understand the specific conceptual relations between subject, aunt, and painting, which, since they governed its creation, the painting consequently embodies.

Can we not consider, speculate, or even hypothesize about what moved the artist to paint the colours and shapes that he did? What, for example do the striking colours and shapes tell us about the artist's psychological disposition vis-à-vis his aunt; what do they tell us about extra-nuclear family ties in early twenty-first century Western society? We have, in this painting, a potentially fascinating artefact ripe for analysis under the lens of psychoanalysis and colour and shape psychology. Moreover, to properly evaluate the work, we would almost certainly need to understand the place the work occupies in the history of art. For example, did the artist have a casual interest in twentieth-century artistic oeuvres such as cubism and abstract expressionism, such that even though he might not have intended to paint in these styles, they might nevertheless have influenced the outcome of his painting-attempt?

We can appropriate Gary Tomlinson's notion of a 'web of culture' and hold that an appreciation of these cultural values is a critical facet of our understanding of the work.³ The hidden premise here is that, in order to understand individual human actions, we need to interpret the cultural context from which they emerge. Tomlinson writes

²Geertz 1973.

³Tomlinson 1984.

that, “musical art works are the codifications or inscribed reflections of human creative actions, and hence should be understood through a similar interpretation of cultural context.” We take art works to be valuable not merely in terms of the technical proficiency of the final product in realising the author’s intentions, but also as eloquent acts that speak of the culture within which the artist herself is embedded.

When Mag Uidhir argues that “for art to be substantively intention-dependent, it must be the case that the success or failure of those attempts matter for whether or not their products are artworks” (209), he appears to have erred. An artwork must be the product of human intentional action in order to be said to be the product of human mindedness. That is, in order to speak of particular cultural values and particular human psychological dispositions and dynamics, the artwork must issue from human mindedness—from an individual’s thoughts, feelings, moods, emotional states, and subconscious dispositions—and practically, at the very least, this requires being the product of human intentional action. It does not require that the resultant artefact realises, to the letter, the artist’s art-relevant intentions.

We could even go so far as to propose that artists do not always do what they intend, nor is what they say they have done always what they have in fact done. Artistic representations can be conceived as “built out of pre-existing cultural resources, and hence have always to be explained as developments within an ongoing cultural tradition.”⁴ Accordingly, “we may find ourselves paying less heed to artists’ confessional statements and more to the circulation of ideas in the world which their practices inhabit.”⁵

My contention, then, is that art’s intention-dependence allows for a gap between the content of the intention that figures substantively in an artwork’s causal history, and the content of the artwork itself. Moreover, correspondence between these two sets of contents is not a necessary condition for the success of the art-attempt in question.

These reflections lead into my second point, which is not so much

⁴Barnes 1977, p. 19.

⁵Harrison and Woods 1999, p. 3.

a criticism but rather what I perceive to have been a missed opportunity for further philosophical development of the Attempt Theory: namely, an analysis of the way(s) in which the Attempt Theory might bear upon theories of art interpretation, evaluation, and appreciation.

In Chapter 6, 'Further Implications,' Mag Uidhir does provide a footnote on this issue, thereby indicating that he has not overlooked this prospect. His avoidance of a detailed development of this thread lies in the supposition that he would thereby be unable to retain the abstract, panoramic art-theoretic stance from which his project is pitched, and would instead become mired in the details characteristic of particular art-interpretive or evaluative theories.

By way of an example, he argues that were the Attempt Theory to constrain theories of art-interpretation one would have to endorse two controversial positions:

- (i) Content-determination is the principal, proper aim of artwork interpretation.
- (ii) Content is constitutive of artwork identity. (207)

From these positions, Mag Uidhir reasons that the domain of art interpretation would be exhausted by, and exclusive to, such content-bearing artworks. Accordingly, the Attempt Theory would oblige the following:

- (iii) For all artworks with contents, a content is constitutive of the way in which something is an artwork *only if* the artist's activities constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which that thing being art is the product are at least in part directed by the intention that the artwork so have that content. (207)

However, for Mag Uidhir the Attempt Theory is of little significance for any art-interpretative or -evaluative theories that reject either (i) or (ii). I remain unconvinced by this assessment.

As argued by Budd,⁶ activities executed with an aim can be evaluated against that aim: those who perform such an activity perform

⁶Budd 2008, p. 90.

it well or poorly according to whether their performance is effective in achieving the aim. Art-attempts are, we can say, just such an activity. Thus, even though we might not be obliged to say that poorly executed art-attempts disqualify the resultant product from being art, we can, nevertheless, hold that the intentions driving the attempt are germane to the interpretation and evaluation of the resultant work.

Let us remain at the abstract level at which Mag Uidhir's project is pitched. At this level, we could say that the artist's aim counts toward the merits or demerits of the work that results from her art-attempt. The artist will aim to create, in a given medium, a work that is valuable *qua* art. It is true to say that, in addition to the social, historical, and art-theoretic elements mentioned above, the meaning of a work of art—the way in which it is to be interpreted—is connected to the conception under which the artist created it. Accordingly, to some degree at least, full appreciation of a work of art will include appreciation of the artistry of the artist, and hence of the artistic achievement that the work represents.⁷ Following Budd,⁸ let us say that the particular kind of achievement against which the artist's work is to be evaluated *qua* art lies in the nature of the experience of the work, which is integral to understanding it. That is, the extent to which one's experience of the work is intrinsically rewarding, how "inherently valuable it is to experience it with understanding—with all that understanding involves," is one plausible way in which the intention-dependence of art could be said to constrain any art-interpretive or -evaluative theory, while remaining at a suitably abstract level of discourse.

Art and Art-Attempts is a significant contribution to contemporary art-theoretic and art-ontological debates. Mag Uidhir rightly picks up on an important premise often explicitly stated but seldom thoroughly analysed, and thereby reinforces the importance of the relation between artists and their works of art. We do after all, talk in terms that align with this project. We say, for example, 'I love Bacon,' 'I can't stand Klimt,' and 'middle-period Kandinsky suffers in light of his later works.' That is, we pre-theoretically identify a strong link, a robust

⁷See Budd 1996, p. 11

⁸Budd 2008, p. 91.

causal relation, between artists and their works of art; and one salient merit of Mag Uidhir's book is that it provides philosophical form to this widespread understanding of art.

Thus, even though we can question some of the less plausible claims advanced by Mag Uidhir, this should not detract from the virtues of the book. Indeed, a book leaving us with such vivid results and providing such a thorough examination of a commonly held intuition is well worth reading.

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