

Book Review: Art & Art-Attempts by Christy Mag Uidhir

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Mag Uidhir, Christy

Art & Art-Attempts

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Among philosophers of art, received wisdom holds that because artworks are artifacts or performances, they are intention-dependent entities. And yet, this widespread notion has received surprisingly little critical treatment. In this book Christy Mag Uidhir sets out to do just that, first by explaining exactly what is meant by art's intention-dependence and then by exploring the consequences of taking the idea seriously. Despite his modest point of departure, however, Mag Uidhir arrives at some breathtaking conclusions: photography is not an art form, artworks and abstract objects are mutually incompatible, and multiple artworks are just sets of concrete tokens bound by a relation of relevant similarity.

The bulk of the heavy lifting is done by Chapter 1, which introduces the notion of attempt-dependence and the possibility of failure. That artworks are intention-dependent entities, Mag Uidhir argues, means that something is an artwork iff it is the product of a successful art-attempt (44), where an attempt consists of a goal and an action directed by the intention that the goal obtain in the manner prescribed (17). Attempts come in two flavours: *de re* (explicitly taking ϕ for a goal) and *de dicto* (aiming at some other goal, ψ , which entails ϕ 's satisfaction) (22). Art-attempts are, at minimum, attempts *de dicto*, thereby allowing for the possibility of art in cultures geographically or temporally distant from our own.

Whatever does not satisfy this condition will be non-art, but within the class of non-art entities we can usefully distinguish between those that are non-art *simpliciter* and those that are non-art because of the way in which they failed the attempt-condition. These latter Mag Uidhir calls failed-artworks. *Simple* failed-art describes the product of an art-attempt that is non-art (26); *complex* failed-art describes the product of an art-attempt that is (ostensibly) art, but not "in the manner intended" (34).

Chapter 2 explores the consequences of this account of intentions for the notion of authorship. It comes as no surprise that, according to Mag Uidhir, being the author of a work entails being a "source of the intentions directing the activities constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which that particular artwork is the product" (45). While collaboration is entirely possible, it need not result in collective authorship; authorship is bestowed only on those collaborators who stand as the sources of the intentions directing the activities in question.

Chapter 3 builds on the arguments of the preceding two chapters in an effort to explain what is required in order to count some practice as an art form: it is to satisfy the conditions for being an art sortal, which is a sortal that is "strongly author-relevant"—i.e., sortals for which being an *F* entails being an *F*-work, where being an *F*-work requires an author to guide the intentions informing the production of the object in question (101). Consider painting: painting is an art form because successful painting-attempts fall under the class of successful art-attempts (actions guided by the intention that a particular goal—the production of an object falling under some art sortal—obtain in the manner prescribed).

The rest of the chapter is devoted to developing a surprising consequence of this seemingly straightforward eliminativism: photography is not an art form. This is because being a photograph does not require any intention at all—to be a photograph is just to be the result of the right kind of chemical process, a process which could happen naturally or accidentally (103-5). "Photograph" is not a strongly author-relevant sortal, and so photography is not a substantively intention-dependent activity. Nothing can be an artwork by virtue of the way in which it is a photograph, and so photography is not one of the arts.

An even more astonishing conclusion awaits us in Chapter 4: artworks cannot be abstract objects and, *mutatis mutandis*, abstract objects cannot be artworks. This is because artists are just authors (132) and, according to Chapter 3, artworks must have artists, i.e., agents who (according to Chapters 2 and 3) are directly responsible (through their actions and intentions) for the object's falling under some art sortal. Since our best metaphysical accounts hold that abstract entities are causally inert (136-7, 141), they cannot be the products of art-attempts—and so, by the arguments given in Chapter 1, abstract entities cannot be artworks. At best, an artist is directly responsible for some *concrete* work standing under an art sortal (139).

Chapter 5 likens multiple artworks to open edition prints. Instances of the work are identified by their "relevant similarity": artworks are relevantly similar iff there is no intention-directed activity constitutive of the successful art-attempt resulting in the one that does not also result in the other (183). In other words, two copies of *Moby Dick* are relevantly similar artworks iff they are the product of a single successful art-attempt, or of two art-attempts that are substantively the same, i.e., each satisfies the conditions for being an artwork belonging to the art-sortal *S* in just the same way, or there is no intention-directed activity constitutive of the successful art-attempt of the one but not the other (185-6, 197). To read *Moby Dick*, then, is just to read an individual and distinct (or relevantly similar) novel that is the product of a unique novel-attempt in which Melville successfully engaged. To read *all* of Melville's works is not to read the millions of copies of each novel, but rather to read each of the individual and distinct (or relevantly similar) novels that is the product of a unique novel-attempt.

To my mind, this work's most interesting, valuable, and lasting contribution to the philosophy of art does not stem from any of these results, astonishing as they may be. Rather, it is the account of art-attempts offered in the first chapter that should command our attention. Despite its widespread acceptance, we have not paid enough attention to art's intention-dependence. In particular, we need to know whether art-making, as an intentional activity, requires a particular concept of art, or whether it can proceed accidentally or incidentally. We need to know whether art-making is an activity that can fail (and, if so, under what conditions), or if, as with wishing, mere intention suffices. And we need to know what this means for the meta-theoretical *desideratum* of descriptive adequacy: if particular concepts are unnecessary for art-making, does that mean that our reflective critical and appreciative practices can err substantially with respect to the nature of art?

Mag Uidhir only supplies an answer to the failed-art question: art-making *must* be capable of failing, otherwise it is not substantively intention-dependent. While this seems right, more work is required to clarify just what constitutes failure. This is especially important in the case of complex failed-art, which has the potential to classify most

artworks as failures by denying that the "manner" in question is negotiable at every step in the process of artistic creation. Consider poor Appelles, who finally achieved his work's crowning glory—the foam from a horse's mouth—when he threw his sponge at the painting in a fit of rage. Since the effect was not achieved "in the manner intended," the worry is that his work will turn out to be failed-art. Mag Uidhir owes us an account of what falls under this restriction, but does not deliver it here. The concern might have been alleviated by a more substantial discussion of how similar problems are treated elsewhere, especially in the philosophy of action, where Donald Davidson introduced a similar restriction to stave off the problem of wayward causation: the action must constitute an attempt *de re*. This would mean that attempts are not minimally attempts *de dicto*, which in turn enjoins us to make extensive revisions to the art-historical canon, a move that, as we saw earlier, Mag Uidhir resists.

While it is no mean feat to pull such revolutionary results from so small a hat, readers are likely to balk at some of the work's more controversial theses. Consider Chapter 3's argument against photography's status as an art form. Photography is said not to be substantively intention-dependent because a photograph might be produced naturally or accidentally as the result of the right kind of chemical process. But just as natural processes might mirror the chemical reactions triggered by the click of a shutter, so too might they result in the accretion, on a canvas, of a chemical structure identical to that of oil paint. The result is a paint-covered canvas, but *not* a painting. While we can use 'photograph' or 'painting' to refer to a work's physical medium without presuming its art-status, we often use those terms in a manner that already assumes the work's art-status (or confers it). The absence of intention merely indicates that what we have is a natural object rather than an artifact, a distinction that is already well-worn in the philosophy of art.

In the end, even if *Art & Art-Attempts* leaves readers unconvinced, it serves as an important reminder that we should not take art's intention-dependence for granted, or think that the philosophical work ends with that assumption. In that respect, this book represents an important first step towards unravelling the philosophy of art's commitment to intention-dependence.

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