

Introduction to the Symposium on Christy Mag Uidhir's *Art and Art-Attempts*
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Christy Mag Uidhir's *Art and Art-Attempts* begins from two deceptively simple observations: artworks are the product of intentions, and intentions are the kinds of things that can fail to be successfully realized.¹ Drawing on these observations he argues that most contemporary theories of art must be rejected, because they are not substantively intention-dependent: that is, they do not account for the fact that an attempt to make an artwork can fail.

From his view that artworks must be the product of art-attempts that are subject to failure, Mag Uidhir derives implications for many domains in the philosophy of art. Mag Uidhir argues (in chapter 4) that artworks cannot be abstract objects, since abstract objects can't participate in causal relations and thus can't be the product of art attempts: one can't coherently intend or attempt to create something that exists eternally. Things that we think of as repeatable artworks, then, can't be abstract types: instead, Mag Uidhir proposes (in chapter 5), every artwork is concrete, but some are tied together by a relation of relevant similarity. We call many performances "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" not because they are all instances of an abstract type, but because they are all relevantly similar to each other in ways that connect to a successful art-attempt made by Nina Simone.

When it comes to authorship, Mag Uidhir's view implies (as discussed in chapter 2) that not everyone involved in artwork production is an author of the work: an author must be a "source of the intentions directing the activities constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which that particular artwork is the product."² Someone who prints a copy of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* creates that concrete novel, but does not thereby become its author, since Roy's intentions, not the printer's, drove the successful art-attempt that gave the novel its artistic features.

Mag Uidhir's view also has implications for art forms. Painting is an art form, Mag Uidhir argues (in chapter 3), because something can satisfy the criteria for being an artwork just by satisfying the criteria for being a painting. The same is true of novels and symphonies. However, it does not appear to be true that something can satisfy the criteria for being an artwork just by satisfying the criteria for being a photograph: most photographs are not artworks, and it seems that for any photograph to count as an artwork, additional criteria (not internal to photography) would need to be satisfied. Mag Uidhir concludes that though there may be artworks that are photographs, photography itself is not an art form.³

In this symposium, Mag Uidhir replies to three critics, David Davies, Sherri Irvin and Keith Lehrer. All three critics examine the relevant similarity relation that Mag Uidhir proposes to account for artworks that we treat as repeatable, while also considering a variety of other issues.

After giving an overview of Mag Uidhir's central argument, Davies considers Mag Uidhir's claim that Jerrold Levinson's historical definition of art, despite the central role it accords to the artist's intentions, is not substantively intention-dependent and

should thus be rejected.⁴ Levinson's view is that to make art, an artist must intend her product to be regarded in the same way that one or more earlier artworks were correctly regarded. Mag Uidhir notes that on this view, simply having the intention is all the artist needs to do to make art; since there is no requirement of uptake by the audience, there is no way such an intention can fail. Since substantive intention-dependence requires the possibility of failure, Mag Uidhir suggests, Levinson's view is not substantively intention-dependent. Drawing on an analogy with lying, Davies argues that Mag Uidhir's requirement of substantive intention-dependence is too stringent: Levinsonian artworks are still subject to failure in an important sense, since the audience may not regard them in the way the artist intends. This form of failure, Davies suggests, is all that should be required to make Levinson's view substantively intention-dependent. Whereas Mag Uidhir insists that a failed art-attempt must eventuate in an object that is not an artwork, Davies argues that it is enough to allow that some things are artworks, yet fail to realize the artist's more specific aims.

Davies argues, further, that on a plausible construal, Levinson's view does in fact allow for art-attempts that fail to produce an artwork at all. On Levinson's view, an artist may intend for a particular kind of expressive product to be regarded in a certain way by the audience. The artist might, then, formulate an intention to produce such a product, but then be unable to do so – due, say, to an attack of paralysis, or a spasm that prevents me from controlling my movements. The same is true of lying: the success of my attempt to lie to you does not depend on my managing to deceive you, but it does depend on my ability to generate a suitable utterance. If I'm unable to speak, or if I'm struck by a condition that allows me only to produce gibberish, my lie-attempt will fail. Davies concludes that Levinson's position allows that art-making is substantively intention-dependent in the same sense that lying is. An art-attempt may succeed at producing an artwork (or lie) but fail to have the substantive effect they intended; or, less frequently, it may fail to produce an artwork (or lie) altogether.

Mag Uidhir replies with skepticism about the idea that Levinson's picture allows that someone might try and fail to create an artwork in the same way that someone might try and fail to tell a lie. All Levinson's view requires for artmaking, Mag Uidhir suggests, is that someone intend some object for regard as a work of art. No further action of any kind is required once that intention is formed: Levinsonian artmaking does not require that the artist do anything to bring it about that the object be regarded in the way intended. If Mag Uidhir is right, then Levinson's view will fail to treat artmaking as substantively intention-dependent unless reconstrued along the lines Davies has suggested.

Davies then takes on Mag Uidhir's argument against the idea that artworks can be abstracta, such as a sound-structure or a string of words. Since abstracta are eternal existents which cannot be produced or altered by the artist's activity, Mag Uidhir suggests, they cannot be generated through art-attempts. Applying a Levinsonian picture, though, Davies suggests that an art-attempt might aim not to create an abstract entity, but to imbue an already existing entity with the relational property of being regarded in certain ways by the audience. The artist might attempt to do so by drawing our attention to the entity in certain ways in certain contexts, producing instances of it, and so forth. Once we have redeemed Levinson's position, then, there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that artworks can be abstract entities that have been imbued with relational properties through art-attempts.

On this picture, Mag Uidhir may reply, the problem re-emerges that there can be no failed attempt at artmaking: if an object already exists, and the artist intends that existing object for regard as a work of art, an artwork has thereby been created, regardless of whether the artist takes any further action or whether the audience ever regards the object in the way intended.

Finally, Davies critically assesses Mag Uidhir's notion of relevant similarity, which is the relation Mag Uidhir proposes to unite all the concrete copies of *The God of Small Things* in the absence of a type-instance relation. As Davies notes, we standardly recognize that there can be correct and incorrect copies of a novel, and even the initial copy generated by the artist may contain errors. Mag Uidhir rejects the notion that the artwork is an abstract type without those errors, but he does not present us with a clear alternative way to distinguish correct from incorrect copies and identify the features that must be similar for two printings to count as the same novel. Davies suggests that artistic practice can furnish a standard for telling correct from incorrect copies. And if this is so, we might think of repeatable artworks not as concreta linked together by the relevant similarity but as Wollheimian types, "ways in which things are grouped in relation to a piece of human invention through a practice."⁵ In writing *The God of Small Things*, then, Roy engaged in an act of human invention that connects to novel-practice in a way that allows us to group together the many concrete printings of the novel. She is author of only one work, the novel *The God of Small Things*, construed as a Wollheimian type; we are thus relieved of the necessity to say that each of the millions of copies of the novel is a concrete artwork. Davies suggests that this picture might avoid Mag Uidhir's worries about abstract objects while also steering clear of the needless multiplication of artworks.

Like Davies, Keith Lehrer proposes an alternative to Mag Uidhir's picture of repeatable artworks, according to which they should be cashed out simply as concrete objects linked by a relation of relevant similarity. Drawing on both Hume and Goodman, Lehrer suggests that a concrete particular can stand for a class of particulars by serving as an exemplar of what members of the class are like. When used in this way to represent a class, a concrete particular can at the same time have instances. Lehrer suggests that exemplarization, the process by which a concrete entity comes to stand for a class, is dynamic: "When a new performance is heard, it may change our conception of the work." And, in turn, "We re-exemplarize artworks in terms of new instances that change how we represent the artwork."⁶ Thus, rather than a standing relation of relevant similarity that governs which concrete performances can be called "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," Lehrer's proposal allows that a concrete performance can, when used as an exemplar, have instances, and that the exemplarization relation may evolve over time as our conception of the work's identity changes.

Mag Uidhir embraces some aspects of Lehrer's picture, but suggests it be seen as an extension or clarification of rather than corrective to Mag Uidhir's own theory. This is because exemplarization and relevant similarity are compatible: exemplarization might, in fact, be a mechanism or vehicle for relevant similarity relations to be realized. While Mag Uidhir does not comment directly on Davies's suggestion about Wollheimian types, he might suggest in a similar vein that talk of these types is intertranslatable with talk of concreta that stand in a relation of relevant similarity to each other by virtue of art-attempts and a surrounding context of artistic practice.

Lehrer, drawing both on theoretical considerations and on his own artistic practice, suggests that Mag Uidhir's account places too much weight on intention and not enough on choice. Not infrequently, Lehrer suggests, the art-making features of a work are produced with no involvement of the artist's intention. "The feature that moves us emotionally or cognitively that makes something a work of art may," Lehrer says, "have arisen as an accident."⁷ But these features can then be chosen by the artist as constitutive of her work. As an example, Lehrer offers a monoprint he produced simply to remove excess paint that had accumulated on the surface of a landscape he was painting. But the monoprint was so visually striking that Lehrer decided to adopt it as his own work. Lehrer suggests that Mag Uidhir's theory would be strengthened by replacing or supplementing the notion of artist's intention with that of artist's choice: this would allow the theory to accommodate both accidentally produced art-making features and the appropriation of found objects as artworks.

In response, Mag Uidhir accepts that some of the features of the artwork may be chosen rather than intentionally created by the artist. He does not accept, however, what he calls Lehrer's Receiver Theory, on which a feature may imbue an object with art status by producing a response in the audience, regardless of whether the artist intended it to do so. Lehrer's monoprint is art not because after he created it, it produced an aesthetic response, but, instead, because Lehrer recruited the object into an art-attempt. He may have been *motivated* to do so because he found the monoprint visually striking, but the art-attempt (if successful), not the fact that it possesses this aesthetic feature, is what makes it art.

Irvin looks in detail at the relevant similarity relation that Mag Uidhir proposes to account for repeatable artworks. For RS-repeatable prints (that is, prints that are repeatable on the relevant similarity account), such as lithographs, Mag Uidhir places two conditions on relevant similarity: to be relevantly similar, two prints must be "roughly qualitatively similar (i.e., roughly similar with respect to appearance) ... by virtue of sharing a production history."⁸ Irvin suggests that two problems arise here. First, there is the question of what counts as a sufficient degree of qualitative similarity. Cashing out relevant similarity in terms of rough similarity of appearance, without a standard for determining how similar the appearances must be, leaves it indeterminate when two prints will count as relevantly similar. Second, it seems that there are cases of prints that are roughly qualitatively similar and share a production history, but should not be counted as relevantly similar, since they are the product of distinct art-attempts: for instance, Elaine Sturtevant's appropriations of Warhol, for which she made prints using the same process Warhol used, on his original screens lent for the occasion. Thus, it seems that there can be two concreta that satisfy the requirements of relevant similarity, yet fail to count as RS-repeatable.

Irvin proposes a friendly amendment to Mag Uidhir's position to alleviate this problem: namely, that the art-attempt be understood as including the artist's specification of what is required for various concreta to count as relevantly similar to each other. Thus, one artist might require a very high degree of qualitative similarity, while another allows for greater variability of appearance; likewise, two artists might place different restrictions on what counts as sameness of production history. This proposal makes relevant similarity an outgrowth of the art-attempt rather than imposing a standard of repeatability on all artworks in a given art form.

Irvin proposes that a similar maneuver might help to resolve a puzzle about musical works and performances. In ordinary practice, we want to be able to say that two performances are relevantly similar in that they are both performances of the same song. On Mag Uidhir's account, "one artwork is relevantly similar to the other artwork if and only if there is no intention-directed activity constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which the one is the product that is not also constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which the other is the product..."⁹ But when two performers perform (what we want to call) "the same" song on different occasions, it seems they have made two different art-attempts (namely, their performance-attempts, each of which did eventuate in a concrete artwork). How can we say that two performances are relevantly similar with respect to the song performed, even though they are, qua distinct performances, not relevantly similar? Irvin suggests, once again, that construing the original song-attempt as including the artist's specification of what is required for relevant similarity can solve the problem. Two performances are relevantly similar, in both being performances of a particular song, as long as both performances realize the aspects of similarity (e.g., in lyrics and melody) the songwriter designated in her initial song-attempt. The fact that they also realize additional features that make them distinct performances issuing from distinct performance-attempts ceases to be a problem if the notion of relevant similarity is enriched in this way.

Mag Uidhir accepts Irvin's suggested amendment to his position, noting that it is compatible with the art-attempt theory because it "folds the relevant specifying activities into the art-attempt[:] they get to be determinative of the relevant similarity conditions precisely because they are constitutive of the very art-attempt itself."¹⁰

Finally, Irvin raises a worry about the account of art-attempts, and whether it can avoid treating someone who merely copies an existing novel as the author of the new concrete novel she brings into existence. When the copyist produces a printing of *Beloved*, Irvin suggests, she really does make "an attempt with success conditions that, if satisfied, entail the satisfaction of the conditions for falling under the [*novel*] sortal."¹¹ Moreover, she aims to create something that satisfies the conditions for falling under the sortal *novel* in a particular way, and the resulting novel does in fact satisfy those conditions in that way. Since these are the central elements of an art-attempt on Mag Uidhir's account, it appears that the copyist counts as having made a successful art-attempt, and thus as having authored the concrete novel issuing from her attempt.

Mag Uidhir responds by reiterating some of the elements of his theory, and noting that the full story must be fleshed out through a theory of the novel, which is beyond the scope of his own project. The copyist does not count as an author, Mag Uidhir suggests, because she is not responsible for the way in which the concrete novel she produces satisfies the conditions for falling under the sortal *novel*. The copyist may successfully intend that her product fall under those conditions in a certain way, but she is not *responsible* for its falling under those conditions in that way; her intention is merely parasitic on an earlier novel-attempt made by Toni Morrison. This is a schematic answer, since the conditions for falling under the sortal *novel*, the ways in which a concrete novel may do so, and what it is to be responsible for its falling under those conditions are really matters that must be developed by the theorist of the novel. Mag Uidhir suggests that once we have an adequate theory of the novel in hand, it will allow us to say in greater

detail why the copyist, though she produces a novel, is not engaged in novel-practice and does not make a true novel-attempt.

As this symposium makes clear, through *Art and Art-Attempts*, Mag Uidhir has reinvigorated consideration of nominalist positions in the ontology of repeatable artworks. Moreover, his work encourages us to think seriously about the nature of art-making, and about the ontological consequences of our accounts of art-making. Students of art, art history and art criticism can all profit from considering the nature of art-attempts, the practices within which those attempts are made, and the products that eventuate from those attempts.

This symposium is the outgrowth of an author-meets-critics session at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, and the authors are grateful to the audience of that session for helpful discussion.

Notes

¹ Christy Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 45.

³ For further discussion of the book's content, see Sherri Irvin, review of *Art and Art-Attempts*, by Christy Mag Uidhir, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, February 8, 2006, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/art-and-art-attempts/>.

⁴ Jerrold Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 232-50.

⁵ David Davies, "Mag Uidhir on What is 'Minimally Viable' in 'Art-Theoretic Space,'" this volume, p. X.

⁶ Keith Lehrer, "Abstracta, Exemplars and Choice: Comments on *Art and Art-Attempts*," this volume, p. X.

⁷ Lehrer, "Abstracta, Exemplars and Choice," p. X.

⁸ Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 175.

⁹ Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 183.

¹⁰ Mag Uidhir, "Replies to Critics," this volume, p. X.

¹¹ Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 92.