

Art and Art-Attempts, by Christy Mag Uidhir. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 222 pages.

What do Ovid, Dante, Petrarch, Camões, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Caravaggio, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Bach, Goya, Mozart, Beethoven, Turner, Hugo, Tolstoy, Eliot, Pessoa, among others, have in common? One answer is simple: they all have been the creators of great works of art. But what makes something a work of art? What is art? Here the puzzles begin and the philosophy of art attempts to answer these and related questions. The meta-philosophy of art seeks to provide a framework in which these questions can be addressed.

In *Art and Art-Attempts*, Christy Mag Uidhir aims at providing such framework. He begins with the assumption that art is “intention-dependent” and he investigates “what follows from taking intention-dependence seriously as a substantive necessary condition for being art” (p. 6). This he calls the ‘Attempt Theory of Art’. As he warns the reader, the Attempt Theory of Art “is *not* itself a theory of art” (p. 6), but what we might call a meta-theory: it focuses on what a theory of art must be, minimally, to be viable as such. The purpose is not to enquire into the nature of art, but to provide “something even better: a unified, systematic, and productive framework for philosophical enquiry into art” (p. 209).

The first chapter is crucial and it deals with “art and failed art”. Mag Uidhir never spells out the conditions for something being art (he begins by professing ignorance about this) but he claims that “the way in which [a] thing comes to satisfy the conditions for being art (whatever those may be) must be the product of intentional action” (p. 23). (He purports to begin with an assumption that is uncontroversial.) Here he gives an example that shows that his Attempt Theory, rather than being unanimously accepted as he claims, is quite controversial. He asks us to imagine that he attempts to paint a realist portrait of his aunt Teresa. Since he is an “inept painter” and the result does not resemble his aunt “in the slightest”, he fails to produce a portrait of his aunt Teresa. With this everyone agrees.

“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” (p. 34). Mag Uidhir concludes that the result is *not* a work of art (it is *failed art*) because the aesthetic properties that the work does possess are not the result of the intention to produce them: “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” (p. 34). So, he concludes, even though the work does possess aesthetic properties, and *appears* to be an artwork, it is not one. He says it is “complex failed-art” (p. 35) and he adds that “it could be the case that many things thought to be art are in fact complex failed-art” (p. 35). Indeed, if all aspects with aesthetic interest need to be intended in order to be artistic, then there are many works that are in fact complex failed-art according to Mag Uidhir.

This example is illustrative of the controversial aspect of the Attempt Theory, despite Mag Uidhir’s claims that the theory is acceptable to all. While professing ignorance about the nature of art (p. 1), Mag Uidhir claims that it is not sufficient for a work to be art that it has aesthetic properties: they need also be the result of intentional actions of the appropriate type. So despite his attempt to remain neutral with regards to theories of (the nature of) art, Mag Uidhir’s tacit theory rejects at least the aesthetic theory of art, a theory which could give art status to his failed portrait of aunt Teresa. Moreover, it does not seem true that his Attempt Theory applies to all works of art, even though it applies to many. For instance, Anne Frank’s *Diary* and Fernão Lopes’s *Chronicles* were not literature attempts (and therefore not art-attempts), but both are now regarded as literature and therefore as art. Anne Frank’s *Diary* was meant to be a journal, with no literary pretensions, and Fernão Lopes’s *Chronicles* were attempts at history, even though they are now studied in Portuguese Literature courses and read as literature: their aesthetic (more precisely, literary) properties have made them gain that art status.

So Mag Uidhir’s “Attempt Theory” and his distinction between art and failed art is far from being uncontroversial, and despite the author’s claims of independence from any substantive theory of art, it relies on a tacit theory of art that is at least a rejection of an aesthetic theory of art. In fact, the Attempt Theory which Mag Uidhir

puts forward denies artistic status to the aesthetic properties that were not intended by the artists. This seems to me a high price to pay, since it is certain that artists are not aware of or responsible for all the aesthetic properties their works end up possessing: many aesthetic effects are unconsciously produced and part of the value of works of art is due to their amazing and surprising aesthetic results, arrived at in a variety of ways, consciously to a great extent but with unconscious elements as well. Furthermore, it is not always clear (in fact, most of the time it is not clear) which aesthetic features were intended when producing a work of art, so Mag Uidhir's theory leaves us with uncertainty as to what we can interpret as artistic in most works of art. In addition, the intentions of the artist are not always publicly available. So if Mag Uidhir's theory is correct we can say very little (from an artistic point of view) about most works of art.

The theory that "something is an artwork if and only if that thing is the product of a successful art-attempt" (p. 86) is, therefore, far from uncontroversial. Moreover, without endorsing a theory of art it is hard to see what distinguishes a failed art-attempt from a successful art-attempt. Mag Uidhir's theory requires additional clarification about what makes art count as art. Saying "whatever those [conditions] may be" (*passim!*) is not enough. For instance, we need to know what makes Camões's epic poem a masterpiece. We need a principled way of distinguishing between Júlio Dinis's largely failed attempts at poetry and his clearly successful attempts at novel writing. We need to know what makes Eça de Queirós's novels so successful as literature. (We certainly don't want to claim that public, institutional, success is the only criterion to distinguish good art from bad art or failed art).

The controversy of the Attempt Theory does not end here. For example, the wish to preserve the Attempt Theory leads Mag Uidhir to conclude that "PHOTOGRAPHY cannot be an art form because to be a photograph is to be the mere causal product of a certain photochemical process, and being a mere causal product of photochemical processes is neither attempt-dependent nor intention-dependent" (p. 119). Granted, not all attempts in photography are works of art. But neither are all attempts in painting or literature or music always successful artistic attempts.

Despite my disagreement, I must say that this book is an inter-

esting and praiseworthy book. With a variety of examples, most of them from contemporary art, *Art and Art-Attempts* offers thought-provoking discussion in the meta-philosophy of art. The choices of the artistic examples assume, however, a theory of art that is more inclusive than some readers would be prepared to endorse. And Mag Uidhir does not tell us what are the criteria used to endorse his tacit theory of art. So he leaves us with no way of distinguishing art from “failed art”. For example, Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, John Cage’s *4’33”*, Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* and (*pour couronner le tout*) Manzoni’s *The Artist’s Shit* are all art-attempts. But what makes them “successful” or “failed”? Is the admission into the circle of art critics sufficient for a work to qualify as a successful art-attempt? The problem is that Mag Uidhir’s account does not provide a way to decide on this crucial matter, leaving us with no distinction between works of art and failed works of art. He offers the following:

artworks and failed-artworks are both products of the right sort of attempts, the difference being that artworks satisfy the conditions for being art (*whatever those may be*) by virtue of the way in which those attempts succeeded while failed-artworks do not satisfy the conditions for being art (and so, are non-art) by virtue of the way those attempts failed. (p. 17)

The underlying and professed ignorance on this matter is therefore crucial. To give the art examples Mag Uidhir gives, he must endorse a theory that allows their inclusion.

We are thus left very curious about what makes some things works of art and others just “failed” works of art. This book is very thought-provoking and a good contribution to discussion in the philosophy of art. The starting point and main thesis is, however, and despite the author’s claims and best intentions, contentious and will certainly invite questions and rebuttals.

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