

Repeatable Artworks and the Relevant Similarity Relation  
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In *Art and Art-Attempts*, Christy Mag Uidhir argues that an artwork must be the product of an art-attempt that could, in principle, have failed.<sup>1</sup> Because being the product of an attempt is a causal-intentional notion, artworks must be able to stand in causal relations. As many have observed, abstract objects, standardly construed, cannot stand in causal relations. Therefore, Mag Uidhir says, artworks, whether repeatable or not, cannot be abstract objects.

Theorists including Sally Haslanger, Barry Smith, and Amie Thomasson have argued that the standard division of ontological space into abstract and concrete objects is inadequate to account for socially constructed objects: there are plenty of things, like races, laws, musical works and games, that human beings bring into existence through causal processes and that cannot be reduced to concreta.<sup>2</sup> However, Mag Uidhir hews to the traditional ontological categories of abstracta and concreta, standardly construed. Having ruled out the possibility that artworks are abstracta, he is thus motivated to give an account of them as concreta.

When it comes to singular, object-based artworks, this is not a problem: for a work of painting to come into existence, there is a causal-intentional process that eventuates in a concretum that didn't exist before. But for repeatable artworks, especially those that aren't typically understood as object-based, we have a puzzle: if only concrete entities can be artworks, then how can there be artworks like Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* or Nina Simone's song "Mississippi Goddam"? There are probably millions of concrete entities associated with Morrison's novel and Simone's song, but none of them seem essential to the corresponding works, and the works are not reducible to any one of them or, arguably, to the class thereof.

Mag Uidhir suggests that the puzzle can be solved by way of an account of relevant similarity: when we speak of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* as though it were a singular entity, that's loose talk. What we really have are a bunch of concrete objects, most of which are printings of the novel, that stand in a relation of relevant similarity to one another, such that it's appropriate to use the same label, '*Beloved*', to pick them out. Here, I will examine the relevant similarity account more closely and also consider whether and how it can be applied to music, since this is a subject that Mag Uidhir largely defers in his book.

What is Mag Uidhir's account of relevant similarity? To get it straight, we must first note that when Mag Uidhir uses the word 'poem' or 'novel,' he is referring not to a sequence of words devised by an author, but to something like a piece of paper to which ink has been applied in a particular way, or an event in which someone speaks certain sounds. So *Beloved* is not one novel: there are millions of *Beloveds*, including all the millions of concrete printings that we normally speak of as copies of *Beloved*. What unifies these printings is not that they partake in or instantiate some abstract entity like a structure of words, but that they are all relevantly similar to each other in being the product of one and the same art-attempt. Of two poems (that is, two concrete poem-printings), Mag Uidhir says, they are relevantly similar "if and only if the way in which one satisfies the conditions for being a poem just is the way in which the other satisfies the conditions for being a poem"<sup>3</sup> or "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."<sup>4</sup> Even if two different people make the

copies, there is only one person, the poet, who has made the successful art-attempt that explains their arthood.

### What is a Successful Art-Attempt?

Here we must examine what an art-attempt is, on Mag Uidhir's view. I'll focus here on *successful* art-attempts, since the relevant similarity relation doesn't arise for unsuccessful art-attempts (which don't eventuate in artworks at all). Mag Uidhir says,

[F]or an artwork to have an artist just is for there to be some agent directly responsible for that work being art (i.e., for the way in which that work falls under the sortal *artwork*), and ... for an agent to be directly responsible for something being art just is for that agent to be the source of the intentions directing the activities constitutive of the successful art-attempt of which that thing being art is the product.<sup>5</sup>

We have a few elements here: an artist, her intentions, her activities, her created work, the art-sortal under which the work falls, the fact that the work is an artwork, and the way in which it is an artwork. Elsewhere, Mag Uidhir notes that often, a work satisfies the sortal *artwork* simply by the way in which it satisfies some other art-sortal, like *poem*. As I understand it, on Mag Uidhir's view, a successful art-attempt is an event in which a person intends to create a concrete entity that satisfies the conditions for falling under some art-sortal in a particular way and takes a series of actions guided by that intention; and the entity does in fact satisfy those conditions in that way as a result of those actions.

If I copy down the words of *Beloved*, I am causally responsibly for the existence of the resulting novel (that is, the concrete novel-printing), but I am not thereby the author of any novel. This is because I have not made an art-attempt, much less a successful one: I am not responsible for the *way in which* the resulting concrete novel satisfies the conditions for being a novel. It is Morrison who is responsible for this.

Mag Uidhir's view allows that even if two novels are both artworks, and both contain tokens of the same string of words, they may not be relevantly similar: it depends on whether or not they are both products of the same art-attempt. If two authors unaware of each other's artmaking activities coincidentally generated two poems containing the same words, then these poems might not be relevantly similar despite their similar structures.

### Prints and Relevant Similarity

To understand Mag Uidhir's model better, we will look at it more closely in relation to prints, a case Mag Uidhir develops at some length. Mag Uidhir says that for two prints to be relatively similar, two conditions must be satisfied. They must be "roughly qualitatively similar (i.e., roughly similar with respect to appearance)." And this similarity of appearance must be due to the fact that they "were both printed from one and the same template ... by the same sort of physical process ... onto the same support." In other words, they must "share all constitutive appreciable print features ... by virtue of sharing a production history."<sup>6</sup>

This view makes the artist's authorization irrelevant to the relevant similarity relation. Any print that is pulled from the same plate onto the same kind of support in such a way that it very closely resembles the earlier prints pulled from that same plate onto that same kind of support will be relevantly similar to them, no matter who pulls it and no matter whether the artist authorized it. Mag Uidhir is aware of and endorses this consequence.

Someone who wished to reject the consequence could modify the account by adding another condition, according to which part of what it is to share a production history is to share

the artist's authorization, in cases where part of the successful art-attempt is the authorization of prints. Some hold that when an artist authorizes an edition of 50, we should reject the idea that print 51, pulled from the same plate without the artist's authorization, is relevantly similar to the other 50, regardless of how similar its appearance. Those who share this intuition could still adopt Mag Uidhir's view, and could reject the idea that print 51 shares the full required production history with the first 50.

Can relevant similarity be cashed out in terms of rough qualitative identity and sharing of "all constitutive appreciable print features"? A problem arises because prints authorized as part of the same edition often don't look exactly alike. This is, I gather, what Mag Uidhir aims to allow when he mentions *rough* qualitative identity. Since subtle aspects of appearance are certainly appreciable features of a work of visual art, two prints that differ subtly in their appearances don't share "*all* constitutive appreciable print features." Moreover, this problem can't be solved simply by appealing back to production history, because some prints produced by the same process will be flubbed, clearly too different in appearance to count as relevantly similar to the rest.

Ultimately, what is needed here is an account of when two prints share *enough* appreciable features in common: or, to put it differently, when two prints are relevantly similar in appearance. So I worry that the problem of accounting for relevant similarity has simply been pushed back a step: two prints are relevantly similar when they share a production history and are relevantly similar in appearance.

This might be a reason to enrich the account by appealing to artist's authorization. It makes sense to think that a major component of the artist's successful print-attempt is the determination of the appearance features that prints must share in order to count as relevantly similar. So perhaps we could say that they must share a production history *and* have the appearance features that the artist deems necessary.

I think it's fairly obvious why Mag Uidhir has chosen to avoid this: it's because a set of appearance features that has been authorized by the artist and must be realized in each print sounds rather like an abstract structure, and Mag Uidhir aims to avoid appeal to abstract entities in his ontology. However, he does say,

I suppose there is a plausible account according to which abstracta, although still precluded as art onta, may nevertheless play a crucial role within art ontology – e.g., not as artworks but instead as a means by which to fix the relevant similarity conditions for the various art-concreta.<sup>7</sup>

So, if it turned out to be necessary to appeal to an abstractum to fix the relevant similarity relation, this might not be a catastrophe.

A related worry about the account of relevant similarity can be derived from a case of appropriation art. As Mag Uidhir discusses in the book, Elaine Sturtevant made some of her works by borrowing, with Warhol's permission, the screens Warhol used to make some of his artworks. Notice that if Sturtevant pulls a print from Warhol's screen onto the right sort of support, and if her print looks sufficiently similar to his, then it just is relevantly similar to Warhol's, on the account we've been discussing: it looks about the same, and it shares the same production history.<sup>8</sup>

In his discussion of the example, though, Mag Uidhir denies this, on the grounds that Sturtevant's print is not the result of the same successful print-attempt as Warhol's. "That [Sturtevant's] print (or the production thereof) is composed of a Warhol print doesn't entail that

Warhol is directly or even indirectly responsible for the way in which [Sturtevant's] print is a print."<sup>9</sup>

In relation to this example, then, we see that two prints' having a relevantly similar appearance and physical history of production is *not* sufficient for their being relevantly similar artworks, because it isn't sufficient for their being the product of one and the same print-attempt. It seems, then, that we need to return to the notion of sameness of art-attempt, over and above sameness of appreciable features and production history.

Ultimately, I suggest that to make this account work, we need to insert an additional component, according to which part of the artist's intention-directed activity that constitutes a successful art-attempt is the specification of what is required for relevant similarity. In my view, the artist can specify both aspects of what counts as relevantly similar structure or appearance *and* aspects of what counts as relevantly similar production history (though these decisions may be constrained in some ways by the art form in question and the historical context). Sturtevant's print isn't relatively similar to Warhol's, because the relevant similarity relation for Warhol's work excludes prints produced later by someone else as part of her own artistic practice.

### Musical Concreta and Relevant Similarity

Mag Uidhir does not offer an analysis of repeatable works of music, and he suggests that if no analysis of them in terms of relevant similarity is available, then we should simply reject the idea that musical works are works of art. In my view, that's a rather extreme consequence to embrace, and here I want to examine the prospects for avoiding it given the resources of Mag Uidhir's account.

There are many sorts of concreta associated with (what we normally speak of as) a musical work. Here I'll focus on performances. Accounting for a song as a repeatable artwork is complicated by what I will call aesthetic nesting. Any two performances of "Mississippi Goddam," whether they are both by Nina Simone or are by two different artists, such as Simone and Carole Alston, will have different aesthetic properties. This is because, as we might say in philosophical parlance not conditioned by nominalism, the nature of the song underdetermines the nature of the performance. Performers make aesthetic and artistic contributions over and above those of the composer: they make choices about tempo, dynamics, vocal timbre and myriad other factors that are not specified by the song itself. This remains true even when the composer and the performer are the same person.

To account for the view that a performance can both be an artistic work in its own right and be a performance of a song, which is a repeatable artwork, we need to be able to offer the following picture. Two concrete performance events, call them 'Mississippi Goddam – Simone – 1964' and 'Mississippi Goddam – Alston – 2005,' are distinct musical performances, and thus distinct, non-repeatable artworks. However, nested within each of them is an additional concretum, the song "Mississippi Goddam;" and these two nested concreta are relevantly similar to each other (even though the two performances within which they are nested are not relevantly similar).

Does Mag Uidhir give us the resources to understand the repeatability of songs along the lines of such a picture? On the surface, it appears not. Mag Uidhir says, "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..."<sup>10</sup> Since the two concrete performances were generated via distinct art-attempts composed of different intention-

directed activities, it's hard to see how they could have, nested within them, concreta that are relevantly similar.

But perhaps there is a way of understanding Simone and Alston as each having made two distinct attempts, an art-attempt and a mere copy-attempt, that eventuated in the concrete performance-event. First, each made a performance-attempt, which is an art-attempt. Simone's and Alston's performance-attempts are clearly different from each other, as are the resulting performance-works. But in addition, perhaps Simone and Alston each made a song-copy-attempt, analogous to my novel-copy-attempt described above: when I copy *Beloved*, Mag Uidhir claims, I am not making an art-attempt. Although I do make a novel, I am not thereby its author, because *the way in which* it is a novel (and thus an artwork) is attributable to Morrison and her intention-directed activities, not to me and my intention-directed activities.

This story sounds good so far. But the difficulty that confronts us now is in accounting for the fact that the song being copied by Simone is relevantly similar to the song being copied by Alston. For all we have are concreta, and every concretum that is a performance, including Simone's first-ever performance of "Mississippi Goddam," will have aesthetic properties in addition to those that are integral to the song. So, what must I copy in order to be copying the song "Mississippi Goddam" when I create a new performance? Presumably, I must copy those features that are the product of the intention-directed activities constituting Simone's successful song-attempt. But if all I have to go on are earlier concreta, how do I distinguish those features from other features the concreta may have?

To try to answer this question, I looked to Mag Uidhir's account of an art-practice. Perhaps, if we have an understanding of song-practice as a kind of art-practice, and of what the specific art-relevant aims of song-practice are, that will inform us about which features nested within the performances must match in order for the nested song-concreta to count as relevantly similar.

Now, it would obviously be unreasonable to expect Mag Uidhir, in a book like this, to give us a fleshed-out account of what constitutes song-practice or novel-practice or painting-practice as an art-practice. He does give us a hint when he speaks of painting-practice: he says that, since accidentally spilling paint is not a painting-practice, a work that appropriates an accidental paint spill is not a work of painting, though it may be an artwork, and a very good one.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, though diary entries and letters can be appropriated within works of literature, diary-practice and letter-practice are not art-practices, since they don't normally produce literary works.<sup>12</sup>

More generally, Mag Uidhir's account of an *F*-practice, where *F* is an art-sortal like 'song' or 'painting,' is as follows: "for a practice to be an *F*-practice is for that practice to constitute an *F*-attempt (i.e., an attempt with success conditions that, if satisfied, entail the satisfaction of the conditions for falling under the *F* sortal) aiming at the production of a work in the *F*-medium."<sup>13</sup>

Here's the rub. Let's turn back to the example of my copying of *Beloved*. Mag Uidhir has denied that, in copying *Beloved*, I thereby author a novel, even though my actions do directly result in the existence of a novel in the only sense in which novels can exist, on Mag Uidhir's view. I am not the author because Morrison, and not I, is responsible for the way in which my novel satisfies the conditions for counting as a novel and thus as an artwork.

But when we look at Mag Uidhir's definition of an art-practice, and also at his grounds for rejecting some things as art practices, it is harder to see why my copy-attempt is not also an art-attempt. For one thing, successful novel-copy-attempts are aimed at producing, and do very

reliably produce, things that fall under the sortal *novel* and the sortal *artwork*. For another thing, my novel-copy-attempt really is “an attempt with success conditions that, if satisfied, entail the satisfaction of the conditions for falling under the [*novel*] sortal.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in making my novel-copy-attempt I do aim to create something that satisfies the conditions for falling under the sortal *novel* in a particular way, and if my novel-copy-attempt is successful, then it does in fact satisfy those conditions in that way. Now there is more than one way to describe the particular way in which I aim for my product to fall under the sortal *novel*. One aim I might have is for my product to satisfy the conditions for being a novel in the same way that Morrison’s *Beloved* does, whatever those may be. And another aim I might have is for my product to satisfy the conditions for being a novel in some detailed way specified within my intention, where I recognize this to be the way in which *Beloved* satisfies the conditions. But either way, I have engaged in a kind of attempt that, if successful, reliably produces things that fall under the sortal *novel* and the sortal *artwork*, I have intended to satisfy the conditions in a particular way, and my product does in fact satisfy the conditions in precisely that way. So my attempt sounds rather like a novel-attempt, and *ipso facto* rather like an art-attempt. Moreover, given the prevalence of examples of appropriation art and Mag Uidhir’s desire to accommodate such examples, it’s not clear that we can block this simply by rendering impermissible art-practices whose aims invoke ways of falling under art-sortals that have already been pioneered by others.

To return to the musical case: given this analysis, it is not clear that we can separate Simone’s and Alston’s activities in producing their performances into two distinct attempts, a performance-attempt (which is an art-attempt) and a song-copy-attempt (which is not). Song-copy-attempts seem also to satisfy the criteria for being art-attempts, in the absence of further analysis. If we wish to defend the reality of the song as a repeatable artwork, we may be forced to think of Simone and Alston as having each made two nested art-attempts that eventuated in two distinct concrete artworks, both evident during the same performance attempt. Is there a way to sort these two art-attempts, and these two artworks, out from each other? I’m not sure. No way of doing so presents itself as entirely obvious.

I don’t mean to suggest that there is no way to solve this problem. Obviously, Mag Uidhir does not mean for a novel-copy-attempt (or a song-copy-attempt) to come out to be an art-attempt. All I mean to show here is that the accounts of art-attempts and art-practices may need to be enriched to rule this out.

One way of enriching the picture, in line with what I suggested above, would be to say that when it comes to repeatable artworks, to make an art-attempt is not just to create a product with the aim that *it* be an artwork in a particular way, but also to specify the set of features that any other artwork must have in order to be relevantly similar. The account enriched in this way would help to explain why *Beloved* remains Morrison’s novel despite the fact that in copying it, I did succeed at creating a novel, and I did successfully intend that my novel fall under the sortal *novel* in a particular way. Morrison’s attempt is a successful art-attempt, and mine is not, because she is in charge of the relevant similarity relation. Another way of putting this is to say that she has some kind of normative or regulatory relationship with the repeatable artwork that I do not.

The same goes for Simone and “Mississippi Goddam.” In *performing* “Mississippi Goddam,” she creates a performance-work that is aesthetically replete and unrepeatable. But in *composing* the song, she creates not just a concrete entity but also a set of norms governing the relevant similarity relation that determines which other performances have concrete “Mississippi Goddam”-copies nested within them.

The idea that the art-attempt eventuates in some normative or regulatory entity that governs subsequent art concreta is, I gather, one that Mag Uidhir wishes to avoid. My suggestion here is that he hasn't yet given us enough resources to be confident that we can avoid it. My hunch is that the most promising avenue for further development is in the notion of an art-practice. But it remains to be seen whether the notion of an art-practice for repeatable artworks can be spelled out in a way that doesn't involve the artist in dealings with abstracta after all.

Regardless of that, the notion of repeatable artworks as the products of an art-attempt made by the original artist, even if someone else produces the subsequent concreta, is a valuable addition to our arsenal of tools for understanding repeatability.

### Repeatable Artworks and Aesthetic Education

Mag Uidhir's view that repeatable artworks are concreta connected by a relevant similarity relation has significant implications for the aesthetic education of artists and art appreciators. Particularly when it comes to music, Mag Uidhir's view may vindicate the intuitive notion that appreciating a work of music just is appreciating a performance: the composed musical work *is* (or is embedded in) the performance, so there is no need to engage in appreciative acrobatics of abstracting away from the performance to some distinct entity. Perhaps full appreciation would involve also grasping the nature of the relevant similarity relation that links the various concreta associated with "Mississippi Goddam;" and this, in turn, seems linked to appreciation of the successful art-attempt by which Simone created the originary concretum. If this is correct, then Mag Uidhir's view may have some affinity with David Davies' position that to appreciate an artwork is, most fundamentally, to appreciate an artist's creative activity.<sup>15</sup>

As artists are mastering the creation of repeatable artworks, they too may benefit from education about the concrete nature of their artistic products, if Mag Uidhir's view is correct. The way that artists conceive their artistic activity might shift if they come to see their products not as abstracta, but as concreta governed by a relation of relevant similarity: in particular, they might come to see their art practices as practices of shaping this relation. Many contemporary visual artists, even working in art forms that are not typically construed as repeatable, are already giving specific attention to this matter when they provide instructions about how their works are to be installed. Though El Anatsui's 2007 work *Dusasa II* is certainly a concrete object, a tapestry composed of liquor bottle caps and wire, Anatsui has indicated that the relevant similarity relation governing displays of the work does *not* involve its being draped in exactly the same way each time it is exhibited. Allowing installers the freedom to choose how to hang the work makes manifest Anatsui's *nomadic aesthetic*, which, as he says, "is about fluidity of ideas and impermanence of form, indeterminacy, as well giving others the freedom, or better still, the authority to try their hands at forming what the artist has provided as a starting point, a datum."<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Anatsui is attending directly to the relevant similarity relation: specifying this relation is part of his artistic practice, over and above the making of concrete entities for display. This allows his artwork to express something beyond what the concrete entity alone expresses. If artists working in overtly repeatable art forms are trained to see the specification of relationships among concreta as integral to their artistic practice, this would create a rapprochement between art practices in repeatable art forms and those at Anatsui's end of the spectrum of non-repeatable art forms.

It might also create a shift in priorities, away from the articulation of an abstract entity and toward attention to the way that artworks function in the world: the fact that the concrete entities through which we appreciate a repeatable work must be constructed in empirical

circumstances by real agents with their own peculiar aims, knowledge, preferences and abilities. Whether or not one accepts Mag Uidhir's ontology, his attention to the role played by the relevant similarity of concrete entities in repeatable art forms has the potential to shift how both artists and appreciators understand artistic practices in these art forms.

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

<sup>2</sup> See Sally Haslanger, "A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race," in *Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age*, eds. Barbara A. Koenig, Sandra Soo-Jin Lee, and Sarah S. Richardson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 56-69; Barry Smith, "How to Do Things with Documents," *Rivista di Estetica* 50 (2012): 179-198; Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Amie L. Thomasson, "The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 221-229.

<sup>3</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 185-6.

<sup>4</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 197.

<sup>5</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 175-6.

<sup>7</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 193.

<sup>8</sup> The Sturtevant example works only if it is slightly fictionalized, since in reality Sturtevant typically included a visible flaw in her appropriation works that would distinguish them from the originals.

<sup>9</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 93-4.

<sup>13</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 92.

<sup>14</sup> Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art-Attempts*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with El Anatsui by Kate McCrickard in *El Anatsui 2006* (Cape Town: David Krut Publishing, October Gallery, 2006), n.p.