Full Response to Xingjie Du and Mengjie Zhou

1. Introduction

I am grateful to Xingjie Du and Mengjie Zhou for taking the time to review my book *Art as Communication: Aesthetics, Evolution, and Signaling* (Lexington Books, 2024). It is always a delight to discover that someone has found one's work worth reading and engaging with. It is even more humbling to have one's work reviewed in a professional journal.

The purpose of this note is to respond to critiques raised by Du and Zhou (2025) about several of the arguments presented in my book and to offer clarification on what I see as a few important points of misinterpretation. I will focus on four of their worries in particular.

2. Interpretation and Disclosure

The authors mention that what they see as the most significant issue in my book is my handling of the ontology of art. The case they focus on is my analysis of French-born artist Marcel Duchamp's readymade piece *Fountain* (1917). They claim that I maintain this work cannot be included in the list of things we might consider art because I hold the view that it "does not imitate anything" (1). More broadly, the authors appear to worry that I hold the view that "art should be used as a tool to express or represent something," that I believe *Fountain* does not do this, and so that I do not consider it a work of art (1). Du and Zhou then suggest that the theories of Heidegger and Danto can make sense of Duchamp's *Fountain*, and that since those theories share certain features with the sender-receiver model, the model can handle the *Fountain* case too.

The first problem with this critique is that I do not write in the book that Duchamp's *Fountain* cannot be included in the list of things that count as art. I mention that critics now consider it a work of art and that this was not always the case – a simple historical fact. I also mention, while assessing the resemblance theory of art, that Duchamp's fountain would not count as art according to *that* theory. But the resemblance theory of art is a theory that I do not hold. I accept that resemblance can be a part of *some* works of art, but I do not hold that *all* works of art must function in this manner. Indeed, *Fountain* would not appear to fit the standard resemblance theory account of art because it was not created by the artist with the intention that it resemble or imitate anything – the piece just was a urinal that Duchamp picked out and then put on display. The piece does resemble other urinals – it was part of a series of urinals created by a factory via a mold. But the urinal itself used *as* a work of art was not imitating anything. Duchamp, instead, in his displaying of the urinal, meant for the object to serve as a commentary on just what art is – whether a work of art need be something created by the artist and whether it must have some sort of thing that it "stands for". Later in the book, I take on the case of Duchamp's *Fountain* from the point of view of the sender-receiver model and I suggest that it can count as a work of art if we look at it from the model's perspective.

What is key to the sender-receiver model, in brief, is that there is a sender who "sends," produces, or displays a work of art and a receiver or audience who observes the work (where 'observes' should be taken in a broad sense here, to include hearing, reading, or otherwise perceiving the work) and evaluates it for some sort of aesthetic quality. There has to be some sort

of role that the work plays in the sense of communicating some state of the world, feeling of the artist, or something else to the receiver. There must also be something that the receiver or audience does in response to that work of art – some action they take, feeling they have, or some other reaction – and that reaction must in some way be able to feedback and influence subsequent artistic production by the sender. The work of art under consideration need not accomplish any of this through its resembling anything or imitating anything else – it *can* do so but it does not *have* to.

Duchamp's *Fountain* functions as a work of art because it fits this basic picture. The work sends a message, namely one *about* the nature of art, about institutional authority, about what counts as aesthetic value. There are receivers meant to observe and evaluate the work (the art world, critics, viewers) and very plausibly a reaction receivers were supposed to have upon viewing it – namely, reconsidering what art is and perhaps what outputs from artists would henceforth be considered fair play in the art game – that could in some way influence Duchamp's subsequent productions. If people did not understand what Duchamp was trying to express with *Fountain*, he might have tried something else next time to better convey his message. The piece also benefited from being used within an art-historical context – a context of already shared sending and producing conventions and history, a context Duchamp no doubt used to help decide how to craft his message and that helped receivers determine how best to interpret it. I could have been clearer about all of this. But I never meant to rule out such works from the art category.

Regarding Martin Heidegger's (1950/2002) analysis of Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* and Arthur Danto's theory of art as put forward in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), Du and Zhou are right, I believe, that these views might be accommodated by the sender-receiver model – though, I am not sure how much Heidegger would agree with what I am about to say here.

I do not interpret Heidegger as wanting to say that a painting *communicates* something – at least, not on his interpretation of that word. On Heidegger's view, Van Gogh's painting instead does something like *reveal* or *disclose* the "being" of the equipment and the peasant woman's world. Through the painting we encounter what the shoes are in their full context, including the weight of the wearer's labor, the soil, the peasant's relationship to the earth, the whole form of life within which the shoes have their existence. This is not, says Heidegger, something we get from just looking at an actual pair of shoes, because actual shoes in use are too much part of the background of everyday life to even be noticed. In a work of art, however, the shoes are set up in such a way that the work brings into being their "truth" for us by *un-concealing* what is ordinarily hidden.

The question then is whether this kind of "un-concealing" or "disclosing" is a form of communication. I would suggest that it is. If I am trying to disclose to you the true nature of some object and trying to do so via a painting of it, that can, of course, go well or not – can be successful or not. If it does not go well, if you are unable to interpret what I am trying to disclose correctly, I might revise my painting. There is a back-and-forth there, feedback. There is something I am trying to get across to you and something you are receiving, interpreting, and responding to. It is hard to see how this use of art would not fit the sender-receiver framework.

Danto's book takes a completely different approach and is in many ways a response to questions raised by conceptual art and Pop Art, particularly Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964). Danto's main worry is that if a Brillo box in a supermarket warehouse is visually indistinguishable from Warhol's *Brillo Box* in an art gallery, what makes one art and the other not? Since you cannot answer this by simply looking at the objects themselves, the difference must be something other than the objects' perceptual properties.

Danto's solution is the theory of the artworld and what he calls the "atmosphere of theory." An object like Duchamp's *Fountain* becomes art on this view when it is interpreted within an art-historical and theoretical context that "transfigures" the object – in other words, that lifts it out of ordinary reality and into a different ontological category. The commonplace object (a Brillo box, a urinal, a pair of shoes) is transfigured into art not by being changed materially but by being seen under a description, interpreted within a framework. Art is essentially *about* something – it has "aboutness" or "intentionality" – and what it is about is a function of interpretation *within* the artworld.

Danto's account is also partly a theory of representation and rhetoric – artworks make statements, embody attitudes, propose ways of seeing. Two visually identical objects can be completely different works of art if they are about different things. The way Danto handles the Brillo boxes is more or less the same way I handled Duchamp's *Fountain*. It should be fairly obvious that Danto's theory fits well within the sender-receiver model too.

3. Mate Attraction and Sexual Selection

The second worry Du and Zhou raise is that they interpret my view as suggesting that "art is primarily a tool for mate attraction and sexual selection" (2). To be clear: they do not claim that I take *all* art to be serving that purpose – human or animal. But they do seem to think that this is my view of the *main* role of art and not just from the point of view of evolutionary history but for all art today.

The short of it is that I do not hold this view. I do not see art as primarily a tool for mate attraction, especially in the human cases. I also do not take the view that art is something that originated for this purpose – though, I admit that I do not have a settled view about art's origins. In the book, I do argue that in the case of non-human animals artistic production seems to serve primarily a mate attraction purpose. However, I explicitly argue that art is not primarily such a tool in the case of human artistic production. The reason for this is simple. Plenty of human art is created for non-reproductive purposes: to make money, to decorate a venue, to make some occasion special, to communicate some feeling or state of the world. Children make art. Adults who cannot procreate or who have no interest even in dating make art. Some art is made just for oneself to consume – so-called private art. There is also art made to scare off enemies for one's protection or to mark territory. Of course, some human art is made to seduce others or to advertise one's sexual fitness in some way. But not all human art is, and I have strong doubts that even most of it has this role.

The data on animal artistic production tends to point in the other direction. It does seem that most, if not all, animal art – at least in the wild – is made for reproductive purposes or has some intimate connection to reproduction. A case that seems to offer the best prospect for a departure

from this role is the song of the humpback whale. These songs are sometimes created outside the mating season (Magnúsdóttir and Lim 2019; Schall et al. 2021), and there is apparently a good amount of variability and creativity in their design (Garland et al. 2011). There are also, of course, cases of animals like Congo the chimpanzee and Pigcasso the pig, who were famous for putting paint to canvas in more – for lack of better words – artificial settings. Yet it seems the majority of bird dances, songs, and structures, the dance of the peacock spider, the nest of the white-spotted pufferfish, and other aesthetic behaviors in the animal kingdom, have some sort of connection, direct or indirect, with mate attraction. Many philosophers want to doubt that these productions count as art, in part because of this connection – for example, Davies (2012) and Johnson (2022). I do not. Others might worry still that if we accept that these cases do count as art, this greatly increases the number of works connected to reproduction, thus bolstering the claim that art is primarily for reproductive purposes. I think, however, that such a conclusion would be too strong. The human art cases are simply too central and significant to be dismissed as a peripheral exception, especially to a rule derived mostly from creatures whose aesthetic behavior we can, at best, only partially interpret.

4. Maps, Blueprints, and Models

The third critique I will respond to is that my position appears to be that some maps, blueprints, diagrams, and models might fall into the art category. Du and Zhou write that this seems to "broaden the scope of art but actually blurs the boundary of art to some degree" and what is more that "if these objects are randomly included in art, the boundary of art is not clear and becomes confusing" (2-3).

I would agree that my account does do these things – that it broadens the scope of art, blurs the boundaries, and that it takes some maps, blueprints, diagrams, and models to fall into the art category. However, I do not see any of this as problematic. I would be surprised to find that many art theorists consider the broadening of scope or blurring of lines to be a drawback of the model or that the account's including some cases of maps, blueprints, and other devices counts as a counterexample to it. To be clear, I do not argue that *all* or even *many* maps, blueprints, diagrams, or models count as works of art. Some really are just tools for guiding action and communicating information. But I do take *some* of these devices to be works of art or to at least include artistic elements. Some maps are explicitly made with artistic intentions behind them and are not designed, or not just designed, for navigational or informational purposes. Among the best examples are pictorial maps and illustrated maps. Some maps even have cartoons on them and are meant to be humorous – I am reminded here of the famous maps of Arizona drawn by George M. Avey (famous in Arizona at least). Satire maps are also common – maps that illustrate geographic stereotypes or make some sort of political commentary. Then there are, of course, fictional maps – like the one drawn of Middle Earth by J.R.R. Tolkien. The same sorts of artistic functions can occur in blueprints, diagrams, and other devices.

More importantly, however, these categories do come in degrees and they can overlap. It is not difficult to imagine that I might design a model to help a friend better understand some aspect of biology but also try to design it so that it is beautiful, elegant, or in some other way aesthetically appealing. This is not uncommon among scientists, cartographers, or architects. Of course, there are sometimes boundaries and guidelines the design of these object must follow, limits to how much artistic flair or function can be added to these objects. But that does not mean that there is

not sometimes room for embellishment or other aesthetic moves to be made or that some of these devices are not made with primarily artistic purposes. To rule out that maps, blueprints, diagrams, models and the like can be artistic or works of art in their own right would seem a strange move; it would rule out many cases of these objects that were intended by their creators to be art. That something cannot be created to be a tool *and* a work of art just goes too much against common intuition and well-accepted archeological interpretative practice.

5. Shades of Grey

I will address one final worry Du and Zhou mention. It seems to trouble them that the sender-receiver approach allows for degrees and shades of grey in the art category and in a way that goes beyond the kind of category blurring mentioned in the last section. They say that the view seems to make what counts as art "strongly dependent on the people who determine it but weakly dependent on the object itself" (2). They write further, "In other words, this process is only weakly related to the intrinsic and relational properties of the artefact" (2).

To some extent this is a view that I accept. But it is also one that I do not see as being an issue. What counts as a work of art just is always going to be community or agent dependent to some extent. It is unavoidable. I can imagine we might meet an alien species on another planet and they might have some weird objects in their homes or in their world. We might wonder what those objects do or are for. And then when we get more familiar with that alien culture and learn their language, we might realize that those objects, for them, are works of art and are treated as such. They might even make works of art that we humans simply cannot even experience – we have only so many senses after all and different brains may perceive the world in different ways. Would this then mean that those products are not works of art – just because we cannot experience them as such? I would say that they are art, given that they were created to be art and are being appreciated or could be so appreciated by at least *somebody*, even if not us. That we humans do not or cannot experience something as a work of art does not mean that it is not a work of art – unless we, of course, want to restrict the category of art to only those pieces that can be appreciated by humans, and I see no good independent reason to do that. If an alien species tells us something is a work of art, and their audiences appreciate and react to it as a work of art, why should our inability to recognize it as such be what settles the matter?

The same general moral, of course, applies across human cultures. Some hand axes from the Lower Paleolithic are symmetrical, finely worked, and seemingly too large or fragile to have plausibly been used as functional tools. However, for a long time they were classified as exactly that. It is only in the past few decades that some archaeologists have started to argue that some of these hand axes may actually have been primarily display items or status symbols – the thought being that the "just a tool" explanation does not quite fit the evidence (Kohn and Mithen 1999). The issue remains a live debate in archeology (Machin 2008; Key, Lycett, and Gowlett 2025). But it does show that the line between object and artwork is not always so obvious, even in human cases and even to a trained eye.

Conclusion

Much of what I have said here depends on what we mean by 'Art' with a capital A. Some want to restrict art to only what is created by humans – perhaps because they think certain kinds of intentions are required for the creation of art, or because they think art created for mate attraction

is not really art. Others want to restrict the category further to the fine arts or to only objects detached from any other possible non-aesthetic function. My view is that art should be seen as a category that comes in degrees. Some cases seem paradigmatic – a painting in a gallery – others seem on the edge – a well-crafted aesthetic display of jack-o'-lanterns on a front porch, a mating dance by a bird of paradise. Some works serve more than just an aesthetic purpose. Some are just not clearly cases of art or cases of *not* art, and for these, our best answer to the question of whether it is a work of art will sometimes be no better than "Well, sort of". I thank Du and Zhou for giving me the opportunity to respond to some of their worries about the views expressed in my book and reason to clarify several aspects of my position. It is not every day that you get to grapple with such interesting questions or that you have the chance to further clarify your thoughts. I hope this response will help further discussions of what the nature and boundaries of this peculiar part of our world are and how it works. Art is one of the fascinating features of life. We should all be so lucky to indulge in its wonder at least once in a while.

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