What is the difference between a work of art and an ordinary object? This is the lead question of Peter Lamarque’s perceptive study on the metaphysics of art. When an artist creates a work of art, does she merely bring about changes in pre-existing objects, rearranging materials that have been there already before the creative process, or does she bring into existence something completely new, a new kind of entity? Michelangelo famously opted for the former, arguing that in every block of marble there was already a statue present; the task of the sculptor was merely to discover it and make it visible to the others by removing the excessive material. In this perspective, rather than creating a new object, the artist modifies some properties of already existent objects, for example by reshaping the surface structure of a block of marble with mallet and chisel. Peter Lamarque, in contrast, advocates the essentialist thesis, according to which the artist brings into being entities that have not existed beforehand. The statue, he argues, is not numerically identical with the (carved) block of marble; we rather have to do with two distinct objects that bear two distinct sets of essential properties. The fact that the two occupy the same space at the same time does not show that they are identical, but rather, as Lamarque suggests, that “the coincident objects are not of the same kind” (50). The block of marble is a physical object, while the statue, like all works of art, is a cultural or institutional entity, which, unlike the former, bears aesthetic properties among its essential properties—which might surprise given that in Lamarque’s institutionalist account aesthetic properties are conceived of as relational properties.

Lamarque illustrates the basic problem of non-essentialist conceptions of artistic creativity (like that of Michelangelo) by showing that their plausibility might arise from a false analogy with cooking: when preparing a dish, we merely modify physical objects, but do not create a new entity. When frying an egg, one merely alters some physical properties of the egg, but not its essence: a fried egg is nothing but an egg. When an artist creates a work of art, on the other hand, “the constituting material acquires intentional and relational properties that previously it did not possess” (44). Works of art, thus, are not on a par with lasagne al ragù, soufflé, or stuffed turkey—however sophisticated the preparation of the respective dishes may be—but rather are comparable to entities such as “schools, churches, and laws. A new school is a genuinely new (institutional) object in a community not identical with the buildings that comprise it” (54). So works have intentional and relational properties among their essential properties; they bear “complex relational properties which embed the works in a cultural, art-historical, and broadly institutional, context. Without appropriate cultural and institutional background conditions there would be no works of art even if there were by chance objects physically indistinguishable from those we call works of art.” (105)

With this form of aesthetic essentialism Lamarque ties the existence of works of art to that of social practices, i.e. to communities in which certain expectations, special kinds of appraisal, as well as the possibility of locating works in traditions and styles and attributing meaning or symbolism, are anchored. This dependence on social practices is decisive both in the moment of creation and for the survival of the work. As for the former, Lamarque reminds us that a work of art cannot come into existence by random, it cannot be a mere by-product of an arbitrary or unintentional bodily movement. A dog who excitedly wags his tail in the artist’s studio and accidentally spills oil over a canvas does not create a work of art. To do so, the artist has to pursue a conception, purposefully applying a series of procedures with the intention to produce a specific work, which comes into existence when the process of creation is completed, i.e., when the artist decides that his
conception (which, of course, might undergo modifications or even substantial changes in the production process) is realized: “completing a work is not just deciding to stop—i.e. to stop manipulating the materials—but it involves making that decision in the light of a conception of what has been achieved, against a background of cultural practices that determine what is possible at a given time.” (41)

In consequence, unfinished works, like Mozart’s Requiem or Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, are not works of art in the proper sense “[t]hey are a kind of appropriated work.” (37) Lamarque reminds us (i) that most of the famous examples of unfinished works are by artists who are famous for other works they have completed, (ii) that, though unfinished, these works have come to a point of elaboration that makes them an object of interest in its own right, and (iii) that often efforts have been made by others to complete the work (cf. 36f). Lamarque therefore suggests: “Perhaps we need (already have) a distinct category of works—unfinished works, in their many different forms—that invite their own special modes of appreciation, related to, but not identical with, the modes associated with completed works.” (37)

Lamarque’s discussion on unfinished works shows, in my view, that his overall conception puts too much weight on the artist’s intentions in the process of the creation of the work. There are works of art that do not seem to have been completed in the light of the artist’s conception but are nonetheless appraised as genuine works of art. Take, for example, Michelangelo’s non-finito sculptures: it is not clear (nor, I would add, relevant) whether Michelangelo modified his original conception of the works when he last worked on them or just lost interest to complete them; even if the latter was the case, there are good reasons to regard them as determinate works of art (rather than as unfinished works that might be completed by some other artist). Moreover, the fact that the statues have not been completed is often considered relevant for their interpretation—it can be taken to manifest Michelangelo’s views that the sculpture was already present in the block, waiting to be made visible by the sculptor—but it is not at all clear that this aspect was part of Michelangelo’s original conception (nor is it clear that he later modified his conception in order to embrace this aspect). Since there is no evidence as to why (or even: whether) Michelangelo did not complete his non-finito sculptures, it seems natural to suggest that the judgment concerning the work being complete can be taken not only by the artist, but also by informed interpreters of the work. The artist’s decision, in other words, might be sufficient, but not necessary for a work to come into existence.

Not only the creation of a work, however, but also its survival depends on social practices. “The continued existence of any work depends on the continued possibility of the work’s being responded to in appropriate ways.” (69) With this, Lamarque emphasizes the fact that works essentially have intentional properties: a work “is not an ‘ideal’ entity, existing only in some mind …, but it is an intentional entity, depending essentially on facts about how it is taken to be by qualified observers.” (69) The reception of a work is possible only due to a series of social practices that might gradually change over time—with the result that the identity of the work might undergo gradual changes, as well. Most importantly, the existence of a work can come to an end at some point. If, for some reason or other, the relevant practices are not carried out any longer, the work fades into oblivion and ceases to exist: “To the extent that the conditions of work-identity are bound up with the conditions of cultural possibility it seems inevitable that work-survival will be at least partially a matter of degree. Works can fade into oblivion as cultural conditions change and as cultural memories are lost. An analogy might be the gradual disappearance of a language.” (118) Imagine, for example, that some archaeologists find an ancient scroll that turns out to be the only remaining testimony of a long lost culture. The scroll might contain inscriptions as well as drawings, but since we have no further knowledge of this culture—nor (for the sake of argument) a way to find out more about it—we are not able to read or translate the inscriptions. We cannot even understand the significance of the drawings, for even if we were able to figure out what they depicted, we could not possibly recon-