
Book Review

NOË, ALVA. *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. Hill and Wang 2015, 285 pp., \$28 hardcover.

Reviewed by Lauren R. Alpert

Strange Tools is a strange text. I do not mean this pejoratively; the sense of ‘strange’ I intend is that of *inviting curiosity, provoking inquiry, beckoning examination* — the same sense Noë uses in describing artworks as “strange tools.” By this, he means that artworks have the capacity to reorganize our lives by putting human practices on display for investigation.

Noë’s unorthodox ways of speaking about art (especially through vivid analogies to doorknobs, language, and other tools) will be eye-opening novel to lay readers. For philosophers, on the other hand, the book’s colloquial tone and non-scholarly format might prove more unsettling than its content. Readers expecting an academic monograph may experience this book as an invitation to rethink how a contemporary work of philosophy can be pitched and organized. For philosophical novices and professionals alike, then, Noë’s book achieves what he believes to be the common goal of art and philosophy: to reveal us to ourselves, challenging us to reconsider our practices instead of plowing through them rotely and unreflectively.

Most of the book’s innovations are on the surface level of its presentation. Its broadest claims — that art influences human behavior, that art instructs us about our own experiences, and that we interact with art instead of passively receiving it — risk striking philosophical readers as platitudinous. Moreover, Noë often misses out on the opportunity to display his more specific claims in the best light by defending them against compelling alternatives from ongoing debates in philosophy of art.¹ For example, Noë does not acknowledge the contentiousness of his assertion that art cannot have a function (and even more strongly “is the subversion of function” (98)). Neither does he bolster his claim that “all art, always, has been . . . preoccupied with other artists and the nature of art itself” against inevitable charges of ahistoricism (136).

That Noë’s discussion skirts (and sometimes bypasses altogether) much relevant contemporary work in aesthetics may be a consequence of the book’s outgrowth from his prior work in the

¹ The book’s organization contributes to this impression. Nary a footnote or in-text citation appears in *Strange Tools*, and substantive references and expansions on issues raised in the text appear only at the end of the book.

philosophy of cognitive science.² Noë's discontentment with the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics, for example, is an expansion upon his more general critique of research programs that assume that everything to be discovered about the human mind rests within the confines of the skull. Noë argues (primarily in Chapter 10) that neuroscience is ill-equipped to reveal anything about our mental engagements with art, since researchers can collect data only from subjects in experimental conditions at a far remove from the amalgam of dynamic cognitive, affective, and critical practices that characterize real-world engagements with artworks. This is an important concern about the ecological validity of findings from this field, but even if neuroaesthetics' prospects for illuminating *art* are inauspicious, this may not diminish the value of its investigations of *aesthetic* evaluations and experiences.

The central argument of the book is presented in Chapter 4. Noë contends that all art forms are higher-order ("level-2") practices, which display and investigate first-order ("level-1") activities that humans do by nature: talking, dancing, making pictures, and the like (29). He contends that art practices not only constitute an invitation to re-envision our first-order practices, but "loop back and *change* first-order activities," often without our noticing (31).

To illustrate this model, Noë considers dance practices. *Dancing*, he claims, is a basic, natural, spontaneous, and universal human activity. *Choreography*, however, is not dancing, but rather a representation or display which "exhibits the place dancing has, or can have, in our lives" (14). The latter 'loops back' onto the former: people dancing spontaneously will "cite and sample the postures, attitudes, steps, and styles that they have consumed" (31).

Dance is a troublesome choice to exemplify this model. For starters, Noë does not argue, but simply assumes, that dancing is 'basic', 'spontaneous', etc., in conformity with his characterization of "level-1" practices. Secondly, there are many structured, non-spontaneous forms of social dance which, falling outside the domain of dance artworks, do not neatly fit Noë's characterization of choreography as an investigatory art practice. Whether choreography structured into dance artworks genuinely effects a change in the spontaneous dancing of its viewers is not obvious (and perhaps not desirable — most of us would injure ourselves by appropriating the movements executed by professional performers). Lastly, even if individuals do dance differently after observing choreography, this doesn't demonstrate that choreography changes viewers' behavior in virtue of being an *art* practice: any cultural practice could plausibly inspire social mimicry.

Another instance where Noë's presentation of dance seems suspiciously distorted to suit his view of art is his suggestion that "choreography knows itself to be, at least in part, a quest for a not yet discovered method of notation" (37). While it is true that dance artworks are rarely notated (and if so, usually retroactively and imperfectly), dance practitioners as well as theorists are divided on whether or not notation systems are necessary or even desirable for preserving choreography. For example, Renee M. Conroy makes a compelling case that dance practitioners embrace and reinforce as a "core value" a vision of dance as an ephemeral art which resists notation or recording.³ Noë's discussion of dance (an oft-marginalized topic within philosophy of art) would be much enriched by the inclusion of perspectives from specialists within the philosophy of art, especially those holding competing views.

Strange Tools foregoes stolid conventions of professional philosophy, laudably broadening the book's appeal to accommodate a popular audience. Yet Noë's manner of glossing over complex issues about art does not necessarily render these topics intelligible to philosophical novices. Instead, his oversimplifications will tend to confirm naïve notions that art is straightforward — a common misconception that a foray into the philosophy of art ought to dispel, not corroborate.

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² *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

³ Renee M. Conroy, "Dance," in *The Continuum Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Anna Christina Ribeiro (London: Continuum, 2012), 156–70.

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