Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature
Alva Noë
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In *Strange Tools*, Alva Noë argues that art and philosophy are two species of the same genus in virtue of the fact that they share the same function. That function is to reflect on the ways that our lives are structured and ordered and to thereby gain some understanding of who we are, what we are, why we are. That understanding can then be used to re-order and re-structure our lives. Like philosophy, art is a kind of investigation of ourselves, according to Noë. Furthermore, because the technologies we incorporate into our lives change the way our lives our structured, the task of investigating ourselves is never-ending. Thus, art and philosophy will never end—at least as long as we remain human. One gets the sense that—although I never found a place where Noë explicitly says it—because being human is a kind of achievement, it is not a foregone conclusion that we *will* remain human. For example, one might imagine a nightmarish future such as is envisioned in the movie *WALL-E*.

I've closely followed Noë's work ever since I read *Action in Perception* as a graduate student in the early 2000s. It is characteristic of Noë's books that he makes bold, thought-provoking claims and defends those claims with interesting arguments. Furthermore, his arguments are always informed by a number of different intellectual traditions—from analytic philosophy, to continental philosophy, to cognitive neuroscience, to history, to literature. It is this breadth of background and the boldness of the claims that make his work not only interesting to read but also ripe for philosophical discussion. As such, Noë's work would be pedagogically useful in a range of different settings, from senior seminars to introductory courses at a community college. (Indeed, I have used them in both of those contexts.) *Strange Tools* is no exception to Noë's other books in any of these respects.

The fundamental idea that animates *Strange Tools* is a Heideggerian distinction between our active, embodied engagement with the world, on the one hand, and our reflective understanding of the world, on the other (chapters 1, 2). The former is deeply rooted in our biology and shared with other non-human animals. When we are mindfully engaged with a task, the world kind of drops out as an object of reflection. (When Lebron James is playing basketball, he is not thinking about the basketball as such.) This is so not only with skillful tool use (Heidegger's example) but also with *perception itself*. Perception, for Noë, is a kind of embodied achievement that is more akin to the sense of touch than we realize, but the way we accomplish perception is characteristically opaque to us. More generally, our lives are "organized" both by our biology and by our culture in ways that are characteristically opaque to us. We find our lives structured in determinate ways but we do not often

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reflect on that structure. What makes us different from non-human animals is that we can reflect on that structure. We can reorganize ourselves. Art's essential function according to Noë is this two-step process of occasioning reflection on our normal, habitual modes of interaction with the world and then reorganizing ourselves based on the understanding we gain (chapter 4). It follows from this that art is, in its essence, revolutionary.

How does art accomplish this function? According to Noë, art occasions reflection in a similar way that philosophy does: by posing a question or puzzle. Artworks pose these puzzles in virtue of the fact that they are "strange tools"—tools that are stripped of their characteristic function or context (98). By stripping tools of their characteristic function we put that function and the role it plays in our lives on display for reflection. Consider, for example, the difference between the function of photographs in a clothing catalog versus artistic picture making (45). Because we understand the context of the photograph in the catalog, the photograph is a tool for us, namely a tool for representing the clothing. When we see the photo in the clothing catalog, we, so to speak, see through it to the thing itself. Being able to do this is a culturally developed skill. Like all efficient tool use, the tool itself drops out of our awareness and simply enables us to accomplish our task (in this case, seeing what the piece of clothing looks like). When we examine a catalog photograph we aren't examining the picture per se but rather the thing pictured. In contrast, an artistic photograph (or any other kind of artistic image) is examined for the representation itself, not what is represented. And this is exactly the point of artistic picture making. The artistic picture maker makes pictures that themselves put our use of pictures as tools on display and thus occasions reflection on that practice. There are endless ways that visual artists do this: the way Vermeer does it (questioning what can be represented in a portrait, according to Noë—p. 166) is very different than the way Picasso does it. But the crucial point is that all artistic picture makers are making strange tools—tools that raise the question "what is it?"

According to Noë, art is something you "get" and thus art is more about the conversation around the artwork than it is the artwork itself (202). Just as Plato's dialogues have philosophical value (above merely historical interest) insofar as they occasion philosophical reflection, so too artworks have artistic value insofar as they occasion reflection on the "organization" of our lives—what we value, why we do what we do, how we understand ourselves. As noted above, artworks occasion reflection by posing a question "what is it?" Noë claims understanding a work of art is analogous to understanding a joke: just as the point of the joke is that "aha!" moment of understanding, so too the point of art (97, 111). Like jokes, "getting" an artwork depends on a background of shared understanding and context. Thus, just as certain jokes will be opaque to certain audiences (who lack that shared background and context), so too certain artworks will be opaque to audiences that don't share the background needed to "get" the art. In general, Noë claims that the

aesthetic value of art lies not simply in the aesthetic experiences we have, but in the understanding that the artwork occasions—the "getting it." Sometimes the gap between the puzzlement ("what is this?") and the understanding ("aha!") is quite long and because this can be so, Noë thinks that art always contains the possibility of being *boring* (chapter 9). Furthermore, because there is something to be "gotten" it also follows that one's appreciation of art is something for which reasons can be given and in this way art differs from merely subjective things like one's favorite ice cream flavor. Because our responses to art require justification it follows that there can be disagreement over art (201). This is as it should be if the project of understanding art is a part of the project of understanding ourselves: since there is no one correct way of understanding ourselves, it follows that people will not always agree on the value of an artwork. In this, too, art mirrors philosophy.

Noë admits that his conception of art applies most easily to modern art—after all, it is quite easy to see modern art as containing many "strange tools" and it is not as easy for us today to recognize, for example, a Vermeer painting—or even a Van Gogh—as a strange tool (103). Duchamp's "fountain" or Warhol's Brillo Boxes are perhaps paradigm examples of what Noë calls "strange tools" *for us*. But if Noë is right, then *all* artworks—insofar as they have value as artworks—are strange tools. The ones at a further historical remove from us may not be strange to us anymore, even though they once were. And that is because our first-order practices often take up those second-order artworks and change our first-order practices (chapter 4). Noë discusses this most often with respect to writing and pictures. Literature and poetry (and philosophy) invent new (strange) ways of writing that put our use of language on display for reflection; visual artists put our use of images and picture making on display for reflection. In both cases, it often happens that those ways of writing and picture-making circle back and seep their way into our first-order, habitual practices. What this means is that what counts as an artwork changes through time: what once was an artwork may no longer be an artwork. That is, although we might value the object for various reasons, it may have ceased to be an artwork because it no longer carries out the characteristic function of art (104).

One of the things about *Strange Tools* that I think may pose a pedagogical challenge is that there are many examples that may be out of reach for certain undergraduate students. For example, one of Noë's early illustrations concerns the art of dance—i.e., choreography. He notes that choreography is not dancing but, rather, the putting of dance on display (in a similar way that a model apartment is not an actual apartment but simply a display of an apartment). To me, it seems like choreographed dance is still dancing. It's just that I lack the requisite knowledge to really see the difference. I suspect that many undergraduates would be in the same position.

The good thing is that there are many other examples of art discussed in *Strange Tools* that will likely have more traction with typical undergraduates

(if there even is such a thing). An instructor using this text, or any part of it, could easily set aside less accessible examples and focus on those examples that are easier to understand. One such example that looms large in chapter 15 is music—in particular the distinction between pop music, on the one hand, and classical, jazz, and Broadway musicals, on the other. Noë refers to Roger Scruton's curmudgeonly criticism that popular music (which includes rock, pop, hip hop, etc.) is not art because there is no artistry in the music, which according to Scruton is just too simple and uninteresting to be art (169). Instead, Scruton thinks that pop music trades the veneration of artistry for the idolization of cults of personality, such Kurt Cobain. Noë argues that Scruton is wrong to think that pop music contains no art, but not for the reason you might think. He actually agrees with Scruton that the *music* of the pop artist is not art. But he thinks that the art lies elsewhere, namely, in the way that pop artists puts *themselves*, and in particular, *style*, on display. For pop artists, the music is simply a vehicle for the artist and it is the artist herself that is the artwork. Pop musicians don't create musical art, they create fashion art (p. 177). In contrast, in classical and jazz, the art is in the music, namely the composition. With these kinds of music the musician is a vehicle for the music, which is the artwork. What we care about here is the music more than the person playing the music—or so Noë argues. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Noë on this, one thing is for sure: this claim and the supporting arguments are likely to create some good discussion within the classroom. This is one of the features that makes *Strange Tools* pedagogically strong.

One of Noë's ongoing philosophical concerns is to challenge a certain kind of reductionism that he finds within neuroscientific explanations. In numerous places in *Strange Tools* (esp. chapters 8, 10, 12), Noë challenges neuroscientific accounts of the nature and function of art. In short, the problem with neuroscientific accounts of art is that they treat the artwork as merely a stimulus for a certain kind of subjective aesthetic experience. It is that subjective experience that neuroscientists then try to explain. Pictures are just images that are similar to the objects they represent; music is just sounds that the brain interprets as meaningful. The significance of the artwork here drops out and is replaced by whatever is going on in the brain. But this can't possibly be correct, according to Noë, and the only reason one might not realize this is that they are in the grips of a dogma. When you think about it, Noë claims, there is really very little that a portrait of my grandma shares with my actual grandma. In any case, it is central to Noë's position that no adequate theory of art can substitute the brain state that results from engagement with an artwork for the artwork itself.

In the movie *Zoolander*, Derek Zoolander, when presented with a model of his "Center for Kids who Can't Read Good," looks carefully at the model and then crashes it to the ground exclaiming, "What is this? A center for ants? How can we be expected to teach children to learn how to read, if they can't even fit inside the building?" I think Noë would say that the neuroscientific

dogma that reduces *all* seeing to pictures in the brain—a kind of residual Cartesianism—makes neuroscience susceptible to the Derek Zoolander fallacy of conflating the represented with the representation. It is part of Noë's ongoing philosophical project to root out this residual Cartesianism that reduces objects to pictures in the brain. An orange is not the same as a picture of an orange and any view of art that sees these two as similar will inevitably misconceive of the value of the artwork. There is a lot of technology built into pictures; they are user-friendly tools that humans have developed over millennia (159). We sometimes forget this when we are looking at a picture because, well, that skill has become second nature for us. But in understanding a picture we understand that what is being shown is not present. (This is why animals and infants who might respond to pictures as stimuli are not yet understanding the picture qua picture—p. 158.) Likewise, when we hear music the object of our attention is not just "sound waves." Rather, we are bringing a context to those sounds waves (for example, *what* is making those sounds and the *way* those instruments and voices were recorded) and that context cannot be divorced from what we are hearing any more than the meaning of words can be divorced from the words we hear uttered.

Strange Tools is a fascinating read that covers many different areas of philosophy and engages with interesting ideas that are sure to animate almost any classroom with lively discussion. The endnotes, complete with short summaries of the main points of each of the seventeen short chapters that comprise the book, is a commentary on the ideas within the text, that link those ideas to the academic conversations from disciplines that inform the book. I think this helps achieve a more readable text that will be accessible to a wider audience of readers. If you teach a philosophy course that engages with ideas about what art is, what human nature is, or what philosophy is, then *Strange Tools* is likely to invigorate your course.

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