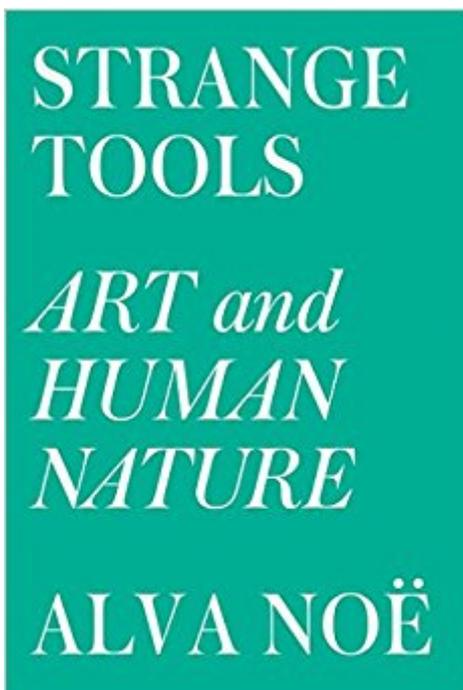


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Strange Tools: Art And Human Nature



Synopsis

A philosopher makes the case for thinking of works of art as tools for investigating ourselves. In *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, the philosopher and cognitive scientist Alva Noë argues that our obsession with works of art has gotten in the way of understanding how art works on us. For Noë, art isn't a phenomenon in need of an explanation but a mode of research, a method of investigating what makes us human--a strange tool. Art isn't just something to look at or listen to--it is a challenge, a dare to try to make sense of what it is all about. Art aims not for satisfaction but for confrontation, intervention, and subversion. Through diverse and provocative examples from the history of art-making, Noë reveals the transformative power of artistic production. By staging a dance, choreographers cast light on the way bodily movement organizes us. Painting goes beyond depiction and representation to call into question the role of pictures in our lives. Accordingly, we cannot reduce art to some natural aesthetic sense or trigger; recent efforts to frame questions of art in terms of neurobiology and evolutionary theory alone are doomed to fail. By engaging with art, we are able to study ourselves in profoundly novel ways. In fact, art and philosophy have much more in common than we might think. Reframing the conversation around artists and their craft, *Strange Tools* is a daring and stimulating intervention in contemporary thought.

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Customer Reviews

“With incisive arguments and in crisp and engaging prose, *Strange Tools* brings the discourse on the function of art and beauty to a different level.” —Giovanni

Frazzetto, *Science* – “A stimulating and wide-ranging investigation of the meaning of art . . . A searching and learned response to vexing, long-debated questions.” – Kirkus Reviews – “Noë’s offers a unique analysis on the role of art, and also philosophy, in our lives. Readers with an interest in philosophy, aesthetics, or art will find this an accessible and engaging read.” – Scott Duimstra, *Library Journal* – “As a neurologist, confronted every day by questions of mind, self, consciousness, and their basis, I find Alva Noë’s concepts both astounding and convincing.” – Oliver Sacks – “Alva Noë’s *Strange Tools* challenges some of our preconceptions not only about art and human nature, but also about philosophy and science. The book shows how bad ideas about each of these subjects support bad ideas about the others. It is passionately argued, and readers will want to argue back at various points; that is true too of the best philosophy and the best writing about art.” – Hilary Putnam, Cogan University Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Harvard University – “As Alva Noë gracefully dispatches one reductionist account after another (the neurological, the sociobiological, the evolutionary, and so forth), his subject—the very nature and provenance of art—just keeps expanding outward. And every page seems to open onto fresh vantages, crisp and evocative of how art endlessly affords us all new ways not just of seeing, but of being.” – Lawrence Weschler, author of *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* – “In his new book, Alva Noë spiritedly suggests that, at their best, art and philosophy are practices of inquiry into the human condition. He defends, convincingly, the idea that the value of those practices derives from the questions they pose and the pleasure we experience when we glean a workable, reorganizing answer. Along the way he argues, advisedly, against reductive accounts of aesthetics. A stimulating read.” – Antonio Damasio, David Dornsife Chair in Neuroscience and director of the USC College Brain and Creativity Institute, University of Southern California – “The projects of philosophy and of art-making cross over in this remarkable book. Read it, and whatever you thought about both will be radically challenged.” – Alexander Nagel, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University – “Organisms organize their interaction with their environments. Human beings can consciously organize and reorganize that interaction. Making, appreciating, and talking about art are among the ways that human beings do this, and thus are characteristic of human life itself. On these simple but undeniable truths, Alva Noë builds a devastating critique of contemporary ‘neuroaesthetics’ and an illuminating account of the role of art in the human conversation. This is a work in the grand tradition of John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, and one of the most important books in that tradition since Dewey’s own.” – Paul Guyer, Jonathan Nelson Professor of

Humanities and Philosophy, Brown University

“Inspiring as well as useful.”

Deborah Hay, director of the Deborah Hay Dance Company

“Many have told us, passionately, that art shapes human nature in ways science alone cannot explain, but Noë doesn’t just tell; he shows how many insights flow from an open-minded understanding of both art and science combined. He walks the tightrope between reductionism and mysterianism with panache, and part of the fun of reading this book is watching him recover from his narrow escapes, almost abandoning naturalism in favor of a romanticized vision of science as poetry, and almost giving some ideologues more respect than they deserve.”

Daniel Dennett, author of *Intuition Pumps and other Tools for Thinking*

Alva Noë is a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, where he also serves as a member of the Institute for Cognitive and Brain Sciences. A graduate of Columbia University, he holds a B.Phil. from the University of Oxford and a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Noë is the recipient of a 2012 Guggenheim fellowship and is a weekly contributor to NPR’s science blog 13.7: Cosmos & Culture.

Alva Noë, in *Strange Tools*, brings us through the semiotics of writing (“Art is writing ourselves”), a strange tool (not merely functional) of Noë’s creativity (“Art looks like technology. It is useless technology; works of art are strange tools”), putting on display the aesthetical and philosophical engagement with the problem of what is art, what is philosophy, what is human nature. He presents this problem as a kind of solution, not as product or as a goal reached, but as a reorganizational experience of what we have known as true about ourselves and the world, toward a new creation of understanding ourselves differently from before, more richly and meaningfully as experiencing a new reality of ourselves and our world. He expresses how this creative process is the domain not only of art (not just as aesthetics), but also of philosophy (not just as intellect). Art and philosophy at their core both put our known selves on display from a new, previously unknown perspective to a greater creative capacity of appreciation, understanding and richness of ourselves and our world. This is the Kantian beautiful (sublime) of Alva Noë’s display of the similar resonance and power of art and philosophy to transform our lives. “Art is disruptive and destabilizing, and also . . . a mode of investigation, a form of research aiming at transformation and reorganization . . . a philosophical practice” (p. 73) Art in John Dewey’s image is “a transaction of doing and

undergoing. (p. 78) "Consciousness is not a neural event inside us . . . experiences are temporally extended patterns of active engagement between whole living being and their worlds (including, I might add, their social world). As Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson write: brain, body and world make consciousness happen. (p. 124)

"Dewey said: art is experience . . . it's about what we do with the art objects . . . the work of art. (p. 133) "Art stands forth for you as Heidegger might say, it shines as exemplary . . . it affords you an experience. (p. 205). To progress to deeper levels of Noe's project is to pay even greater attention to the prodigious notes at the end of his work, *Strange Tools 2.0*, where we find his interactions with Heidegger, Kant and deeper philosophical and aesthetic issues. He refers to Heidegger's classical expression of his phenomenological position in "The Origin of the Work of Art" as how we encounter Van Gogh's painting of the pair of shoes: "The painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be . . . the art work lets us know what shoes [a piece of equipment] are in truth . . . the equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the work and only in the work. (pp.34-35) Heidegger brings us to phenomenology of experience of the work as objective equipment which also has an effect on our experience "somewhere else than we usually tend to be. However he still does not articulate the full process of how work is primarily a singularity, a unique nonrepresentational event of becoming based not on the equivocality of the identity of Being which privileges the anthropocentric, but on the univocity of difference as being based on immanence, multiplicity, virtuality, and the creation of nonrepresentational concepts. There is a similar problem with Kant regarding the aesthetic in "The Critique of Judgment" which Noe affirmatively quotes: "When he puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself but for all men and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. (S212) Noe says about this, "If you try to deny the claims to universality implied in our aesthetic judgments, the you lose a grip on the phenomenal itself. This is Kant's fundamental insight. (p. 261)

Again uniqueness of experience is subjugated to the universal and the representational, the claim of truth of aesthetic judgment, at the expense of the singular and the creative power of nonrepresentational experiences and concepts.

Some years ago, I was talking with an artist. He asked me about the science of visual perception. I explained that the vision scientists seek to understand how it is we see so much of the colorful and detailed world of objects spread out around us in space when what we are given are tiny distorted upside-down images in the eyes. How do we see so much on the basis of so little? I was startled by the artist's reply. Nonsense! he scoffed. That's not the question we should ask. The important question is this: Why are we so blind, why do we see so little, when there is so much around us to see? The quote above is from the Preface of Alva Noë's latest book *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. Noë is a philosopher at UC-Berkeley who focuses his research on mind and cognition. I have been a fan of his work for the last year or so, so I was excited when he came out with this latest book which deals with a subject that I concern myself with in my own work. His work initially caught my attention because he already does very well what I seek to do to some degree: blurring boundaries between disciplines and shattering harmful ideologies. After all, is this not necessary if we are to advance thought? It turns out that there is a lot that Noë and I agree on concerning art, and there was even more for me to learn concerning the relationship between art and philosophy more generally. He argues that both art and philosophy are transformative in that they force us to look at the world in different ways. As he explains in Chapter 8, a good work of art carries the message "See me if you can!" One cannot understand it with one simple glance. It takes a timely process of organizing and reorganizing our conception of a work of art to fully understand it, just as we must organize and reorganize many aspects of our lives. It is not until we understand the work to this degree that we are qualified to make a critical judgment about it. Art is a transformative tool, like philosophy or language, for shaping our understanding and expression of reality and of ourselves. In one of his previous works entitled *Out of our Heads*, Noë makes a convincing and nearly irrefutable case that we are not merely our brains. There is more to consciousness than neural functioning inside the brain. When we confine the mind to the brain, we leave out a crucial part of our being. We are not mere "lumbering robots" as Richard Dawkins argues. We have rights, responsibilities, and the power to make conscious decisions. What exactly is beyond our brains, whatever its nature, is still up for debate. Regardless, this transformation is not something that happens in the art itself, nor does it happen in us, as in, in our brains, as neuroaesthetics would suggest. Rather, art, and also philosophy, happen to us. Yes, there will be correlative changes in brain functioning, but those are merely byproducts of our active engagement with the work. Art is to the artist as philosophy is to the

philosopher. It is the beginning of a conversation that can cause controversy or enlightenment. It might make us uncomfortable at first because it causes us to question our perception as philosophy forces us to question our beliefs. But, it is later humbling, rewarding, and intellectually engaging. It is a tool for thinking critically, and it is strange because it is difficult to understand. Art and philosophy are both Strange Tools.

If you are an artist looking for answers or an exploration of art as philosophy this book is not for you. The last two paragraphs proved interesting and I wish that was where we started but the rest of the book was remedial. However if you often find yourself questioning why art is important or what makes art worthwhile than this book might prove useful.

This book brought art into a light I have continued to appreciate since reading it. It's truly excellent!

Wonderfully engaging piece!

Whoever made the comment about how the book doesn't explain "how our brains and society come together" clearly didn't read the book or is missing the point. The writing style is what has is why I love the book so much and because the ideas are refreshing. His style is approachable which makes the book simple enough to read but the complexities around aesthetics unfold throughout the book. I found it to be an intriguing kind of book that you don't really want to put down. It captivates the audience with very interesting and quirky personal anecdotes that makes you feel like you're having a conversation about art. I would recommend this book for people who want to learn more about art, people interested in philosophy and those who just want a really good book to read.

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