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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. What is art? Why does it matter to us? What does it tell us about ourselves? Normally, we look to works of art in order to answer these fundamental questions. But what if the objects themselves are not what matter? 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 you 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

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 – “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? – Alva Noë’s 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.

Noë builds a situationally based theory of art (his enactive approach) because, in his view, art is not in our heads. Yet, and a real problem with this book is that his view of art (and philosophy) fails to explain how our brains and society come together. Surely, even if he wants to define art “outside of our heads,” he needs to explicitly explain how the brains of artists and art enthusiasts are involved in art practices and commentary? He does not and this is only one of many ways in which his arguments seem to lack well thought out substance. The gist of Noë’s argument, as I understand it, is that artists and philosophers are doing the same thing because in both cases those who engage are looking for understanding, not breakthroughs and inventions. Communication allows us to understand more. What this amounts to, as I understand it, is that our ideas are like a musical score. We all play or interpret the score differently and through communication with other we refine our understanding of what is in the score. He invokes Kant to explain that his isn’t a relativistic position because, surely, there is some kind of universality that exists outside of our sensory (situational) space. The book’s most noteworthy feature is that it has no images. Yet art is

often discussed in terms of visual perception, seeing, and an array of artwork. Actually this book is really two books, with extensive notes at the back. The notes are not endnotes because the main text does not link to them in any way. The notes read as if they had served as an (abandoned) book proposal. It is in the notes where we find more of the critical studies type of information, while the primary text is quite breezy. There is a lack of integration between the two parts.

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