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Book Review

Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature

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Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature

Alva Noë. New York: Hill and Wang. 304 pp. \$13.59

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This engaging and refreshing book takes the reader carefully through a characterization of a wildly diverse field that is notoriously resistant to analysis. Remarkably, it does so in a way that is explicit and understandable and nonetheless succeeds in doing justice to the disruptive, rebellious character of art. This is a rare feat; so many cross-disciplinary analyses of art seem to move so far from what many love about art that they risk irrelevance, and so the success in this case deserves close attention.

As its title hints, this book puts forward a picture of art as resistant, powerful, and, in its idiosyncratic way, useful to us as reflective beings. The book is very ambitious in that it sets itself a broad remit, which includes the world of contemporary fine art, mainstream cinema, architecture, pop music, and so on; in short, anything that comes roughly under the category of art. The vast range of media and approaches thus encompassed requires that Noë's account be based in fairly broadly defined ideas about the underlying methods, aims, and concerns of practices that might be considered art, as opposed to focusing on the objects produced. The one line that Noë draws is to distinguish art from more functional pursuits such as design, a line that might seem more problematic were it not so clearly felt by those working within the art world.

Noë introduces his basic picture of art early on, carefully justifying it with reference to a bottom-up explanation of the basic principles that lie behind it, several examples, and some general arguments about the nature of particular traditions of art-making. A reader already familiar with Noë's work can probably skip the externalist arguments and discussion of organized activities, but it is to his credit that these are included, since research that hopes to reach a broad audience is most likely to succeed if all of the relevant ideas are properly addressed in the course of the text. In chapter 1, the notion of organized activities is introduced; these are a vast range of person-environment—or person-person—activities in which some rhythm or system is developed, the rhythms developed by parent and infant when breast- or bottle-feeding taken as a paradigmatic case. These activities, according to Noë, demonstrate the ways in which our actions are developed in dialogue with the world.

In the following chapters, Noë's basic thesis is introduced. It runs as follows: as well as organized, technological practices, art is there to reflect on and reform our organized activity, itself a *reorganizing* practice. This is illustrated by the case of choreography and dance. Dance emerges naturally in the lives of humans, and it is creatively and reflectively explored by—and subsequently performed with reference to—choreographed performance, which is done “to fashion for us a representation of ourselves as dancers” (17). This practice is characterized by an “evaluative attitude” (56). Noë then establishes a key parallel that he draws between art and philosophy: “Philosophy is the choreography of ideas and concepts and beliefs” (17). Art, then, folds back and comments on some of the

organized practices that we engage in just as philosophy constantly redevelops writing and the fixing of ideas. Noë states several times that art is made up of a range of “activities *bent on* the invention of writing” (36), a statement that is initially perplexing, since not all art results in permanent representations, let alone writing. This is clarified by his reference to Plato’s disdain for poetry, which Noë identifies as rejection of a repetition-based, oral tradition, as contrasted with writing as a method of fixing that can lead to contemplation and critical examination. The point then is not the outcome or the form that it takes but the attitude with which it is approached; playing with writing allows us to reflect on language, to experiment with it, to test out new ways to manipulate it, and thus to develop the ways that we write and speak going forward.

General theories of art can only really be made convincing by a demonstration of their relevance to a diverse selection of particular examples, and Noë launches into just such a demonstration in chapter 7. This book is exciting to read in part because of the examples he uses. So many texts claiming to cover the whole of art seem unable to account for anything less than fifty years old, or expound principles that hold for painting or music but seem entirely inappropriate for other disciplines. A reader accustomed to these difficulties could be forgiven for worrying when the first examples mentioned orbit the familiar poles of Cézanne, impressionism, and Richard Serra, but Noë launches satisfyingly into a nuanced discussion of far more varied and contemporary work from Tino Sehgal, Richard Lazzarini, Sarah Michelson, and Robert Irwin, throwing in Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* for good measure. Noë digs in to the quasi-performativeness of Tino Sehgal’s “live piece” (81) in such a way as to assuage any concerns that an account based in talk of inscription might lack the equipment to be relevant to performance. His discussion of the ambiguous boundaries of the work and the uncertainties that these provoke in the viewer are set up to nicely support a reading of the work as examining the nature of staged performance.

The book also supports its argument with a number of general points about the nature of art and of various forms of making. The end of the book provides a careful exploration of picture-making practices and of the more sociological aspects of music-making, intended to establish their nature as the kinds of organizing, technological practices that Noë described earlier, and thus that they are subject to exploration by reorganizing means. As a sculptor I have to say that I would like to see more said about sculpture, since the media used by different practitioners are so diverse, but a characterization as a method of enquiry through making seems to suit it so well. Noë also peppers the book with comments on art that demonstrate a good understanding of its complex place in our lives, rightly emphasising that art has the capacity to bore us, to slip out of our grasp, by virtue of the fact that its rules are not already established, that often we do not understand what we are supposed to do when faced with it. He observes that a good work of art may well

confuse us as it challenges us to find a way to come to grips with it: “See me if you can!” (102).

In chapters 5 and 10, Noë critiques evolutionary and neurological theories of art, each of which, he tells us, fails to really talk about the value or motivation of art-making itself, missing the point by focusing on the artefacts and their uses or the neurological processes they are supposed to trigger rather than the second-order, reflective aspects of the making process that make art important. It makes sense that Noë would focus on such neurological and evolutionary perspectives, since these are the kinds of arguments that he is accustomed to opposing. But having developed an exciting, nuanced picture of art—as resistant, and reflective—that will appeal to practitioners more than many of those adopted in other such cross-disciplinary projects, it seems a shame not to then take the opportunity to cement the appeal across disciplines by engaging more fully with the literature favored by such practitioners. A few of the big names in aesthetics come up—Kant, Heidegger—but Noë engages far more readily with cross-disciplinary work, which does not tend to be given much weight by practitioners of art, than theory from aesthetics proper, or the continental thinkers most often referred to by those working within the art world. This is particularly frustrating because he might well find some support in that literature, for example, in the well-respected work of Jacques Rancière; the talk of reflective practices that allow us to both perceive and alter our current systems of seeing and doing might find support in Rancière’s picture of art as allowing us to perceive and to break with the regimes of sense within which we operate. Rancière’s ideas have been presented rather impressionistically in a set of difficult-to-decode interviews, a stark contrast to Noë’s careful presentation. Identifying such links might do more to bring these ideas to an audience in the art world itself.

A difficult question is how broadly this understanding of art can be applied; the subject addressed is wide, and diverse in approach, and painting all artistic making with the same colors comes with its perils. Contemporary fine art is certainly self-referential and often derided for being so, but it is not always; could it not be that Noë has simply chosen a set of examples that suit his “reorganization” theme particularly well by virtue of their self-referentiality, and that works with a clearer subject matter, or a more experiential bent, might escape his grasp? It is certainly not true that all art takes itself to be about forms of depiction; Kara Walker’s *Fall From Grace, Miss Pippi’s Blue Tale* (2011) is surely about race more than it is about shadow puppetry, and Olafur Eliasson’s *Riverbed* (2014) seems to be more readily describable as an environment and an experience than as a comment. Noë avoids this problem by pushing the reflective reorganization a little out of view. The reflective work need not be so much an explicit exploration of something like the medium or form of making, but something more subtle, a method of enquiry directed at the ways in which we are accustomed to interacting with the world. The re-

flexibility is more an inherent feature of art-making processes than it is prescriptive of the subject matter that artists take themselves to be exploring. Walker is exploring the ways that we see and have seen ourselves, and Eliasson temporarily changes the way that we relate to the natural world. Noë's point then is a somewhat subtle one and one that is tricky to grasp, but given the subject matter, it could not really be otherwise.