

Alva Noë

**STRANGE TOOLS**

Art and human nature

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A still from Douglas Gordon's and Philippe Parreno's digital video installation, *Zidane*, (2006)

## Philosophy by other means

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What is art? Why does it matter to us? What does it tell us about ourselves? These are questions the philosopher Alva Noë asks, and attempts to answer, in this vibrant, ambitious and at times outrageous book.

Noë's theory of art is disarmingly simple. Here I am, shimmying thoughtlessly to the music on the radio or sketching a map on a scrap of paper to help you find my house. I am dancing or drawing, but I am not making art. For Noë, art begins when we reflect on the nature of dancing or drawing and present our reflections in the medium itself. Choreography explores the movements in which we casually engage and in doing so transforms them. The same is true of the visual arts, which

explore picture- and model-making in the non-discursive modes of drawing and painting and sculpture.

Noë embeds his account in a general theory of “organized activities”, which are natural, functional and purposively structured, but not, in their basic forms, reflective or self-conscious. We move and talk and perceive the world spontaneously, without wondering how. According to Noë, our technologies come to be organized in much the same way. They become “second nature”, unreflective but purposive: we make pictures, artefacts, tools. Organized activities occupy level one of an edifice in which art is level two. For Noë, art objects are “strange tools”: art uses organized activities, often technological, not for their customary ends, but to reflect on the activities themselves, exposing their hidden structures. Art investigates human nature.

If this sounds philosophical, it is. For Noë, art and philosophy are two species of a single genus, art doing in its distinctive media what philosophy does in analytical prose. The abstract expressionist Barnett Newman once complained: “Aesthetics is for the artist as Ornithology is for the birds”. If Noë is right, this is entirely wrong. Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds only if the bird is an ornithologist and her reflections on birdlife are expressed in elaborate aerial displays.

A universal theory of art is a tall order but Noë is not daunted. Nor is he oblivious of the risks. He offers his account “in the spirit of the younger Wittgenstein”, who aimed at a general understanding of what it means to think anything at all. But Noë concedes that the aim is doubtful. The height of his ambition

prompts occasional lapses of style and substance, as he ascends to the oracular: “conversation is an elaborate or elaborated form of breast-feeding”; “musical scores dominate musical practice, and their advent marks the birth of music as an art”; “objects are real; it took pictures for us to discover them”. These claims are analogically, historically and philosophically suspect, and they are not established in this book. But Noë’s main idea does not depend on them. What should we make of it?

Noë takes aim at competing evolutionary and neuroscientific approaches to art, documenting their explanatory failures. Such strategies tend to oscillate between improbable overreach and empty generalization. How much better does he fare? On the face of it, organized activities can be self-reflective without producing works of art. That philosophy counts as art by this criterion is something Noë welcomes, but it will strike others as a *reductio ad absurdum*. More significantly, not all art involves reflection on organized activities in Noë’s sense; that is, on the natural, functional, unreflective sides of human life. Art can reflect on our reflective sides, too. And even when it does reflect on organized activities, that is not the only aspiration of art. Art isn’t just about us and what we do, our natural activities and technologies, but about, well, whatever it wants to be about. Noë’s definition of art, like many others, avoids being empty at the cost of limiting its scope.

Behind the grand ambition of Noë’s book, there is a more modest but still enlightening thought: that much if not all art does reflect on organized activities in his sense, and that while it may do other things, this reflection is an especially fruitful object for critical study. What do paintings tell us about picture-making?

What does dance tell us about our moving bodies? What does poetry tell us about communicating with words? Noë is a brilliant critic, and he puts his approach to work in perceptive, memorable accounts of Richard Serra's "unnaturally sloping . . . hull-like sides of steel" and of Barnett Newman's impossibly scaled abstractions. He writes insightfully about scepticism in *Rosemary's Baby* and about Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's curious film *Zidane*, which follows the football star in close-up through a ninety-minute game. He explores the inherently meta-comedic dimensions of comedy, and has a wonderful chapter on pop music as performance art. All this in prose that glides from the conversational to the poetic, from personal revelation to lucid accounts of his inspirations, John Dewey, Martin Heidegger and Immanuel Kant.

Having characterized art as philosophy by other means, Noë refines his conception of philosophy as art: its subject matter is us and its aim is understanding, not discovery or theoretical knowledge. Philosophy presents us to ourselves in unfamiliar and illuminating ways. I don't think that is all philosophy can do, but it is certainly something, and Alva Noë does it with unusual and entertaining verve.