Book Reviews

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How Strange is a Strange Tool?

Alva Nöe starts his book, Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature with a quote from John Dewey – “By one of the ironic perversities that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formulation of an aesthetic theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them.” Nöe also ends the book by claiming that John Dewey gets the place of art in human life correctly. So, quite clearly, the philosophy of art offered in Strange Tools is consciously situated in the tradition of John Dewey’s Art as Experience.

This is seen very clearly in the final chapter, entitled, “A Very Abbreviated and Highly Opinionated History of Aesthetics.” Therein, art is described as a type of thought experiment that functions essentially the same as philosophy. He narrates a historic trajectory of aesthetic theory through Plato and Aristotle to Heidegger – the latter who he thinks correctly notes art’s place in “disclosing” and bringing our existence out into the open. Indeed, he cites Heidegger’s discussion of Van Gogh’s painting Shoes (1888), and the “ready to hand” as getting something really right. Yet Nöe claims that Heidegger’s analysis is hampered because it is offered in a manner that is too abstract. He also thinks that Kant was correct in thinking of the aesthetic as a space of criticism, as a location where you are led to ask what your commitments really are.

But ultimately Dewey’s work is seen as more important, indeed as synthesis of these previous theorists. Dewey is seen as correct in describing experience as an achievement and human life as meaning making activity. That is, we are all artists; “Art is an opportunity to make experience, to make ourselves, and
so to live.”¹ Beyond this in Strange Tools, “Art is philosophy,” because both are “putting all that about our condition and nature on display.”² Ultimately, furthermore, just like philosophy, “Art is writing ourselves.”³

Nöe sees three ideas as animating his book. First, while art is not a technological practice, it presupposes such practices. Technologies organize our daily lives. But not in any superficial way. In actual fact, technology is not just an addition to human life but rather technologies make us what we are. Our world and our selves are constituted by technology. Art, though not a technology, engages with these practices, techniques, and technologies and shows us how they organize us. That is, art is a way to understand our organization and also, following from this, to reorganize ourselves. Art is a strange tool in the sense that it is a tool that shows us the place and possibilities of other tools. Second, this entails that art is a philosophical practice. Not only that, but philosophy is an artistic practice. Indeed, both are “species of a common genus whose preoccupation is with the ways we are organized and with the possibility of reorganizing ourselves.”⁴ Third, art and philosophy are practices based on “the invention of writing.”⁵

These claims are broad as well as provocative. And the subject matter is important. There is the question of what is art. Then there is the question of what is philosophy. Another question that is raised and answered in Strange Tools is what are the uses of philosophy and art in human life? Obviously this is an ambitious project in that all of these questions are unequivocally answered.

In this review essay a few specific aspects of the ambitious project in Strange Tools will be outlined and critiqued. First, the conceptual distinction between tools and strange tools will be examined. Then, to make this distinction more concrete, some examples of strange tools as offered by Nöe will be focused upon. Then the seeming aims of the book will be outlined and critiqued in relationship to the arguments offered. The conclusion offered herein is that Nöe has given us, in his ambitious project, a set of strange tools, indeed tools too strange and unwieldy to fit together in a coherent fashion. Given the aims of the project, the tools offered are, if the analysis offered here is correct, both too narrow, in that, for instance, his definition of art excludes way too much from the domain of art, and too broad, in that he makes claims for art and philosophy that are difficult to justify and not really necessary depending upon

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² st, p. 206.
³ Ibid.
⁴ st, pp. xii–xiii.
⁵ Ibid.