

Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature: A Précis

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What is art? Why is it important? What does it tell us about ourselves? In *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, I try to answer these questions. *Strange Tools* builds on my previous work on perception and consciousness (Noë 2004, 2009, 2012).

The book has three animating ideas. First, art is not a technological practice; however, it presupposes such practices in something like the way that irony presupposes straight talk. Works of art are, as I put it, strange tools. Technology is not just something we use or apply to achieve a goal, although this is right to a first approximation; technologies organize our lives in ways that make it impossible to conceive of our lives in their absence; they make us what we are. Art, really, is an engagement with the ways in which our practices, techniques, and technologies, organize us and it is, finally, a way to understand that organization and, inevitably, to reorganize ourselves.

The job of art, its true work, is philosophical. This is the second animating idea. Art is a philosophical practice. And philosophy—however surprising this may seem—is an artistic practice. This is because both art, and philosophy—superficially so different—are really species of a common genus whose preoccupation is with the ways we are organized and with the possibility of reorganizing ourselves.

A third and final animating idea is that art and philosophy are practices, in the language of the book, bent on the invention of writing.

In *Strange Tools* I criticize biological approaches to art, both neurobiological and evolutionary biological. But I also argue that art is tied to biology, for organization, central to the account I offer, is, at least in part, a biological notion.

It is a striking fact about art that it is bound up with manufacture and craft. Artists make stuff; they make pictures, sculptures, performances, songs. Artists tinker and assemble, they build; they construct.

But why? In contrast with mere technology, art doesn't have to work to be good. Indeed, when it comes to art, it is usually impossible to say, with any confidence, whether it works or not. And this because it is typically hard to say what it is even trying to do.

This needn't be true. A portrait by the artist Leonardo da Vinci may aim at displaying a person's likeness. You can learn, for example, about the Duke's mistress from the

painting, just as you can learn (for example) about a jacket for sale online by inspecting its picture. But even here that the portrait's value, unlike that of the picture of the jacket, doesn't boil down to how well it discharges its illustrative function.

But then why are artists so bent on making stuff? Why produce when the familiar criteria of success or failure in the domain of manufacture are not applicable?

I propose that artists make stuff not because the stuff they make is special (excellent, functional, beautiful, or whatever) in itself, but because *making* stuff is special for us. Making activities—technology, for short—organize us and shape us. Artists make stuff because in doing so they reveal something deep and important about our nature, indeed, I would go so far to say, about our biological nature.

One of the problems with neuroscience, as a tool for studying art, or so I argue in *Strange Tools*, is that it is too individualist and too internalist (too concerned alone with what goes on inside the brain) to comprehend the ways social activities of making and doing contribute to making us. And so it fails to bring into focus the fact that artists make art *out of*, as I dub them in the book, organized activities.

Human beings are designers by nature. We make and use technology. Not only knives, dwellings, clothes, but also language, pictures, writing, and also email, air travel, and social media. Tools and technologies organize us; think of the way chairs and door knobs mold your posture and the way you move; think of the way the telephone or email have changed how we communicate. Technologies solve problems, but they also let us frame new problems. For example, there would be no higher mathematics without mathematical notations. Tools like the rake extend our bodies; tools like writing extend our minds.

Technologies organize us, but they do so only in so far as they are embedded in our lives. Take a door knob, for example. A simple bit of technology, yes, but one that presupposes a vast and remarkable social background. Door knobs exist in the context of a whole form of life, a whole biology—the existence of doors, and buildings, and passages, the human body, the hand, and so on. A designer of door knobs makes a simple artifact but he or she does so with an eye to its mesh with this larger cognitive and anthropological framework.

When you walk up to a door, you don't stop to inspect the door knob; you just go right through. Door knobs don't puzzle us. They do not puzzle us just to the degree that we are able to take everything that they presuppose—the whole background practice—for granted. If that cultural practice were strange to us, if we didn't understand the human body or the fact that human beings live in buildings, if we were aliens from another planet, door knobs would seem very strange and very puzzling indeed.

Pictures are no different. The pictures in the morning newspaper or the family album strike us as self-evident and natural. They come with captions and they function as transparencies through which we see the world. In fact, pictures, like the words of our native language, are moves in a communication game that is so familiar and pervasive that we forget that we are playing it. We are at home in the game and so the game seems natural. But pictures, like doorknobs, are natural only in the way that all good design is natural. Design wears the mask of nature.

This brings us to art. Design stops and art begins when we lose the possibility of taking the background of our familiar technologies for granted. Art subverts function; it does this by making the background problematic. You never ask, when confronted with a

doorknob, *what is this?* Because for the question even to come up is for the doorknob's utility to have been undermined. But art begins precisely with this ungroundedness or absence of utility. You ask of the art work before you *What is this?* And critically, when we are dealing with art, there is no answer to this question that can be taken for granted. When we ask of a work of art *What is this? What is this for?* we need to come up with our own answer. And so, we need to take a stand, a stand, critically, in relation to ourselves and our background.

In this way, art unveils us ourselves. Art is a making activity because we are by nature and culture organized by making activities. A work of art is a strange tool. It is an alien implement that affords us the opportunity to bring into view what has been hidden in the background.

From this point of view, art isn't a phenomenon to be explained. Not by neuroscience, and not by philosophy. Art is itself a research practice, a way of investigating the world and ourselves. Art displays us to ourselves, and in a way makes us anew, by disrupting our habitual activities of doing and making.

There is all the difference in the world, then, between design, whose very nature depends on there being a known function and so an available standard for assessment, and art, whose very nature depends on the unavailability of any such standards or functions. But it is precisely the strength of this conceptual difference between art and design, or art and life, that lets us begin to appreciate the way these are in fact, and inevitably, entangled in our lives. Design is always influenced by art or always aware of or interested in its status as non-art, or as possibly art, and art, for its part, is so bound up with making as to be always at risk of becoming just a way of doing something. Other examples: dancing is one thing and choreography another, just as talking is one thing and writing another. But writing changes the way people talk and images of dancing created by choreography change the way people dance. Design, dance, talk, these activities are now only available to us, as it were, in space of art, choreography, writing. As with art and design, or art and life, so with any first-order activity and the distinct practice of reflecting on it. Reflection changes what we do; it loops down and alters what it aims to capture. Engagement and reflection are entangled through and through.

This theme of the entanglement of art and philosophy with the habits of making, thinking and talking which are its raw materials is the heart of *Strange Tools*. Entanglement helps bring into view why art and philosophy are so profoundly important. They are the very engine of our transformation from one kind of person into another. They are emancipatory. But they also bring out the ways in which life itself, or mere making, mere doing, design, work, are already the stuff of art and so, also, the stuff of renewal and reorganization.

I don't argue for the value of art in *Strange Tools*. I assume it and I try to explain it. And although I insist on the distinction between art and non-art, giving perhaps the appearance of an outdated modernism, my true aim is to bring out the lively and inherent instability of the distinction itself. Art, like a good joke, can happen any time and anywhere. It knows no limits to form or content. We do not comprehend this fact, but fail utterly to appreciate its significance, if we take it to reveal that there is no boundary between art and the rest of life (art, craft).