Alva Noë

Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature

Interview with Richard Bright (Editor of Interalia Magazine)

Published in With Consciousness in Mind (Part 3) – November 2015.

Richard Bright: Your latest book, Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature, makes the case for thinking of works of art as tools for investigating ourselves. How are works of art “strange tools”?

Alva Noë: There are two remarkable facts about art which, for all that they are remarkable, are completely uncontroversial and commonplace. The first is that artists make stuff, art is bound up with putting together, producing, building, manufacturing, whether it’s a poem or a staged production or play, or an installation or painting or sculpture, artists are constantly in the making business. Yet, and this is the second interesting fact, there are never any straightforward ways we can adequately evaluate works of art or do justice to whatever their claims of them are by simply accessing how effectively or how efficiently, how perfectly or how well they were made. In the case of art we can never take for granted what the function is according to which one would measure whether the instrument that was made served its function or not. That’s not to deny that many works of art do not, in fact, serve all sorts of functions. I assume, I could be wrong, but I assume for arguments sake that religious art in the Middle Ages served a didactic and instructional function, and maybe even a liturgical function. Likewise, I assume that when a great portrait painter such as Leonardo da Vinci made a painting of the Duke’s mistress, on contract from the Duke, he was meaning to make something like, in a very broad sense of instrument or tool, an instrument or tool for representing or depicting her and for allowing us to think about her or contemplate her in her absence, in a picture. Just as one might contemplate a pair of shoes that you might be thinking of buying through an online catalogue by looking at the picture. So, works of art may serve functions but I think it’s fair that we don’t evaluate whether a piece of art is successful by the same standards that we would use to decide whether the picture in an online catalogue is successful.

My explanation of that, in the first instance, with the catalogue we have a clear sense of what it’s for and what it’s trying to do, but when dealing with art all bets are off of what the presumed function is and therefore nothing can be taken for granted. Then there is a very interesting consequence, it means that works of art, which may be materially just like things that have this or that function, actually serve a different kind of function, meaning that of occasioning us to think about the ways in which we ordinarily take function for granted. Whether it’s the function of a picture or the function of any other kind of tool. I must say that I’m using ‘tool’ in a very broad sense as I finally want to encompass things such as language and other kinds of social practices and technologies. So my hypothesis is that works of art are not really tools at all, but they look like tools, or they’re tools that have been made strange, and in having been made strange in a sense can no longer play their function as tools as a straightforward application, but they exhibit something about the place of tools in our lives.

There’s a formulation of this idea that I actually came to only after writing the book, but I think it helps me get it, which is, artists don’t make ‘things’ because what they make is special. They make things because ‘making’ is special for us. By that I mean making special for us as human beings
because doing, making, construction, tool using, skill based social practices, I would argue have a kind of defining role for what it is to be human. They help constitute us and make us what we are.

I want to kind you a very trivial example. If you were to come to my house after never been here before, you would take a look at the doorknob and turning it you would just pass right through into the threshold of the house. The doorknob is a practically transparent, self-evident piece of social gadgetry, but it only has the function that it has, given a lot of background facts of what it is to be human, it’s built to be used by people of roughly human size stature with roughly human shaped hands, who need to live in these kinds of dwellings to protect them from the weather or from other humans or from whatever it might be. You can imagine that an anthropologist from another planet would come here and wonder what this strange tool was. So what makes the doorknob transparent to us and self-evident, and why it doesn’t take a lot of brains to use a doorknob, is because the doorknob plays its role against the whole social context, and a biological context.

Now, imagine an artist would come along and obliterate that context, or take it away. Now you’re just left with an alien implement, or a ‘strange tool’. That implement, that tool, could now serve as calling to mind so much of what is actually concealed in the background of our normal life. To me that would be a way in which a work of art could actually unveil us to ourselves and reveal something profound about what it is to be human. So that’s why I call the book ‘Strange Tools’.

I should say that there is a little bit of a conceptual issue which is that, in a way what I’m really arguing is that works of art are not tools, they do whatever work they do precisely by imitating tools without really being tools. By my definition a strange tool is not a tool. A tool is only a tool when you can take its function and its background for granted.

RB: And the intentions and functions of artists are very wide, and ambiguous a lot of the time, maybe most of the time.

AN: Exactly.

RB: In the book you argue how recent efforts to frame questions about art in terms of neuroscience (ie. neuroaesthetics) and evolutionary biology alone have been and will continue to be unsuccessful. Obviously there has been a great upsurge in interest and research into neuroaesthetics. What are the limits of these two disciplines in terms of their approach to art?

AN: I should probably discuss them in turn because, I think, they face different problems. I should also say that the style that I chose to adopt in the book makes it natural to interpret that as giving a very loud and unambiguous ‘No’ to both of these fields in their approach to art, I don’t want to be labelled as the negative person who is totally against evolutionary biology and neuroaesthetics. It is true that I’m not optimistic about progress in these fields, but I also want to acknowledge that they a very inventive and evolving fields and maybe there will be some interesting breakthroughs. I don’t want to say it’s impossible that that could happen, or that I know for certain that it won’t. In fact, I think more in the evolutionary field has come very close to shedding light on some of the questions that interest us if we’re interested in what art is.

The general problem is a difficulty bringing art as distinct from other cultural or social or technological practices into focus, so that generalisations are offered, but the generalisations don’t pick out art as distinct from other non-art activities and therefore one is left thinking that the secret of art has not yet been explained.

So, as I say, let me discuss them in turn.
Neuroaesthetics is a term that requires definition. As I understand it, it is the attempt to apply the concepts and methods of neuroscience to the study and experience of art. Much of the work that has been done in this area has looked at the ways in which our experience of works of art depends on and exquisitely exercises our neural capacities, whether it’s our colour vision or our sensitivity to sound or our emotional dispositions. They look at works of art and study the way in which they, in very fine tuned and subtle ways, stimulate our nervous systems. Then look at the way the state of our nervous system conditions the possibility of our having experiences.

The problem, from my view, and I’m not alone by any means in arguing this, is that the brain is necessary for any experience, so all this research amounts to is simply pointing out that art, like anything else, in the sense that we are looking at perceptual objects, requires the exercise of our ability to see. There is nothing in the approach of neuroaesthetics that I’ve yet seen published by anyone ever that calls attention to the ways in which it is shown that our ability to perceive is exercised differently for art, and so art is just treated as a stimulus, a trigger for the experience.

Here’s a second thought. In my past work and writing I’ve argued that it’s kind of a mistake to think of experiences as things that happen in our heads, triggered by the environment. I have this view that we should think of the world not as a trigger but as an occasion for us to do things and that the experience is the temporarily unfolding of doing that happens. For me, I’m not sympathetic to the idea that any object, not just a work of art, should be thought of as an experience trigger. That leaves me to generalize my previous comment so I fear that the neuroaesthetic approach tends to think of works of art, and indeed any old object, as triggers for events in the nervous system. I think that’s both an inadequate conception of what an experience is and ultimately doesn’t give you any means of thinking about what makes art objects special, as distinct from other possible stimulus.

There’s a further point which I can discuss very briefly, which I think is the deepest point, it’s the one I think is the most value, and that is that one way for the neuroaesthetics community to respond is to say, ‘Our interest is not in just looking at the neural structures that are required for us to explain works of art, but we want to investigate what happens when you have an aesthetic experience, what happens in your brain when you have an aesthetic experience, or to use the jargon, what are the neural correlates of aesthetic experience?’ Here, if I do have an a priori argument, I want to say ‘aesthetic experience aren’t the kind of thing that has neural correlates. The reason I say that is I think that aesthetic experience, for me, is like a dinner party. I want to compare it to a dinner party. So you and meet for dinner, and maybe you chose a restaurant and you chose the wine. You chose the restaurant and the wine because it’s your favourite restaurant and wine, and so we talk for hours and we catch up on our lives and we get drunk. To me the experience of the dinner is all of that, it’s not the flavour of the food and how we experience the food is influenced by cultural biases and ideologies. If you tell me that it is good wine then that will influence how I enjoy it. If the chef comes out and flatters us on our choice of food this will also influence how we enjoy it. What you and I bring to the table, what we talk about, what we think about, the judgements we make, the tastes we enjoy, the state of our bodily health, how good our digestive systems are, all of that makes for the quality of the meal.

Similarly, it’s the same as when we go to see a work of art. I think you can go and look at a painting and only a week later you may realise how important that painting is to you. I’ve had the experience of sitting through an hour long performance in a theatre, thinking every minute that I was hating it, and then at the end something clicks and I’m able to really experience the whole thing. Or, you and I go to the theatre and you say something to me at the end that changes how I feel about it. Or, before going to the theatre I read a critic, a brilliant critic whose offering all sorts of advice on what to pay attention to, to get something out of the work, and I bring that with me. So, my claim is not
that there isn’t experience going on, and that there isn’t experience going on that depends on the brain, but I can’t even conceive of how you could think how the experience has immunity, such that there could be some single phenomenon underlying it. So, I’m suspicious of there being such a thing as aesthetic experience whose neural correlates could uncover.

Let me just say that I’m not an anti-science person, I’m more of a naturalist, broadly speaking. I’m sympathetic to the project of science, and to the project of trying to frame a conception of human nature that is amenable to scientific investigation. The reason I’m sceptical of neuroscience is I think that it doesn’t have an accurate conception of human nature, it thinks that a person as essentially just their brain. I think that people are embodied and social animals and you can’t you can’t give an individualistic brain level account.

Evolutionary biology doesn’t have that problem. I think it’s in a very different state. Evolutionary biology has much greater resources to think about what people and animals do. That said, I’m not aware of any account of any attempt to use the apparatus of Darwinian Theory, including its extension into what is sometimes called sexual selection and adaption, to pick out what is distinct and special about art, as distinct from other art-like social behaviours. One thing to say in the face of that is ‘Well, maybe art isn’t special’. Maybe, for example, art simply is something people do to display their suitability as mates. Maybe the conspicuous consumption of works of art is a way of demonstrating ones mega-fitness and comparable to any other form of conspicuous consumption, like the peacocks tail.

If you are at all sympathetic with the thought that it may have something in common with that but it’s not just that, there’s something more to be said about what art is and why it matters and what mode it plays in our lives, than merely that it serves as a reliable indicator of fitness to ones fellow species members, then I think no evolutionary account has come close to explaining why we make art. There may be surprises in store for me, and I would welcome that, but as of now I have an intuition of why that should be that the explanations go so far but no further. That is that you can use these styles of evolutionary explanation to explain all manner of human organisation and cultural practice, but the interesting thing about art is that art, like philosophy, is not just another social practice but it’s a field for studying and investigating ourselves. Investigating precisely the stuff that evolution does a good job in explaining.

RB: Also, there’s a natural capacity to draw, which can be evidenced in children. It is a natural part of our make-up, to make marks that have meaning. Definitions of drawing, like the practice of drawing itself, is expanding, but one definition that encompasses the act of drawing is that it is trace of our lines of thought.

AV: I think that’s a very interesting idea. People say that we think with words, it’s not something we use just to express our thought but that we actually think in words. We certainly know that there are some kinds of thought that you couldn’t have if you didn’t have the words. Words are a tool and I think it’s certainly true of line, or can be true of line. The clearest case for this is exemplified in the history and pre-history of human evolution. One never knows how much of this is speculation but my understanding is that some of the earliest examples we have of line making are in keeping track of things so, for example, a person might make marks to keep track of how many sheep there are, and they know they’ve lost a sheep if there’s not a correspondence between their marks and their sheep. Apparently, the earliest writing starts there.

One the other hand, we know that that, as much as more than thirty thousand years ago, there were the cave painting practices and, presumably, or it could be speculation, that we see these
magnificent preserved cave paintings but there must have been a lot of other drawings made that we don’t have a record of, that preceded those cave paintings. Somebody had to learn how to make them!

I think writing probably begins with drawing. It’s a mistake, as the linguist Roy Harris has noted, to think that the main job of writing is to represent speech. The main job of writing, and I think drawing, is to think. It’s an apparatus for thinking. I’m very sympathetic to your comment saying that drawing is a natural capacity, but to call it natural gives us a reason for denying that it could also be cultural. It seems a very interesting thing about human beings is that we’re naturally cultural. It’s our nature to work together and to live in social groups. Not only humans, of course, but other species as well.

RB: I would like to ask you about the neural equivalency thesis. A lot of the studies made in neuroaesthetics has been about looking at pictures of things, rather than the things themselves. Is there a neurological difference between seeing a thing and seeing it in a picture. What comes to mind is Rene Magritte’s painting of a pipe, with the title, written underneath the image of the pipe, ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (‘This is not a pipe’).

AV: Thinking about this naively, there is one thing to see something in a picture and there’s another thing to see something in the flesh. For example, it’s both true that I’ve never seen President Obama and that I’ve seen him hundreds of times in pictures. It’s true I’ve never seen him bit I know what he looks like. I’m quite certain I would recognise him instantly if I were to meet him because I’ve seen him in a picture. Part of what makes pictures so remarkable is that they enable us to see something that isn’t there. In some of the word ‘seeing’ they let us see something absent. It’s also very important, except under very, very unusual circumstances, pictures don’t usually delude us. It’s not as though, when you see something in a picture, you falsely believe that it is there when it isn’t. In very exceptional circumstances you can be tricked, with Trompe L’Oeil for example, and even then only under the most special circumstances, you have to view it from a particular point of view. The moment you start moving or interacting you test it with your experience. As a general rule, part of what it is to see a picture is both to see something as if it was there and obviously not there. It’s almost a contradicting motion, you have the experience of the presence of something which is manifestly physically ‘not present’. I think of a picture as a device for showing ‘something’, as a tool, as something social. Any account of how pictures work and what they are needs to be able to explain this double aspect, that they show you what is obviously not there.

One of the interesting ideas that is so pervasive in the neuro-scientific study of vision is the idea that seeing is like having a picture in your mind. For example, it is sometimes said the reason why I see this thermos by the side of me, when I look at the thermos is because I have a picture in my mind that represent the thermos. Then it is said, that the reason why I see a thermos when I look at a ‘picture’ of a thermos is that the picture produces in me the same kind of experience that would be produced in me by the actual physical thermos. Pictures are a certain kind of trigger for the nervous system. Indeed, this is becoming the idea of the neural equivalency thesis, which is that to see a picture of something is to be in the same state that you would be in if you were to see the actual thing. That’s why the picture lets you see the thing, because it affects you that way.

It kind of goes both ways. The reason I see a 3-dimensional cube when I look at line drawing of a cube is because I’m in the state that I would be in if I were looking at the actual physical cube. This goes into the theory of projection. An actual cube projects an image in my eye and that’s what I’m given. My main point in this vicinity is I don’t see how, with those resources on the table, we can explain in a profound way how seeing in pictures and seeing them in the flesh is different. By and
large, experimental psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience seem to be comfortable with that. Nobody’s yet adequately really tried to develop this point as a full-blown criticism. To give you an example when I say they are comfortable with that, scientists continuously publish results about object perception, the perception of 3-dimensionality, object constancy, and almost all of those studies are done using stimuli which are not actual objects but are pictures of objects. That’s really interesting. They treat them a substitutional, as one thing or the other, for the purposes of what they are interested in. I’m sceptical of that. I think we need some account of what it is to engage with a picture which is distinct to what it is to engage with a ‘thing’.

That’s one part of my concern. There’s a second part, which requires one last ingredient. It is sometimes said, by scientists who are enthusiastic about neuroscience as a tool for thinking about art, that art are really a kind of neuroscience, that what artists are doing is investigating the limits of representation. For example, we know that I see a cube when I look at a line drawing of a cube. Why? Because a line drawing is the brains code for a cube. Now, suppose I distort the cube in the line drawing. Do I still see a cube? If the answer to that is ‘Yes’ then the conclusion is that the brain can’t tell the difference between the line drawing and its distorted variant.

I make a point in the book, which is just a basic one, that the argument that artists are our neural representations of objects really follows from the neural equivalency thesis. The argument is taken for granted, it is built into the framework. Except in those rare Trompe L’Oeil cases, the majority of paintings that you or I have ever seen is smaller than life-size, or much larger than life-size, and it’s got a frame around it and it’s hanging on a wall so, in what sense are we not noticing that it is different from reality?

RB: As you say, one of the differences between a picture and the real ‘thing’ is the sense of scale. Our experience of art is something we achieve through thoughtful and active, meaningful engagement and, although it involves stimulus and neural representations, it is something more than just stimulus and neural representations. It will involve our knowledge of the work, what has been given to us by our education and what we have learnt about it ourselves. It is also a two way process, what we take to the artwork and what the artwork gives us back. How might Art give us the resources for rethinking human nature?

AV: I think that both individual works of art can and the ‘fact’ of art can. Art as a global phenomenon can provide resources. Individual works of art have this capacity to let us catch ourselves in the act of engaging with them. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a great master painting or whether it’s some completely avant-garde piece of contemporary art, nothing happens until you engage. You can spend all the money you want on audio guides, tour guides and prices of admission, if you don’t engage in a certain way nothing will happen. When something happens it’s always a part of what happens that we catch ourselves in the act achieving or understanding our perception of the work. That right there is revelatory and I want to say is that is what is giving us some insight into what it is to be human. Sometimes, what is unveiled are fundamental facts about the way we perceive, think, judge and respond. Not always though.

Art can also give us resources for giving a better understanding of ourselves in a more global sense. Meaning, if we as thinkers, as philosophers, as scientists, can better understand what art is and its place in our lives, we realise that we need a conception of human being which makes room for culture and for trans-individual phenomena. One of the ideas that I argue in the book is that our lives are made up of all these ‘organised activities’, you can think of them as habits or skillful activities that we do. For instance, the way we drive or the way we walk, the way we use of eyes to govern our cleaning up in the kitchen. In the book I go into a lot of detail of what I mean by an
organised activity, but for our present purposes it suffices just to say that there are all these ways that we live and conduct ourselves, always situated in an environment and usually an environment that includes other people, that we just find ourselves with.

I think that one of the things that art does is, it takes all those facts about us and it makes art out of them. It takes all these things that we do, these patterns of movement, attitude and thought, vision and dress, sexuality and whatever it might be, it takes all of that and makes art out of it. It does that, in the first instance, by displaying it and displaying it in a way that lets us see it. Then, I think, it does so in a way that inevitably changes us. One of the terms I use in the book is that art is a ‘reorganizational practice’, it displays the ways in which we are organised and gives us resources to reorganise. This is the kind of thing I had in mind when I say that art can contribute to framing our conception of human nature.

RB: Georges Braque once said, ‘Art disturbs, science reassures’, which I don’t think was totally correct because I think science disturbs as well. Do you think he was right in that art disturbs to the point that it actually reassesses human nature?

AV: Yes, I think he’s exactly right. He’s right not just that art can disturb views that we have about ourselves but that art’s mechanism is creating disturbance, because by interrupting business as usual it makes us notice things we would never see otherwise, to experience things we may have never experienced. This can be something both at the level of something visual or something phenomenological, like Cubist painters changing our conception of the visual world. The disturbance might also be theological. An example I give in the book is of a small statuette of Moses, that looks like a piece of devotional art, is actually meant to disturb a certain sanguine idea about Moses and his role in Christian lives.

RB: You have discussed the basic problem with the brain theory of art. Following on from that, although the brain is necessary for human life and consciousness, is the brain-centred conception of everything the whole story?

AV: I see why you are hesitating to ask that because it is clear from everything I’ve said that my answer to the question is ‘No’. The problem is that the brain has become a kind of ‘I is the self we are, so we theorize about the brain but a lot of what we say about the brain we’re not really talking about the brain, we’re saying it’s the brain but we’re really talking about human beings. Descartes talked about the mind, or the soul, and he didn’t think it was conceivable that the qualities and properties of the soul could be attached to something physical. As some people have jokingly put it, ‘how could mere meat think and feel inside?’ So, the great conceptual breakthrough of neuroscience is to think, ‘Oh yes, mere meat can think and decide and feel and, in fact, you are nothing but a piece of meat’. The interesting thing is, I believe, that we don’t today have a better conception how mere meat thinks than Descartes has how mere spirit thinks.

The book Strange Tools comes at the end of twenty years of work trying to explore what a scientifically more reasonable conception of ourselves would be. It roughly is the idea that a person is not a brain, a brain is part of a person’s body, but that a person is an integrated whole who is, in some profound sense, coupled to the world. So, it’s the brain, the body and the world, including the social world, that is the place where consciousness happens. That’s not meant to be a kind of ‘whoooo’ idea that consciousness is all around us, it’s meant to be the idea that looking for consciousness in the brain is like looking for the dance inside the dancer’s body. What’s going on inside the dancer’s body is necessary for the dance but the dance is not inside, the dance is an interaction with the whole world. The world itself has a kind of agency in our lives. One of my
slogans in my earlier work is that consciousness is not something that happens inside of us, it’s something we do.