ALVA NOË
University of California, Berkeley
noe@berkeley.edu

ART AND ENTANGLEMENT IN *STRANGE TOOLS*

abstract

What is art? Why does it matter? What does it tell us about ourselves? In this essay, I introduce and in some cases extend the basic account of these matters offered in Strange Tools (New York, Hill and Wang: 2016).

keywords

Strange tools, art, pictures, choreography, organization

Phenomenology and Mind, n. 14 - 2018, pp. 30-36
DOI: 10.13128/Phe_Mi-23622
Web: www.fupress.net/index.php/pam

ISSN 2280-7853 (print) - ISSN 2239-4028 (on line)

There is an old-fashioned party game for children. Each child reaches into a brown paper bag whose contents are hidden from view; the task is to name what you hold in your hand. Even familiar household implements such as a comb, a cork, a thimble, a feather, a sponge, a spoon, and the like, can be delightfully baffling. To the touch they can seem fragmented and disunified, a chain of empty properties. The moment of recognition can be thrilling. Beneath your touch, the properties assemble themselves as integrated wholes. Now *they* – the objects themselves rather than the isolated qualities – show up in your perceiving.

Context plays a similar and similarly invisible role when it comes to pictures. It is rare that we encounter pictures whose pre-assigned task is not evident. Pictures, whether in print or online, or wherever, typically come with captions attached. And even where there is no caption, pictures very frequently have readily apparent rhetorical or communicative functions. The picture of husband and child that adorns your desk, or your Facebook page, the photo in your passport, the pixelated rendition of an oven stuffer in the newspaper circular, the animal figures in children's books. We know in advance what these pictures are for, what they are, in the normal case, used to show. Pictures rarely puzzle us.

Remove the context, however, and what would otherwise serve as a picture, as a display or a presentation, becomes an opacity and, sometimes, a curiosity, a puzzle, or even, a work of art. Why do we find pictures interesting? Why do we make them and use them and look at them? I suspect there are as many different answers to these questions as there are reasons for showing, displaying, looking and studying. Our interests may be personal; they might have to do with science or engineering, with education, with religion or politics. It is not the job of a theory of pictures to tell us why parents can't enjoy the Easter Egg Hunt without filming it, or why lovers, these days, even as they embrace, are liable to keep one arm extended to make the selfie they might later post to social media. Pictures are made and put to work in what can only be described as many different ways. I think of there being a vast picture-psychology, or picture-economy, or picture anthropology, and this is as reticulate and changing, as trending and historical, as our lives themselves.

Which is not to say that we can make no theoretically important generalizations. As I have already indicated, a picture is an instrument for showing, or putting on display. And the relevant context in which pictures succeed or fail to perform their function of showing is a communicative one. We use pictures to show. And, the lure of psychological or neuroscientific models of how pictures work notwithstanding, pictures do not secure their pictorial function by themselves alone, or so I argue in *Strange Tools*. A picture cannot provide its own caption,

and without a caption the picture is not a picture but a blank or a pictorial misfire. Of course explicit captions are very often missing. In that case it is other aspects of the context that do the caption's job of letting you know, in advance, as it were, what you are looking at.
It is worth remembering that even though there have been big changes in pictorial media in the last few decades, and in the last few centuries, resulting in recent very rapid change in what we habitually do with pictures, the fact remains, human beings have been making pictures for about as long as there have been human beings, or rather, for about as long as there have been what are known as psychologically (as distinct from anatomically) modern human beings, that is to say, for more than 40,000 years. Pictures have played a role in organizing our communicative and visual activities of showing since prehistorical times.
Now, as I have already suggested, not all pictures are artworks, nor is it the case that all art painting, photography or sculpture, is pictorial.
Is there a special interest or value attaching to pictorial works of art? And if so, what explains this special standing?
In *Strange Tools,* I make the following proposal: artwork pictures are not themselves moves or gestures or transactions within the complicated, multi-layered, life-embedded economy of pictures to which I have be referring. They are not, in this sense, pictures at all, that is, instruments functioning within and constrained by a communicative context for the purposes of showing. Pictorial artworks are not like the pictures in the family album, or newspaper, or online catalog, or magazine, only better, or more beautiful, or more innovative, or more noble or exalted in their subject matter. But nor are they entirely alien to those more domestic deployments. My proposal is that paintings, photographs and plastic works of art that are pictorial are significant not because they are special pictures, but because of the special importance that pictures have in our lives and because of the distinctive manner in which they, works of art, exhibit the place of pictures in our lives. Moreover, and I'll explain this as I continue, artwork pictures do this, they put us and our picture making activities on display, in a way that enables us to do it all differently.
Art, speaking generally now, is bound up with making, construction, doing, putting together, tinkering and manufacture. Why? Not, I propose, because artists are bent on making special things. But rather because making is so special for us. Making activities – technology in the broadest sense, but also forms of activity that are not conventionally thought of as technological or tool-using activities such as talking and looking – make us what we are. A strange tool, in my sense, is not a tool at all, and its work, its value, is in the way it unveils the way tools make us what we are.
According to the theory of *Strange Tools*, then, picture making as an art has both nothing and everything to do with pictures. Nothing, because pictorial works of art are not, in a way, pictures at all, that is, implements for showing this or that deployed in this or that communicative context.
But also everything! For painting and the other pictorial arts would have no point at all if not for the organizing, central role, of pictures in our lives.
This is not meant to be a piece of dogma. I am trying to describe the phenomenon. Artworks – keeping with pictures – are puzzle objects in all the ways that the picture in the newspaper or in the ad only exceptionally ever are. Indeed, they are, I would go so far as to say, philosophical objects. You can never simply say what the artwork picture shows, in the way you can say what the passport photo shows. Or if you can – as when you say, this is Leonardo's portrait of the Duke's mistress, or this is Nigerian-born New York-based artist Toyin Ojih Odutola's portrait of her brother – you haven't even begun to touch on the meanings of the picture as an artwork. When we are in the setting of art, moreover, there is never a function or set of possible functions that settles the questions, the difficulties, the inabilities to

comprehend; there is never a caption that would be authoritative. In this sense, then, art is disruptive. Always. Everywhere. The artwork picture looks like a picture but doesn't discharge pictorial functions as we would, in a different setting, expect. I don't mean, when I say this, that art always startles or agitates or shocks. That *would* make my position avant-garde-ist or modernist in a parochial way. But that is not the view. Paintings and other pictorial works art stand to the background place of picture making in our lives in something like the way that irony stands to straight talk. They are different, but one presupposes the other. Maybe each presupposes the other, an idea to which I will return.

To recapitulate: I distinguish picture-making from the making of pictorial artworks, and I distinguish the ways we use pictures in our familiar lives (online, in the newspaper, in the family photo album, on billboards, in textbooks, but also in making plans for a construction project, in geometry, and so on), from the way we use pictures when we are interested in them as art. I will mark this contrast as that of first order versus second order. Painting as an art, then, is a second-order activity; it puts picture-making and picture-use, as a first-order activity, on display, and does so, I will try to show, in ways that are liable to change the first-order activity itself, or (and this will prove to be important as we go on) other nearby and related first-order activities.

I propose similar accounts of all the arts. Arts stand to the first-order activities that provide them with their raw materials in the way that painting as an art stands to picture-making activities, and they acquire what significance they possess from the importance of the first-order organized and organizing activities that they take for granted. (A good part of *Strange Tools* is devoted to laying out why these organized activities, these habitual activities, are so important, both culturally, biologically, and philosophically.)

Dancing, for example, is something people habitually do. We do it for many different reasons, in many different ways, in many different settings. Human beings dance. We are dancers. We are, in my parlance, organized by dancing. We find ourselves dancing. Dance as an art, I argue, however, is not just more dancing, not just dancing taken to new heights and deploying new feats of virtuosity combined with all manner of stage craft. Dance as an art, or choreography, I argue in *Strange Tools*, puts dancing, as we know it, on display; it stages it. And in doing so it stages, or displays, us, we human dancers, the fact that we are dancers, that we are organized by dancing, and the different meanings this can have for us. And so it displays us. In this way we might even say that choreography investigates us, or investigates us in one particular neighborhood of our being, namely, that neighborhood, big and messy and sprawling, where we dance.

And so, for these reasons, I argue that choreography has both everything and nothing to do with dancing. Everything, as we have seen, because there is only an art of dance because we are dancing human beings and this is a fact– a personal, a psychological, a political, an anthropological, a biological – fact about us that matters. But nothing, too, because, whatever else is true, dance on the stage is not dancing, not any more than a staged, model rental unit in an apartment complex, is a home. (As with a model unit, the dance on the stage may be materially identical to dancing as we perform it at the wedding, or at a party, although it need not be. The difference between dance art and dancing, like that between a model unit and a home, is a conceptual one.)

Now this account of choreography is made more complicated by the fact that I am oversimplifying when I suggest that choreography targets the first-order activity of dancing *alone*. Dance as an art has other sources than dancing; it works with other raw materials as well. The ballet, for example, has origins in styles of movement that might be characterized as courtly or bound to questions of style that have more to do with manners than dancing; status and bearing and poise are in play; moreover, as I learned from Jennifer Homan's book

on the history of ballet, there was a whole theory of the regimentation and organization of the body at work in ballet's origins, one not unrelated to the history of logic and grammar.[1] Much choreography is also narrative. And a great deal of contemporary choreography takes the whole range of human movement as, as it were, its pallet. And then there is the abiding fact, to which I will return, that choreography, like painting and the other arts, always builds from and refers to other art, other choreographers, other performances. So we are a far cry from a simple scanning of choreography as second-order meta-dancing which takes as its source the first-order dancing that is so prevalent in our lives.

In fact, it is my main objective in *Strange Tools* to bring out the ways in which a simple opposition of first order and second order is inadequate to explain the relation between life and art, technology and art, tools and strange tools. It is only from the standpoint of a clear conception of the difference between levels that we can appreciate what I think of as their ineliminable *entanglement,* the entanglement of first order and second order, of life and art, of tool use and the special value of strange tools. It is this phenomenon of entanglement, I want to show, that we most urgently need to understand and this is my true focus in *Strange Tools* (although I don't use the word "entanglement" there).

Before pursuing this theme of entanglement directly, some preliminaries:

When I say that art aims at unveiling us to ourselves, and that it seeks to do so in ways that lets us reorganize, I do not mean, nor do I see why I should be compelled to mean, that this is what artists intentionally aim at. I mean, rather, that it is this which is the source of art's value, whatever intentions move the artist and whatever an artist might say or believe about her work, or his.

When I say that choreography puts dancing on display, or that painting unveils the place of pictures in our lives, I don't mean that all choreography is *about* dancing (even subject to the qualifications above), or that pictorial artworks are *about,* or have as their subject matter, pictures and pictoriality, or the phenomenology of seeing, or anything else, although they may have (and as a matter of fact have had throughout history; this is, I believe, not a modern preoccupation. Aside: even the cave paintings, it seems to me, seem to suggest a whole unknown art history). Moreover, ass I have already mentioned, picture transactions happen in the vicinity of morality, church, God, sex, money, science, family, and so pictures and their use frequently affect us and are bound up with feeling and emotion. For this reason, an art of pictures, conceived as I do, has available to it, throughout history and across cultural space, a correspondingly enormous, indeed, I would say, an entirely unrestricted range of topics and preoccupations. Just as philosophy does. Neither philosophy nor art can be specified by reference to subject matter. The strange-tools theory makes no predictions about nor draws limits to what picture art may be about. *Mutatis mutandis* for dance and the other art forms.

Art forms (dance, painting, etc) are local to different, distinct, and sometimes plural, first-order organized activities, and it is this locality that gives them their basic meaning as well as their means. Some artists are performers, others are writers, others are plastic modelers and still others are builders. They are all artists and the scope of their concerns in unrestricted. But what makes them artists of one form or the other is the fact that they happen to work (as a result of decision, or, perhaps, less of decision than of their confinement, as a result of contingencies of life and class and situation) with the raw materials of one or another organized activity or tool-using activity.

The thesis is: we make art *out of* organized activities. Art is not *about* organized activities (unless of course it happens to be). And in making art out of organized activities, in making

1 See Jennifer Homans *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House, 2010.

art with these raw materials, the artist enables us to know ourselves better in relation to those bio-cultural – to borrow a term of John Protevi's – behavioral substrates. Art lets us know ourselves better because it does its work, where, as a matter of habit, we find ourselves.

In *Strange Tools* I begin with puzzlement about the very fact of art. We know that artists may be plumbing matters of social, or moral, or political, or religious importance. But then why in the world are they be so doggedly bound up with activities of making, tinkering, throwing, sewing, marking and building? Why is art, always, so specifically, so concretely, bound up with its own medium (with clay, or mark making, or voice, or movement)? What does art have to do with the tools, technology and first-order making activities that it deploys? My answer: It makes art out of them and this art may be about whatever may happen to matter.

Now let us turn to the phenomenon of entanglement.

The first thing I want us to notice is that art practices arise spontaneously and even necessarily out of first-order activities. Pictures organize our lives, dancing organizes our lives, but we are not the authors of this organization. Like Gregor Samsa in the Kafka story, we simply wake to find ourselves put together by habit, body-schema, expectation, skill and situation, in a variety of ways. We are lost. The impulse to make art, like the impulse to make philosophy, is the impulse to be found, or to orient ourselves. Artworks, I have argued, let us achieve this. Art, like philosophy, aims at or seeks the making of something like a representation of ourselves (or of ourselves dancing or making pictures), what Wittgenstein called a perspicuous representation.

The second point is that the representations of ourselves of the sort that art provides loop down and change the first-order activities of which these are the representation. A good analogy for what I have in mind is the relation of writing and speech. Speech is one thing and writing another, but the existence of writing influences not only how we talk, but how we think about what we do when we talk. Writing, and everything that goes with it, gives us a way of conceptualizing language and speech and thus scaffolds and enhances speech even if it is also always at the same time, to some degree, a falsification of what speech is. We experience our words and speech sounds as things that have spellings, and our lives as readers and writers shapes what we take ourselves to be doing even when we speak in the most informal or intimate of settings. (This is a big topic and one that I explore at some length in *Strange Tools*.)

Turning back to art: Dancing, in a world in which there are in currency choreographic representations of dancing, is made new. I don't mean that we all perform lifts, balancés and arabesques on the dance floor, or that we would ever think of doing that. I mean that the existence of articulated forms of dance-displays shape what we think dancing is or can be and indeed in a way that reorganizes how we experience our dancing bodies in much the way that writing reorganizes our experience of our own talking and what is possible or interesting when it comes to talk. We can't unsee the dance performance we have seen. The image of dance – Ballanchine to Michael Jackson, you name it – provides, to borrow language from the late art historian Anne Hollander, the standard by which the direct perception of ourselves and others dancing is assessed.[2] It loops down and affects the activities of which it was the image.

A few years back I was traveling with a sculpture by Robert Goodnough. It was made of sharp pieces of steel bolted together. The security guard at the airport pulled me out of the line. She set the object down on table and began to study it. Finally, exasperated, she asked me what it was. It's art, I said. She smiled and looked relieved and took a whole new look at the piece. You can go through, she said. And then she added, "there's not a lot of art in this art."

2 Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes.* New York: Viking. 1978.

What I find remarkable in this episode is that she understood that by framing the object as art, I had removed the legitimacy from, or altered the character of, her demand to know what it is. In learning that it was a work of art, she released herself from the need to figure out what it was for or how it worked.

It is only by appreciating the entanglement of life and art, first order and second order, and so, only by granting the importance of these distinctions that get so deliciously messy in practice, that we can appreciate why art always -- yes, I want to say: always, everywhere -- raises this sort of question about itself, this question of how to frame what it is for, what it is trying to do or why, in a way, it may not be trying to do anything. To insist, as I do, on the legitimacy of this question *Is it art?* is not to insist on there being a decision procedure for supplying an answer. Indeed, and this is a direct consequence of entanglement, it is to insist on the opposite.[3]

3 A longer version of this essay was originally published under the title "Art and Entanglement in *Strange Tools*: Reply to Noël Carroll, Anne Eaton and Paul Guyer" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (94, 1, January 2017: 238-250). I am grateful to the journal for permission to publish this reworked version here, and to Noël Carroll, Anne Eaton and Paul Guyer, whose valuable critical commentary on *Strange Tools* at the Pacific Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association in April 2016, occasioned me to write it.