

MISZELLE

SEEING *STRANGE TOOLS* AS A PICTURE

or: How to Make Sense of Alva Noë?

By Tobias Servaas

In *Strange Tools*, American philosopher Alva Noë discusses the relationship between philosophy and the arts, placing himself in the middle of an ancient-old quarrel. On the one side of this debate many philosophers have insisted, in Plato's spirit, on the superiority of philosophy over art. Philosophy, they claim, serves as the basis of a concern for true and objective knowledge. In the opposite camp, we encounter philosophers who, following Schelling, celebrate the primacy of art and culture as the true locus of access to the self. Alva Noë, however, takes a rather different turn. Instead of establishing a hierarchy of one over the other, he attempts to put art and philosophy on a par. He writes¹: »art and philosophy – superficially so different – are really species of a common genus«.

But what are we to make of this statement? Its formulation gives rise to confusion: at first glance it appears that Noë makes a metaphysical claim and attempts to describe the true essence of art and philosophy. In this essay I will show that we cannot read *Strange Tools* as a metaphysical work of philosophy if we are to understand Noë's claim properly. To this purpose, I will provide a reading of *Strange Tools* in which Noë's use of metaphysical language is substituted for a vocabulary that is more appropriate. I will suggest reading Noë's work as if it was written in an »analogical vocabulary«, a style of writing based on Wittgenstein's notion of »seeing as«. Doing so, I will argue, avoids the confusion otherwise prevalent in the book and allows Noë's insightful ideas to be harnessed.

The internal confusion I locate in *Strange Tools* has its origin in Noë's childhood. Alva Noë grew up in a household of artists, and feeling kindred to his parents, he confides in us that²: »this book's central claim – that art is a philosophical practice and philosophy an artistic one – [...] can be understood, finally, as my defense of philosophy and its value, a defense of my work, in the setting of my family's engagement with art.« In tandem, Noë's work is also strongly informed by a biological-scientific perspective. Succeeding his artistic upbringing, Noë won his academic spurs in the philosophy of cognitive science. It is precisely the clash between Noë's two worlds that motivates *Strange Tools* – and it is this clash that will be at the

¹ Alva Noë: *Strange Tools – Art and Human Nature*, New York 2015, xiii.

² *Ibid.*, 207 f.