

Varieties of Presence

A book review

Author: Alva Noë

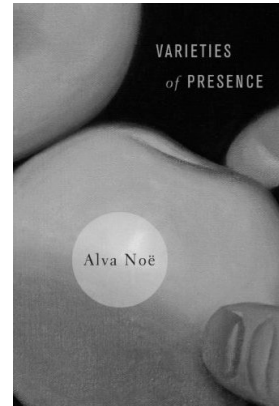
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There's a lot to like about this book. We'll have something to say about what we like about it and what we do not like about it soon enough. For now, let's take a look at the cover and at how handsomely the volume is presented by its publisher. The ochre tones and sensuous forms of the fruit and fingers on the cover come courtesy of a painting by Alexi Worth, and the indigo used for the title, the end flaps and the Harvard University Press seal complement the art beautifully. This is not incidental for a text that claims to have been informed by art and for a philosophical practice that aspires to the practices of art.

Appropriately, there is more to this cover than at first appears, because for Alva Noë things do not appear. They show up for us. The "varieties of presence" named in the title refer to the different and diverse ways things show up for us based on the skills we have at our disposal for perceiving or, rather, Noë would say, achieving what we might otherwise suppose appears. We can make an example of the cover art to illustrate this point.

As it turns out, the image on the cover follows a motif used in other paintings by Worth where, by cropping and foreshortening, an object is represented as held up for our inspection. Framing this object by fingers, the image nicely imbricates seeing and touching, a theme that is important for Noë's account. Ideally, the fruit in the cover image for a book by Alva Noë would show up for us as tomatoes. Here, they show up as apples, and they show up as such from what we have read in reviews of Worth's work and from what is left of the blossom that became one of these fruit and shows up as a star on the book's spine. Seeing the fruit as apples,

the fingers can take on a sexual connotation (as they have in a review of Worth's painting by Ken Johnson, "Art in Review: Alexi Worth," *New York Times*, 2 January 2009). What we notice in the cover image is that the fingers are represented as using two apples to prop up a third.

A very similar design shows up in Worth's *Pyramid* (2008). In fact, the image on the cover of Noë's book is taken from a painting, cropped and reduced, oil on canvas, titled *Pyramid (Yellow)* also from 2008. And while in the one painting we have five apples and a sight through the pyramid they form of a man wearing a grocer's white apron using his hands to arrange the apples, in our image we have the fingers from two right hands with no sign of the man or woman whose hands are making this arrangement. The fingers show up as belonging to two right hands by our making out the proximity of the knuckle and nail of what we would call a thumb in the image on the front of the cover and the curve of the fingers in the image on the back. This puzzle is clearer in the uncropped original of *Pyramid (Yellow)*.

Now, Noë likes puzzles and likes to think he's solved several puzzles about perception and thought in his book. Worth likes to paint puzzles that don't admit of easy solutions. Like many of Worth's images, the puzzle in *Pyramid (Yellow)* stages a dialog with photography. With the flatness of the image and the sharp contrasting areas of light and dark Worth arguably pictures the effect of a photographic flash on its subject. With the isolated detail presented as cropped we may say he presents the image as the result of a photographic enlargement. In remarks about his work Worth has commented about the ubiquity of photography in our world. As we have no doubt noticed ourselves, virtually everyone who carries a phone carries a camera. And while the history of art teaches that photography eclipsed the purpose of painting by giving us the faithful double of the world painting aspired to achieve, the ubiquity of photography ironically returns painting to that aim; photographs have become a part of the world that art aims to double, and it is not entirely clear that photography has any privileged access to a world that includes photographs. This leaves an artist like Worth to paint the world as it shows up, in a photograph, to someone with a specific skill set. Worth paints what a painter sees in a photograph – the specific ways a photograph represents and, *a fortiori*, distorts its subject – and in this way makes the world show up for us in ways it would not otherwise.

Our aim is not to judge Noë's book by its cover but to point out that the cover image will show up or become present to a variety of readers in a variety of ways based on their capacity to see it or make it present in one way or another. This, at least potentially, makes the art especially appropriate for the book it covers. In his introduction, subtitled "Free Presence," Noë uses the example of a work of art that may have left you flat coming alive or coming present to you because of something you overhear from another patron in the gallery. Noë's point is that the work of art

in this example does not become present to you for free or without effort but only with the application of your recently heightened understanding of it. You have to work to achieve the art in this painting as we have worked to achieve a meaning for the art on the cover of Noë's book.

So, now, what about the meaning on the pages printed between these covers? Well, it comes down to this. "The world shows up for us," Noë writes, "thanks to our mastery and exercise of skills of access. We achieve the world," he continues, "by enacting ourselves. Insofar as we achieve access to the world, we also achieve access to ourselves" (12-13). What does this mean? It means that the world that shows up is present to us. And the presence of that world is an achievement of a "form of practical knowledge that is independent of language-use and that is shared by humans and nonhumans alike" (24). It means that the world that shows up for us is the world we understand. And without this distinctly sensorimotor understanding, "there is no access" to the world "and so no perception" (20). Further, since thought is largely, and exclusively when it is directed to an object, extended perception (28), thought, as perception, is an achievement of this understanding. Exercising and mastering skills of access, we enact ourselves. And in enacting ourselves, we achieve a world. It is, however, only for the sake of achieving a world that we enact ourselves. In giving a general theory of access, Noë gives an account of how we become what we are in a world that shows up for us and those like us.

For those wedded to a representational or causal model of thought and perception, this account will not be persuasive, and nothing Noë says or I can add by way of summary and exposition will likely change their minds. Apart from their deep-seated convictions and commitments to shared evidence and the findings of neuroscience, they will want to know something about this understanding which is a precondition for thought and perception. They will want to know more about the sensorimotor character of this understanding, about what it means to say the world shows up "not to our eyes, or brain, but to us" (32). The brain, they might well suppose, has a fundamental structure shared by all sentient beings, and this is the basis for the world appearing the same to all those beings. If an object shows up to us but not our brains, how does the language independent, practical knowledge we variously enact lead to a shared world? Won't the world that shows up for me and my skills of access be different from the world that shows up for you?

Those trained in a continental philosophical tradition, on the other hand, will appreciate Noë for making a case for a view close to their hearts in an idiom that will not be dismissed as obscure by those once called analysts. Readers versed in the writings of Edmund Husserl and in the important revisions of Husserl's phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty will be quite comfortable with the idea that things show up for us and not our brain. They will also readily accept that changes in my physical relation to an object changes the way that object shows up for me.

They may be confused, though, when a discussion of thought as a kind of extended perception is presented as a new idea or when the idea of styles of thought and perception is presented without a citation to Merleau-Ponty who introduced the idea so many years ago.¹

In a short section of text (52-55), Noë addresses what he calls “Merleau-Pontyan contextualism,” a concept he wrangles from Sean Kelly’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.² Noë’s discussion, in a chapter titled “Real Presence,” occurs in the context of an attempt to rectify the claims of perceptual constancy and perceptual nonconstancy. “A satisfying account of perception,” Noë tells us, “must explain how the silver dollar can look both circular and elliptical, how the tomatoes can look to be the same in size and yet different in size” (47). Noë rejects what he takes to be Kelly’s suggestion that context plays a normative role in seeing the coin as constantly circular in the face of its nonconstant varieties of elliptical presentation, because, he says, perception does not vary with the purposes it is put to; perception does not, that is, see the coin relative to some optimal presentation of it. Noë also balks at the idea that we can be aware of the context in the course of perception and, so, judge one way of seeing the coin as not optimal because in a different context we would see more of it than we do now.

Kelly’s point, however, following Merleau-Ponty, is that context is a positively indeterminate presence in perception. It is not what has not yet been determined, a view of the back of the tomato we do not see but might, which is a part of the context for seeing the tomato from one side only as a three dimensional object. For Merleau-Ponty, as Kelly tells us, a sight of the back of the tomato is a positively indeterminate presence in our perception of the tomato from one side only as a fully fleshed out piece of fruit. This would appear to be a variety of presence Noë would want to embrace, and he comes close in declaring that the Merleau-Pontyan contextualism he is considering “seems to collapse into something like the view” he is advocating (54). Yet, Noë falls back to a position we might more readily identify with Husserl when he declares that we encounter the roundness of the coin in encountering its elliptical presentation because of a “practical appreciation” that the apparent shape “depends on my spatial relation to the coin and would, therefore, be modified by movements” (54). Noë may be right to say that the perceptions of the coin as elliptical (the way an artist wanting to represent the coin would see it) and as circular are not incommensurate even if we cannot see the coin as elliptical and circular at the same time. It may not be right, however, that one cannot attend to the color and shape of an object at the same time; this would seem to be something artists do as a matter of course.

¹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 39-84; “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), xx-yy; and *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

² Sean D. Kelly “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” in *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. T. Carmon and M. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 74-110.

Getting back to style, Merleau-Ponty introduced the idea in a discussion of what is positively indeterminate in language and art. Literature, Merleau-Ponty thought, pushes the determinate conventions of language to be expressive and arouse attention by tending toward what is indeterminate. “The writer’s task,” according to Merleau-Ponty, “is to choose, assemble, wield, and torment” linguistic conventions “in such a way as to induce the same sentiment of life that dwells in the writer at every moment” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 48). This sentiment of life is the writer’s style which is not, as Malraux may have thought, a means for recreating or the consequence of a way of perceiving the world but a translation of the writer’s otherwise indeterminate relation to the world (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 56). Style, in painting, Merleau-Ponty writes, emerges “at the point of contact between the painter and the world, in the hollow of the painter’s perception, and as an exigency which arises from that perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 59). Generalized to the everyday experience of those who have not made a career from art, we might describe what Merleau-Ponty calls style as a comportment, or as Noë might put it, a sensorimotor disposition that signs the way we experience the world.

In fact, there is a lot in Merleau-Ponty’s account that squares appreciably with what Noë says he is after in this book. “This is a book,” Noë writes, “about presence, and its fragility. This is a book,” he continues, “about style

about the foundational importance of the idea that we achieve the world for ourselves through different styles of active involvement.... Style is the face of a practice – it is its perceptible, recognizable quality (153).

With one important exception, this is perfectly consistent with what Merleau-Ponty is trying to say. To the end of his life, Merleau-Ponty struggled with the rubric of interior and exterior positing, finally, an entwining of consciousness and the world he called “flesh.” Noë, to his credit, is pushing to a place that is no longer burdened with this struggle (154). In the actionist or enactive direct realism Noë is advocating, “perceiving is a direct relation to the world,” “an achievement of the sensory motor understanding” (65). There is no interiority of concepts that makes experience of the external, physical world possible. Perceptual experience and thought are achieved by the exercise and mastery of skills, the deployment of a sensorimotor understanding Noë says we possess (69) but that he has also called the face of our practiced engagement with the world (153).

For, if all that is the case is the world we achieve by enacting ourselves, and we enact ourselves to achieve this world, then the self we enact is the self that achieves this world. On Noë’s view, it would seem that perceiver and the world perceived come about together in the same sensorimotor achievement. There is no worry about entwining an inner experience of indeterminate meaning with the determinate world outside us. We achieve the world by enacting ourselves and achieve ourselves in achieving this world. This is not the result of an understanding we possess so much as it is the face of our sensorimotor capacities, our style.

What Noë calls sensorimotor understanding is the practical disposition of the affordances and skills that bring us into contact with the world. It is in this sense that perception can be “a nonintentional relation to the world” and an enactment of the understanding that enables us to achieve this relation (73).

One difficulty with this view as Noë presents it is that the affordances that might enable us to achieve a world are not equally accessible. Noë follows James J. Gibson in calling affordances “the possibilities for action provided by things” (120). His focus, as Gibson’s, is on opposing this view to the “perception-as-classification” model of traditional cognitive science. He seems to allow that the world affords different things to different people, because they have different skill sets, but he does seem to notice that there may be artificial barriers to the acquisition of certain skills and limits to the access some individuals will have to the world. Affordances are not just picked up “the way we might pick up pebbles on the beach” (29n8). They show up for us as a result of the skills we exercise, the worlds we achieve and the selves we enact. And these exercises, these worlds, these selves will vary in ways we are not always free to decide.

Still, what Noë says in his “Afterword” holds out the promise for changes in the availability of affordances and the access these affordances enable us to achieve. For while our access to the world is achieved by what we know and can do, and limited in the same way, this access, Noë says, is liable to disruption, worries and doubts. More promisingly, Noë writes, “The *question of style* – the need for different, maybe better ways of carrying on – is always with us” (154, italics in the original). Our “captivity,” he says, by pictures and advertising, architecture and ideology, is never total and “this tension between the ways our understanding opens up and the ways it closes off the world for us is a conversation we can’t help but keep having” (154). This conversation is the work of philosophy and art, and it is this conversation that enables us to remake ourselves, our skills and our understanding.

These conclusions are all well and good, but Noë ends his book by an appeal to grace. “We can’t invent new languages or new pictorialities, new ways of thinking,” he writes. “But we also can’t stop them from inventing themselves” (155, italics in the original). This is puzzling. Perhaps Alexi Worth is only discovering new pictorialities and not inventing them, but if the question of style is always with us, we will not wait for grace to discover the worries and doubts that can disrupt our settled understanding of things. If the question of style is always with us, we will seek out these disruptions and actively enter into conversations that enable us to think differently and open access to the world for ourselves and others.³

³ Special thanks to Alexi Worth and Heidi Lange of DC Moore Gallery for their assistance in writing about the cover art for this book.