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Critical Discussions

Big Guys, Babies, and Beauty

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***Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, by Ellen Dissanayake**; xvii & 265 pp.
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000, \$29.95.

The intellectual climate of postmodernism has not been particularly encouraging for the development of an evolutionary theory of the arts. Concentrated in constructionist modes of analysis and interpretation for the past thirty years, the social sciences and humanities have asserted that aesthetic objects and practices are produced and regulated by social and cultural structures, and serve overwhelmingly to reinforce those structures. In its most extreme form, postmodern constructionism claims that *all* meaning or significance derives from social and cultural factors, and that perceived truth is a matter of agreement or a function of power. If, for instance, we like Edward Weston's photographs and Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings because we observe striking similarities between the organic forms represented in them and features of the human form, postmodernism counsels us that our preferences are dictated by social and cultural regulators, such as current discourses about nature and art, and not in any way by predisposed attractions to types of natural objects or to the relationships between them.

Certainly, it would be foolhardy to argue that social and cultural context have *no* influence on either the type of art that is produced or its reception in any given culture, but a thoroughgoing or strong **[End Page 155]** constructionism is another matter. ¹ Strong constructionism cannot explain--or, to be more accurate, refuses to explain--why we have art in the first place. Recent intellectual fashion has dictated, in sum, that the most interesting questions about art, the truly thought-provoking and hard questions, should not be asked. Yet even in an era inimical to the study of complexity, some scholars will continue to grapple with the interesting questions. So it is that within the past twelve years Ellen Dissanayake has published three books that together stand as the major contribution to an

evolutionary understanding of the arts.

Dissanayake's three books--*What Is Art For?* (1988); *Homo Aestheticus: Where the Arts Come From and Why* (1992); and, most recently, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (2000)--build on one another, elaborating a functional account of the genesis and adaptive value of the arts. ² It is fitting that each volume amplifies Dissanayake's central theory, representing, as it were, a new stage in that theory's evolution, for *elaboration* is a key concept in Dissanayake's work.

First and foremost, Dissanayake establishes the need for a functional account of art in *What Is Art For?* before developing her central thesis. Pointing out that what we know of pre-industrial cultures is inconsistent with the traditional approach to aesthetics, Dissanayake fruitfully suggests we readjust our intellectual lens. Whereas aestheticians have been preoccupied for centuries with discovering a transcendent essence for art, a functional and evolutionary account reveals the myopia of such an approach. Premodern cultures, because they do not separate life into discrete categories including the real and everyday, the imaginative and aesthetic, and the religious, have no concept of art apart from everyday activities or utilitarian considerations and, therefore, the study of these cultures calls the existence of a transcendent art essence into question. As constructionist colleagues would be happy to point out, the quest for essences does indeed attest to a cultural bias, that particular bias being an overwhelming tendency to conceptualize in rigid dualities within modern western culture; simultaneously, the quest for essences conflicts with an evolutionary understanding of human beings and their practices. In thus preparing the ground for her central argument, Dissanayake recommends persuasively the need for a major shift in focus among aestheticians, who are encouraged to look at how art behaviors work in adaptively significant ways within human social life.

In Dissanayake's account, all of those activities, adornments, and the like in pre-industrial culture that we today see as the ancestors of **[End Page 156]** modern art forms exemplify a predisposition toward elaboration or, in her chosen phrase, *making special*. Carvings on tools; nonfunctional, decorative features on baskets and pottery; and the visual, aural, and performative patterns of ritual, for example, are all evidence of the propensity to make special, which in some sense removes objects and activities from the world of the everyday and places them, for members of traditional societies, within a magical or supernatural world, yet not within a separate sphere of art. A feature, Dissanayake asserts, "as distinguishing and universal in humankind as speech or the skillful manufacture and use of tools," making special has two adaptive functions: first, it imposes a civilizing order on everyday things and experience, and thus promotes a psychological sense of mastery and control; second, it promotes group cohesion, through shared activities, images, and the like (p. 92).

Hence, in her first book, Dissanayake lays the groundwork for a functional account of art by providing an evolutionary and anthropological perspective for readers unfamiliar with such a point of view; in her second book, *Homo*

Aestheticus, she builds on this behavioral approach by incorporating significantly more cognitive science and neurophysiological research into her analysis to support her central claims. At the outset, Dissanayake stresses the psychological need of humans for perceived control over experience and the importance of art in facilitating feelings of mastery. As she explains, the first step toward neutralizing anxiety is to crystallize an apparent problem through representation, and art and ritual as forms of representation are accordingly instrumental as mechanisms for the psychological control of experience. For preindustrial persons who are highly intelligent and capable of conscious reflection yet at the same time subject to numerous threats from their environment, the need for such psychological control must be great. What is required is a sense of *dromena*, or things done, a concept Dissanayake borrows from Jane Ellen Harrison. Art, a uniquely human means of elaborating objects beyond the everyday, is a way of producing *dromena*, and thus of feeling masterful under potentially overwhelming circumstances.

In her discussion of the *protoaesthetic*, Dissanayake observes that all of the elements of making special are inherently pleasing to human beings. Geometric symbols, for instance, don't occur in nature, yet they are evident in all early human art, indicating a human propensity for form. Concurrently, however, playing with form, indicating a predisposition toward novelty, is just as evident in early art as form itself. **[End Page 157]** Apparently, then, two contrary predispositions, one toward formal organization and one toward pattern-breaking, strongly inflect art behaviors. With this discussion of the protoaesthetic, Dissanayake begins to address the often neglected difference between perceived beauty in our environment and the aesthetic features of artworks.

Whereas Dissanayake's first two books articulate a phylogenetic account of art and explain the cognitive features underlying both the elements of art and its mental processing, her new book, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, offers an ontogenetic perspective on the evolution and perpetuation of the arts. While Dissanayake's central thesis about art, that art is a mode of making special that facilitates psychological control and group cohesion, has remained consistent, she has come to incorporate increasing amounts of cognitive and developmental research into her centrally anthropological approach.

The claim of this new book, that intimacy or love and art are fundamentally related and grow out of the first relationship of infant to mother, is original and, although it seems unusual to use the word in the context of nurture, daring. "Mothers and infants?" we hear the aestheticians protest, "But we thought our subject was Art."

Mothers and infants indeed. Human infants, as Dissanayake explains, are predisposed toward emotional communion with others, because emotional communion facilitates the physical proximity of caregivers and consequently improves the likelihood of survival for human neonates, who are born, due to the pressures for early birth caused by encephalization and upright posture, in a state of extraordinary dependency. Adults, but especially women, and most especially

an infant's primary caregiver/mother, are in turn predisposed to respond to a baby's facial expressions, sounds, and gestures, because the mutual emotional attachment of child and mother that promotes survival simultaneously enhances the parent's inclusive fitness (i.e., her ability to reproduce her genes in succeeding generations). The rhythms and modes of infancy, which establish and continually reaffirm strong attachment and are based in the turn-taking, affective exchanges between mother and child, arose in our hominid past and are still a major feature of our developmental repertoire, but their importance doesn't end with adulthood. They remain, in Dissanayake's view, a fundamental feature of our adult emotional and psychological repertoire, serving as the substrate for our mature rhythms and modes of love and art.

What are these rhythms and modes? By rhythm, Dissanayake explains, "I mean to suggest movement in time and the sense of forward [End Page 158] flow of sound and nonsound, both 'natural' (or biological) and humanly organized in performances of love and art" (p. 6). *Mode*, whose meaning overlaps with *rhythm*, also suggests emotional and sensory states or mode-of-being, and particularly reflects the preverbal experience of unified perception. The rhythms and modes enacted and experienced in mother-infant interactions are distinct from adult interactions, as cross-cultural studies of the past several decades demonstrate. When adults speak to infants, they speak in a higher, softer, sing-song voice, and they often speak as though they expect a reply, even to extremely young infants. Rocking, patting, and smiling often accompany talking to babies, and "the things [mothers] say are structured in time, like poetry or song: if transcribed, they reveal formal segments like stanzas, often based on one theme (with variations) that has to do with the looks or actions of the baby (frequently its digestion: burps, hiccups, and poops) or something about its lovability--for example, 'Mommy loves you. Yes. Yes. Did you know Mommy loves you? Yes she does. She does. She loves you'" (p. 30).

It's more than likely that, had Dissanayake proposed this theory fifty years ago, she would have been laughed out of the country's lecture halls. We live in a culture that little understands how our attitudes toward young children not only reflect what we are but also define what we will become. Assuredly, second-wave feminism (not to mention post-Vietnam economic conditions), has changed the scene somewhat, bringing many women back into the workplace and therefore requiring an adjustment in attitude toward women and their concerns; but on the whole, the relegation in the past several centuries of women to the household where labor is overwhelmingly comprised of the care of children has led to a devaluation of childrearing along with a correspondingly distorted enthusiasm for paid work. From a sociobiological point of view alone, this situation is illogical: one only increases inclusive fitness when, after successfully reproducing, one nurtures *and* provides for children. Yet when infants are mentioned in a serious argument, people seem uncomfortable and embarrassed, as though the speaker has brought her knitting to a meeting with the dean. Thankfully, developmental psychology has blossomed since the mid-1960s, and it is Dissanayake's marshalling of this significant body of research in the service of her argument that

renders it, far from an example of wish-fulfilling latter-day feminism, convincing and even profound.

Dissanayake's use of developmental theories is accurate and authoritative, as readers of this literature will attest. Drawing on a host of **[End Page 159]** developmentalists, including John Bowlby, Daniel Stern, and Colwyn Trevarthen, the last of whom Dissanayake has worked with in Scotland, Dissanayake establishes that the emotional rewards of mother-infant interaction, because of the strong bond they encourage, are the crucial link to reproductive success. The rhythms and modes of art are embedded in this process, and Dissanayake's discussion of baby talk gives a clear example of how this works: "Baby talk . . . has nothing to do with the exchange of verbal information about the world and everything to do with participating in an impromptu expression of accord and a narrative of feelings, ideas, and impulses to act. It is this wish to share emotional experience that motivates early vocalization . . . and sets a child on 'the path to spoken language,' as the neurobiologist of language John L. Locke (1993) nicely described it--not the instrumental need to request or name things, which comes later" (p. 45). If the notion that infants are motivated to speak not through a utilitarian need to name things but by a desire for communion and meaning-making seems far-fetched to some readers, familiarity with development and cognitive psychology affirms that this is the accepted picture of the infant in those fields. ³ Language acquisition theorists, in fact, believe that innate narrativity *precedes* language and drives its development; the infant is eager for the enhanced communion with and power to influence mother and others in his circumscribed world. Thus reproductive fitness, emotional and psychological well-being, verbal facility, and the protoaesthetic patterning of narrative are all improved or encouraged through baby-talk.

In insisting on the priority of mother-infant mutuality, Dissanayake has written an intellectually and socially significant book. The gaze behaviors, prespeech, and early gestures of infants, far from being randomly directed, are oriented toward the mother and others who, in responding and perpetuating interaction, are instrumental in the infant's developing sociality and sense of self. One need only glance through the work of a leading developmentalist like Daniel Stern to get a picture of the substantive basis of Dissanayake's theory. ⁴ It is hard, then, to see how Dissanayake's thesis cannot in an important sense be right for, given a normative genetic make-up, mutuality is the foundation of all developing competences.

Peculiarly, it is just the demonstrable priority of the mother-infant relationship that points to a potential weakness in the author's thesis, to wit: *if* mutuality is the foundation of everything for the normal infant, then it is the foundation of *everything*, and we are addressing a general **[End Page 160]** theory of the correspondences between early developmental relationships and behaviors and adult behaviors, which is something other than a specific theory of the arts. And instructively, Dissanayake's claim is not exclusively about art; her theory states that the rhythms and modes of infancy underlie art behaviors and adult love, two

very different sorts of behavior with distinct proximate motivations and emotional bases. Assuming her hypothesis is correct, then, do not the rhythms and modes of infancy serve as the emotional and social substrate for other adult human relationships and experiences, such as friendships, work relationships, and feelings of professional competence? While I suspect that the answer to this question is "yes"--that mother-infant mutuality establishes the emotional and social dynamic of all the activities of later life--I would not make too much of this as a criticism of *Art and Intimacy*. Among other things, by focusing on the impact of infant development on art specifically, Dissanayake addresses a concrete instance of early experience's overwhelming impact on human life.

The author's ability to locate her argument amidst the theoretical considerations of humanities disciplines on the one hand and social scientific statements about the nature and meaning of the arts on the other is one of the strengths of her book, showing that her perspective and theory are not discipline-bound but instead relevant to diverse groups of scholars. Today, cultural constructionists and evolutionary biologists typically speak past each other, or only to themselves; but Dissanayake addresses both groups. Speaking to constructionists, she makes effective use of personal experience, noting that her periods of residence in Sri Lanka over the past fifteen years have confirmed her sense of the "incommensurability of cultures" while nonetheless making her, as she says, "the opposite of a fanatical cultural relativist: I have in fact become more impressed with the deeper human similarities that underlie cultural differences. I have become, that is, a firm advocate of a common human nature" (p. 11).

If even constructionists would have difficulty arguing with her broad experience of life in varied cultures, which complements her psychological research to supply a concrete basis for her assumptions about developmental universals, evolutionary theorists, likewise, should attend to her criticisms of their use of the term "aesthetic," which should not, in Dissanayake's view, be applied generally to all that human beings find attractive, interesting, or arousing. Dissanayake has, in fact, been pointedly critical of so-called evolutionary aesthetics, which conflates a predisposition to find attractive certain features of environments or **[End Page 161]** persons with aesthetic considerations, and it is in response to evolutionary aesthetics that she has developed her concept of the *protoaesthetic*, first discussed in *Homo Aestheticus*. In short, understanding biologically based patterns and subjects as protoaesthetic requires us to distinguish those phenomena from their representation in art: though the rhythms of a mother's voice may predispose us to respond emotionally to certain metrical patterns in poetry, they do not predetermine the aesthetic efficacy of poems adhering to that pattern. Similarly, the features of landscape that people find attractive cannot be added together randomly to produce an aesthetically viable painting, as Dissanayake pointed out several years ago in the pages of this journal in her discussion of Komar and Melamid's amusing *Painting by Numbers*, a book describing an experiment in which the authors polled individuals about their preferences and then painted a picture comprised of all the favored objects. [5](#) Surely common sense tells us all that such an experiment must fail, yet the

presuppositions of evolutionary aesthetics nonetheless imply its success, equating as that subdiscipline does *preferences* with *aesthetic judgment*. Indeed, Dissanayake's insistence that there is a crucial distinction between adaptive preferences and aesthetic qualities also invites reconsideration of theorists in the humanities like Rudolph Arnheim and Morse Peckham, both of whom made pioneering attempts to connect bioevolutionary considerations with formal preferences in art nearly forty years ago. ⁶

Just as Dissanayake's comments on evolutionary aesthetics expose a simplistic and therefore unsatisfactory concept of the elements of art, her criticism of evolutionary biology's received notion of the function of art reveals a one-sided perspective in need of correction. Explaining (and, indeed, ultimately sharing) evolutionary theory's view that humans expend energy toward survival-related ends and that, in consequence, extravagant behaviors like the arts with no directly apparent reproductive value form something of a puzzle, Dissanayake enumerates the shortcomings of the reigning evolutionary hypothesis of art behavior. This hypothesis holds that forms of display--singing, dancing, building, speaking well, etc.--promote reproductive success because they provide the opportunity for males to draw attention to their superior qualities and, as a result, to be preferentially selected as mates by females. Unwilling to dismiss this analysis entirely, Dissanayake incorporates it into a broader perspective: "evidence indicates that male competition is only one, and not the most important, driving force for human elaborations. Male competition cannot account for **[End Page 162]** the arts of females . . . for the arts of men and women older than prime reproductive age . . . or for the obvious fact that the arts, even when they also serve competitive interests, are often co-created and performed by more than one person" (pp. 135-36). Dissanayake maintains that the ceremonies of traditional societies are gratifying because their rhythms and modes derive from mother-infant mutuality, which challenges the regnant evolutionary view to reconsider its own causal hypothesis, even as it implies that the emotional rewards of sexual competition and those of cooperation may not be mutually exclusive and may, in fact, have a shared origin in early experience.

Like Sarah Hrdy's *Mother Nature* and, on the popular market, Natalie Angier's *Woman, Art and Intimacy* asks us to think more holistically in theorizing the evolutionary value of human behaviors. ⁷ Loath to toss out big guys, babies, and bathwater in one ritual clean-up, these books compel us to ask what role men *and women* play in any evolved behavior. At the same time that theirs is a feminist perspective (either implicitly or explicitly, depending on the author), it is also a more scientific and specifically Darwinian perspective than that which, in the service of biocultural analysis, ignores the role of women. Since feminist analyses of science have pointed to male bias to discredit sociobiology (along with rationalism and scientific empiricism in general), *Art and Intimacy*, like the recent work of Hrdy and Angier, will help to restore the viability of Darwinian approaches within the humanities and social sciences. That the authors of these books extend and elaborate evolutionary arguments in promising ways is not, needless to say, of secondary value to the political consideration of restoring Darwinism's

credibility among female scholars.

To some readers of this journal, Dissanayake's unwillingness to move from general theory to in-depth analysis of specific artworks may prove somewhat disappointing. In fact, to the degree that she treats specific manifestations of the arts at all, her discussions are typically either of the ceremonial rituals of traditional societies or of visual objects such as paintings. Although she does connect salient literary themes with universal biological patterns and is well-acquainted with the work of Joseph Carroll and Robert Storey, the two most prominent theorists in evolutionary literary studies, she shies away from speculating at length about how the rhythms and modes of infancy are elaborated in the production, distribution, reading/viewing, and reception of particular works of art, especially literary art. [8](#)

One possible reason for this refusal to engage in the specific analysis **[End Page 163]** of literary works is a bias against language-oriented culture, expressed not only here but in *What Is Art For?* and *Homo Aestheticus* as well. The spread of literacy and with it the spread of a language-oriented culture whose tendency is to subserve rationalism, to hone the ability to make fine discriminations, and to reward problem-solving and critical thinking--to parcel out by geometric rules, as Wordsworth would have it--leaves untended (or undertended) the psychological needs traditionally met by the mythopoetic and holistic force embodied in religious ritual. In the latter portion of her book, Dissanayake is intent on revealing our culture's neglect of the arts and on arguing that public attention to the arts will help alleviate the fragmentation and meaninglessness of contemporary culture. The points need to be treated separately. First, while it is true that contemporary culture does little for any development of the arts, almost anyone reading Dissanayake's book is apt to be interested in art in the first place, and therefore unlikely to benefit from an argument he or she would willingly endorse. Instead, such readers might benefit most from specific examples, which would enable them to bring Dissanayake's theory into discussions with friends and students about theatrical performances, paintings, music, literary works, and the like.

Second, Dissanayake's assumption that art can alleviate contemporary cultural fragmentation is problematic, and exemplifies a near-universal tendency in anthropological analysis to romanticize traditional cultures, which have not yet been ravaged by the consumerism, waste, complexity, and accelerated greed of modern life. Anyone living today sympathizes with the view that we've somehow made our lives just too complicated and that a bit of simplicity would be a nice thing. But we are nonetheless beholden to remind ourselves that we cannot return to a past life and time. How much power does art have to reintegrate our experience? Given that so much modern art not only ponders the problems of fragmentation, alienation, and meaninglessness but is in many cases inspired by them in the first place, the power of these phenomena to restore holistic consciousness is most likely a distinctly limited and qualified one.

None of this alters the fact that, along with *What Is Art For* and *Homo Aestheticus*,

Art and Intimacy is a major work of cultural analysis. Basing her work on thorough and wide-ranging research in the sciences and social sciences, Dissanayake demonstrates that a revisionary humanism supported not by truistic claims but by a documented understanding of what people are may hold the promise of the intellectual future for the [End Page 164] humanities. Certainly postmodern constructionists have so foreshortened the range of acceptable interpretations of cultural phenomena that they are running out of things to say. Indeed, not in spite of but rather because of the parameters she has set for her own project, Dissanayake's book opens up possibilities for the analysis of specific works and types of art as well as for general theoretical considerations, and will invigorate the study of art for many years to come.

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Notes

1. The terminology of strong versus weak constructionism (or constructivism) is adopted from Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
2. Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988); *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (New York: Free Press, 1992); *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
3. See, for example, Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).
4. Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). The seminal work on mother-infant attachment (or bonding) is John Bowlby's *Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
5. Ellen Dissanayake, "Komar and Melamid Discover Pleistocene Taste," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 486-96.
6. Rudolph Arnheim, *Toward a Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts* (Philadelphia: Chilton Publishing, 1965).
7. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999); Natalie Angier, *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

8. Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Robert Storey, *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

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