

Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began

Ellen Dissanayake

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Fanning the riverbed of human psyche with the tireless fin of academia, soft-rayed with the sweeping reach of interdisciplinary research, *Art and Intimacy* gradually unveils the shared origin of love and the humanities, which rock with the tidal urges of evolution.

Dissanayake initiates an exhaustive (and humble) departure into the realms of numerous disciplines, including infant psychology, evolutionary theory, cognitive science, neuroscience, physical and cultural anthropology and aesthetics, in an effort to successfully balance her work and promote her thesis. Proposing that infants and their mothers engage in a rich exchange of love via their dually created set of “rhythms and modes,” Dissanayake maintains that this natural and evolutionary effort to satisfy inborn human needs is the original fertile ground from which adult love, and the arts, flourish.

Springing from the assumption of five basic intrinsic needs that the infant harbors, the author wisely allows the book to manifest itself as a functional expression of its theory. As each chapter is titled and devoted to an individual need, each builds upon its predecessor, allowing a sobering, natural progression to the author’s appeal for “taking the arts seriously.”

The first of the innate needs explored is the mutuality between mother and infant, as Dissanayake emphasizes this fundamental interaction far beyond traditional evolutionary theory. Mutuality, in turn, impacts ability to belong to a social group, find/make meaning in life and feel competence through creating with the hands. The final need for elaboration is, in essence, art itself—the expression of one’s fulfilled basic needs, or expression of identity.

Considering modern day neglect in satisfying these inborn needs, Dissanayake observes that “Our marvelous, long-evolved, specialized hands, which can weave baskets, fashion arrows or mold vessels, are now used chiefly for pressing buttons on appliances and computer keyboards.” In contrast, the Venezuelan Yekuana tribe live their worldview through the handmade artifacts, or “tidi’uma,” and ritual, which together provide meaning, “hands-on competence” and elaboration. While creating a symbolically garnished basket, “a person simultaneously learns about the society’s underlying meanings,” which provides a cultural importance foreign to our own polar view of “basket weaving.”

Decidedly aligned with her previous works, which similarly delve deep within the primordial depths of art and evolution, Dissanayake’s *Art and Intimacy* emerges with both subtle urgency and cool intellectualism. Far beneath the enveloping wash of pages drifting past, lovers of the arts may find themselves breathing the waters of its theory, and wary of modern culture—with its air of artificial prosperity and purpose which sear the lungs.

KAREN WYCKOFF (May / June 2000)

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