



Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began

Ellen Dissanayake

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To Ellen Dissanayake, the arts are biologically evolved propensities of human nature: their fundamental features helped early humans adapt to their environment and reproduce themselves successfully over generations. In *Art and Intimacy* she argues for the joint evolutionary origin of art and intimacy, what we commonly call love.

It all begins with the human trait of birthing immature and helpless infants. To ensure that mothers find their demanding babies worth caring for, humans evolved to be lovable and to attune themselves to others from the moment of birth. The ways in which mother and infant respond to each other are rhythmically patterned vocalizations and exaggerated face and body movements that Dissanayake calls rhythms and sensory modes.

Rhythms and modes also give rise to the arts. Because humans are born predisposed to respond to and use rhythmic-modal signals, societies everywhere have elaborated them further as music, mime, dance, and display, in rituals which instill and reinforce valued cultural beliefs. Just as rhythms and modes coordinate and unify the mother-infant pair, in ceremonies they coordinate and unify members of a group.

Today we humans live in environments very different from those of our ancestors. They used ceremonies (the arts) to address matters of serious concern, such as health, prosperity, and fecundity, that affected their survival. Now we tend to dismiss the arts, to see them as superfluous, only for an elite. But if we are biologically predisposed to participate in artlike behavior, then we actually need the arts. Even -- or perhaps especially -- in our fast-paced, sophisticated modern lives, the arts encourage us to show that we care about important things.

Ellen Dissanayake is Visiting Scholar at the University of Washington and has recently held Distinguished Visiting Professorships in the College of Fine Arts at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, and at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. She has lectured and taught in a variety of settings, including the New School for Social Research in New York City, the National Arts School in Papua New Guinea, and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. She is the author of *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From* and *What Is Art For?*



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