

## ResearchSpace@Auckland

### Version

This is the Accepted Manuscript version. This version is defined in the NISO recommended practice RP-8-2008 <http://www.niso.org/publications/rp/>

### Suggested Reference

Davies, S. (2005). Ellen Dissanayake's evolutionary aesthetic. *Biology & Philosophy*, 20(2-3), 291-304. doi: [10.1007/s10539-004-0193-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-004-0193-3)

### Copyright

The final publication is available at Springer via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10539-004-0193-3>

Items in ResearchSpace are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. Previously published items are made available in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher.

<http://www.springer.com/gp/open-access/authors-rights/self-archiving-policy/2124>

<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/issn/0169-3867/>

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/docs/ua-docs/rights.htm>

Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

**Important note:** This is a final draft and differs from the definitive version, which is published in the **Biology and Philosophy**, 20 (2005): 291-3049. I have been assured by the University of Auckland's research office that if they have made this publicly available then it does not violate the publisher's copyright rules.

Ellen Dissanayake's evolutionary aesthetic

Abstract:

Dissanayake argues that art behaviors—which she characterizes first as patterns or syndromes of creation and response and later as rhythms and modes of mutuality—are universal, innate, old, and a source of intrinsic pleasure, these being hallmarks of biological adaptation. Art behaviors proved to enhance survival by reinforcing cooperation, interdependence, and community, and, hence, became selected for at the genetic level. Indeed, she claims that art is essential to the fullest realization of our human nature.

I make three criticisms: Dissanayake's theory cannot account adequately for differences in the aesthetic value of artworks; the connections drawn between art and reproductive success are too stretched to account for art's production, nature, and reception; indeed, art enters the picture only because it is so thinly characterized that it remains in doubt that her topic is art as we understand it.

Keywords:

Dissanayake, art, adaptation, "making special", community, mutuality, aesthetic, value, ritual, play

## Ellen Dissanayake's evolutionary aesthetic

Is art purely cultural or does it centrally involve a biological component? Ellen Dissanayake argues that the propensity to make and enjoy art unavoidably draws on part of our universal, biological nature. In this paper I outline and criticize her view.

Dissanayake is an ethologist. She is interested in human behavioral predispositions that are universal and innate because they have proved to enhance survival, which is defined as reproductive success (1995: 36; 2000: 21), and, hence, became selected for at the genetic level. Such behaviors must date back at least to the late Pleistocene (20,000 years ago), since it is then that human biological evolution reached its present condition. Subsequent changes involved cultural evolution, a predisposition that is itself based on evolutionary characteristics of the human species (1988: 23; 1995: 14; 2000: xiv). Dissanayake holds that art behavior, which she characterizes first as patterns or syndromes of creation and response (1988) and later as rhythms and modes of mutuality (2000), displays the hallmarks of a biological adaptation (1988: 6; 1995: 33-4); it is universal, innate, old (being present from at least 100,000 B.C.E., depending on what is counted as the first evidence), and is a source of intrinsic pleasure. Indeed, she claims that art is essential to the fullest realization of our human nature. Art is not something added to us but is the way we are, Homo aestheticus, stained through and through (1995: xix).

## 1.

Art is closely related to both play and ritual (including ceremony and religion). In fact, art, ritual, and play all fall under the umbrella of "making special" (1988: 75-105, 1995: 45-56), also known as "elaboration" (2000: 134). The human tendency to make things special was first manifested about 100,000 B.C.E. (1988: 55), when functional items were selected in part for their attractiveness or unusualness. At a similar time, decorations or patterns were added to artifacts. The propensity to make things special had adaptive value; that is, it enhanced the survival or breeding of those who had it. Consequently, the art-making practices that followed, appearing along with religion 40-60,000 years ago (2000: 131), inherited a similar functionality. In the case of art, making special or elaboration takes the form of intentionally decorating oneself and one's environment in order to provide aesthetic enjoyment, which sometimes can attain the level of ecstatic states. Typically, art is made for life's sake, not its own. It often is conjoined with ceremony to amplify features already made salient by their ritual selection and function. Art is adaptive because, along with ritual and play, it promotes community benefits that, in turn, improve the wellbeing and reproductive potential of society's members. It highlights and affirms what is important to their lives: control over nature, manual competence, group lore, genealogy, wisdom, and mores. Moreover, it plays a vital role in promoting cooperation, mutual identification, and social cohesiveness.

The mechanisms harnessed by art include the following: imitating, varying, experimenting, seeking novelty, formalizing, patterning, exaggerating, distorting, channeling emotion, embellishing, pretending, and metamorphizing (1988: 130). The adaptive benefits of art are, as just

described, a mixture of the individual and social. We need and value control of nature, system, and order, and art provides a source of these (1988: 77-9; 1995: 106; 2000: 75-9). In conjunction with ceremony, art makes group knowledge more impressive, compelling, and memorable, it promotes agreement and cooperation, and it addresses the uncertainty and liminality inherent in the human condition (1988: 154; 1995: 89, 129; 2000: 141).

"We evolved to need mutuality with other individuals, acceptance by and participation in a group, socially shared meanings, assurances that we understand and can capably deal with the world, and the opportunity to demonstrate emotional investment in important objects and outcomes by acts and experiences of elaborating. These psychological necessities were instilled, expressed, and felt by means of what I have called rhythms and modes, which themselves are inherent in our biological adaptedness ... Unbound from their origins and elaborated as components of ceremony and, much later, as independent arts, rhythms and modes throughout most of human existence encapsulated and transmitted group meanings that further confirmed individual feelings of belonging, meaning, and competence and united individuals into like-minded, like-hearted groups" (2000: 168).

Also, art has many of the benefits claimed for it by proponents of the educative value of the liberal arts. It helps people to care, and realize they care, about the natural world; it allows the expression of what cannot be verbally articulated; it enhances thought and learning in other areas (such as those of solving complex problems, understanding systems in a variety of contexts, and thinking non-linearly); it reconnects us to the

more global, synesthetic, emotion-suffused, analogic or metaphorical kinds of thinking that we exercised as children; and it addresses universal themes that tell us of our common human heritage (2000: 192-9).

Finally, art is often a source of highly valued ecstatic or transcendent experiences (1988: 135-9, 156-60; 2000: 160). Though she says little about the adaptive value of such experiences, except to suggest they help individuals deal with stress, change, and uncertainty (1988: 155), Dissanayake thinks a sign that they have evolutionary value is that 85% of human societies acknowledge some form of transcendent experience and have institutionalized means for achieving it (2000: 161).

Now, Dissanayake is confident that the ethologist fares much better than the anthropologist, sociologist, philosopher, and post-modernist theoretician in explaining the importance of art in human life (1988: 16-17; 1995: xiv-xvi, 24-6, 74-5, 199-223). She swipes with a broad brush; indeed, sometimes she is scathing in her comments.<sup>i</sup> More generally, Dissanayake criticizes the functional explanations of art offered by anthropologists and philosophers, according to which art reflects the natural world, provides access to direct "thoughtless" experience, trains our perception of reality, prepares us for the unfamiliar, develops and extends consciousness, assists in giving order to our world, contributes to objectivization, abstraction, and symbolization, dishabituates us from ordinary modes of perception, and provides a special intensity to human experience (1988: 62-71). She responds that art is not the only or even the most efficient means to such ends, and that such accounts do not always allow that aesthetic features and their apprehension contribute centrally to the functions identified.

Observe, however, that Dissanayake endorses similar functional values for art, as I observed above in comparing some of her ideas with those of people who advocate an education in the liberal arts. I take it that her main objection is not that art lacks the beneficial effects claimed for it by the philosophers and anthropologists, since she makes similar claims, but rather that the effects cited both are insufficient on their own to explain the universal occurrence and high value of art and that they bypass the underlying biological inclinations and mechanisms that provide the foundation for art behaviors.

Brave though Dissanayake is in the interdisciplinary scope of her commentary, her perspective on other disciplines may look to experts rather swift and shallow, as she is aware (2000: xii). More interesting, then, are the criticisms she levels at other ethologists.

Evolutionary theory might take one of three approaches to art: (1) it might ignore it, regarding it as a local, purely cultural phenomenon; (2) it might describe art as a spin-off from, or as an incidental byproduct of, adaptive behaviors, rather than as something targeted directly by evolution; or (3) it might regard art as a behavior selected by evolution because it directly improves the reproductive potential of those who have it. Dissanayake's view is of this last kind (1995: 35).

Though art is not generally mentioned by ethologists, Dissanayake rejects the first option. In her view, there is compelling evidence that art has adaptive significance (1988: 6; 1995: 33-4).

The second position holds that art is an incidental, side benefit of some other adaptive behavior; there is coincidental selection of the trait

but not selection for the trait. The adaptive syndrome of behaviors that is often identified as generating art as one of its byproducts is the development of language, abstract thinking, and other modes of symbolization. Against this theory, Dissanayake emphasizes that art played a role in the long pre-verbal history of the human species; it continues to do so in the pre-verbal infant stage of individual development; and the human compulsion to elaborate and decorate also goes far beyond what symbolization requires (1988: 146-7, 172-8; 1995: 89, 154-5, 204-23; 2000: 146-7).

One aspect of Dissanayake's position might give the impression that she regards art as a spin-off from the mother-infant relation. She observes that the behaviors (rhythms and modes) establishing mutuality between mother and infant include the rhythmic sequential organization of vocalizations, movements, and facial expressions; imitating, matching, and turn-taking, either in synchrony or antiphony; and cross-modal or analogical equations between gestural, vocal, and other patterns. Ceremony and art echo these same processes and are sensorily and emotionally satisfying and unifying in the same way. Yet Dissanayake's thesis is not that art is merely a positive side-effect resulting from the persistence of adaptive behaviors that target the mother and child. It is, rather, that art and ceremony are no less adaptive than is the development of intimacy and mutuality between the baby and its primary caregivers, and that, parsimoniously, these different forms of adaptation share the same mechanisms (1988: 141-4; 1995: 180-2; 2000: 34-8, 129, 139-43).<sup>ii</sup>

"It is not surprising that societies all over the world have developed these nodes of culture that we call ceremonies and rituals, which do for their members what mothers naturally do for their babies: engage their interest, involve them in a shared rhythmic pulse, and



thereby instill feelings of closeness and communion. The inborn propensities for imitation, reciprocity, and emotional communion in infancy have become further elaborated and used in ritualized and ceremonial forms that themselves build and reinforce feelings of unity among adults, all of which ultimately serve to hold the group together" (2000: 64).

Dissanayake's is a version of the third theory, according to which art behaviors are directly adaptive. As noted previously, this means they are universal, innate, old, and a source of intrinsic pleasure. There are several things to notice about these crucial claims, especially the one about universality.

The claim that art making is universal is ambiguous; it might mean either that art occurs pan-culturally or that art is made by every individual, given appropriate conditions. The first, weaker view is available to Dissanayake. She could argue that only a talented few persons make art, though this happens in all cultures. So long as the use and appreciation of art is widespread, it would be possible for a limited number of art makers to generate the community effects that Dissanayake identifies as advantaging the reproductive success of members of the group. In fact, though, she clearly opts for the stronger view, according to which the behavior is selected at the individual, not group, level. The behavioral tendency to create art "is inherited, and thus both indelible and universal. That is to say, it is not the exclusive possession of just a select few; rather, like swimming or lovemaking, art is a behavior potentially available to everyone because all humans have the disposition to do it" (1995: 34-5). In the evolution of the species, art-inclined individuals survived better, and that is how the disposition became more or less

universal across the whole species. In Dissanayake's account, the activities of creating and using art are described variously as basic, innate, normal, and natural to individuals. They are compared to the manner in which we are attracted to and engage with human babies.

The claim that art-behavioral dispositions are universal among individuals imposes a demanding burden of proof on Dissanayake's theory. She rightly observes that the relevant behaviors are potential (1995: 35; 2000: 169). The realization of these potentials might depend on social and other circumstances that may be absent, at least from time to time. Nevertheless, the dispositions should be actualized under conditions suited for our reproductive success, such as ones of sociality, mutual support, and comfort. Dissanayake takes her claims—that art is a behavior in which very nearly all individuals engage and that it is an easily accessed source of universal pleasure—to be intuitively compelling. This reveals how broad and humble is the conception of art to which she must be appealing. It is doubtful, as I explain later, that art, as we normally understand the notion, survives this reduction.

Also, Dissanayake's undefended assumption that art is pan-cultural leaves her theory vulnerable. She takes it for granted, apparently, that we share a pre-theoretic notion of what art is and that we can readily recognize art as such across cultural and historical divisions. Of course, she provides examples of "making special" from many societies and eras, but she does not argue either that art can be made by those who lack the concept or that all cultures share the same pre-theoretic notion of art. Both these alternatives are challenged by those who regard art as a comparatively recent creation of European culture, as I outline later.

The line most commonly adopted by ethologists who regard art behaviors as directly adaptive is that art leads to reproductive success by functioning as a form of sexual display. Like the peacock's tail, it allows humans to demonstrate their fitness for reproduction, and to do so in part by showing they can afford to "waste" time or "gild the lily" by committing themselves to demanding but redundant activities.<sup>iii</sup>

Dissanayake dismisses this view. While she allows that art might enhance the reproductive success of the individual who shows off his talent, dexterity, perseverance, grace, or whatever, in making it, she denies that this is its principal evolutionary function. The view of art as sexual selection mistakenly treats art making as a male preserve and it cannot account for much of the "making special" or elaboration that goes into religion and rites (1995: 10-11, 66; 2000: 135-7). More generally, Dissanayake objects to the way evolutionary theorists narrow the subject of reproductive success to the frequency of sexual copulation (2000: 43), or characterize reproductive success as the exclusive survival of the fittest rather than as the inclusive survival of the fit, and thereby wrongly elevate ruthless self-interest and competition above cooperation, care, and interdependence (1995: 20). By contrast, she stresses the importance of community, mutual support, and collaboration for reproductive success. We are evolved to seek and find satisfaction and significance in our connectedness to others; to feel incomplete and unrealized if we cannot join with others in a life of sharing and caring in which adult love is to be distinguished from mating just as dining is to be distinguished from feeding (2000: 20). "While some of us seem to do nothing but make and spend money, and others suffer from not knowing what we are here for, a lot of us probably feel (or hope) that we make a few others' lives better or happier. We are here to learn, teach, preach, serve, befriend, build, create,

defend, help the helpless, and—as far as we are able—find hope and meaning in life" (2000: 22).

This idea carries over to her view of art. It is adaptive not solely as a way of procuring sexual partners, if it is that at all, but mainly because of the vital contribution it makes to community stability and the enrichment of social mutuality. It makes for an intense, plentiful, complex, and deeply satisfying mode of existence with others. Human reproductive success requires stable social life and improves as that life provides significance and emotional support over people's lifetimes. And that is why art is adaptive. Across a broad array of activities and elements, art adds to, improves, draws attention to, and amplifies communal existence in a way that enhances the reproductive chances of society's members.

Speaking personally, I find this aspect of Dissanayake's theory makes it far more plausible and suggestive than most. She acknowledges the importance and seriousness of art. Her position avoids the trivializing reductions of most ethological approaches, which tie beauty to sexual attractiveness and see the interest and value of art exhausted by its potential as a tool for seduction. Yet consider for a moment that most people regard their musical preferences as so important that they contribute centrally to their sense of their own identity. Most of us cannot easily imagine that we would be the same person had our preference been for Country and Western, not, say, classical music, or had it been for heavy metal, not, say, romantic ballads. And most of us can feel slighted if the music we prefer is ridiculed, dismissed, or found boring by others, even if we allow that tastes differ. And so it is for most of the arts. They are so deeply integrated into human lives that people are as likely to

identify themselves in terms of their affiliations to kinds of art as to nations, cultures, sports, political perspectives, ethnicities, and religions. If evolutionary theory is to be able to contribute more than a speck to our understanding of art and what it does, it must be able to respect and address the centrality of art in the lives of most people. Among the ethological theories of which I know, Dissanayake's is the strongest candidate for meeting this requirement.

Moreover, Dissanayake is a passionate and eloquent advocate for art, because she believes we humans are betraying our nature and because she thinks art could rescue us from this situation, if only it could recover its sense of seriousness and purpose. She maintains that we have become alienated from the concerns, practices, and activities that would fill our lives with meaning, coherence, and competence (1988: 32, 178-80, 195; 1995: 136, 139; 2000: 115-17, 123, 224). This is not to say that we could return to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle (2000: 123, 225), or that that existence was not desperately fraught for our predecessors in the Pleistocene. Notwithstanding such considerations, however, Dissanayake regards the past with a deep nostalgia born of her sensitivity to the cost imposed on us by the elevation of technology, individualism, hedonism, and an artificial environment that shields us from the psychological, physical, and social realities of existence (2000: 75, 98). "Not only is advanced man no longer fitted for human life; modern life is no longer fitted for human nature" (1988: 194-5).

Post-eighteenth century Western art, as well as modern life, has lost its grip on the evolutionary thread that should give it significance, Dissanayake observes. With its detachment from real life, its increasingly arcane and self-referential embellishment, and its trivialization in

postmodern times, recent Western art has become a private predilection consecrated for the unengaged, overly cognitive apprehension of an elite few (1988: 183, 188-92, 198-200; 1995: 137).

## 2.

What criteria of success must be met by an account that sees art as directly targeted by evolution?

The standard might be modest. The theory succeeds if it can describe certain behaviors—namely, ones identified retrospectively as the ancestors of current art behaviors and understandings—as enhancing reproductive success under the conditions holding in the late Pleistocene, so that they became selected for at the genetic level. Under the different conditions that obtained later, the descendants of these behaviors could become largely non-adaptive or even maladaptive. Also, our contemporary art behaviors, theories, and concept might have moved far from those that can be applied to the Pleistocene. By this standard, an adequate theory must tell us about the origins and adaptiveness of ancient, proto-art behaviors, and it must trace a robust causal path from current art behaviors and understandings back to these origins. It can leave cultural contingencies to account for the molding of the original activities to their present, very different, manifestations, however.

Or the standard might be set much higher. The theory succeeds only if it accounts for our current concept and behaviors (though it can allow that dead-end spin-offs from these may be non-adaptive or maladaptive), as well as identifying the source of these as genetic selection in the late Pleistocene. Because it refers to aspects of human

biological nature that have not been altered in their fundamental character by subsequent cultural evolution, it makes claims about what is normal or natural for present-day humans.

Dissanayake's theory is ambitious in its scope and she plainly expects it to be judged against the higher standard. She aims to provide an evolutionary story to account for the pre-theoretic notion of art that we currently share, and she accepts that doing so commits her to providing an account not only about art's origins and persistence but also about the criteria of aesthetic value that we apply to it.

In this section I suggest that Dissanayake's theory fails the tests she sets for it. It cannot account adequately for differences in the aesthetic value of artworks; the connections it draws between art and reproductive success are too stretched to account for art's production, nature, and reception; indeed, art enters the picture only because it is so thinly characterized that it remains in doubt that her topic is art as we understand it.

It is a common criticism of evolutionary accounts of art that they cannot discriminate kitsch from great art, so they provide no account of aesthetic value (Dutton 2003). For instance, even if we are evolved to prefer savannah and similar landscapes, this tells us nothing about why anyone would prefer a painting by Constable to an unimaginative calendar photograph of parkland.<sup>iv</sup> If evolutionary success is indifferent to aesthetic quality, so that the pleasure we are biologically programmed to derive from art bears no connection to its aesthetic merit, then evolutionary theory may be able to tell a story about the adaptive

significance of the merely agreeable or the sensuous, but can have little to say about art or aesthetic beauty as such.

Dissanayake is aware of this problem and attempts to address it by providing an analysis that integrates aesthetic value with behavioral dispositions that have obvious relevance to reproductive success in her view. She argues that there are four criteria of aesthetic quality (2000: 209-21): accessibility coupled with strikingness, tangible relevance, evocative resonance, and satisfying fullness. The first three are necessary for aesthetic worth and the last is necessary for the highest levels of aesthetic value. "Super stimuli", such as videogames and advertisements, cannot qualify as aesthetically good because they do not provide the deep rewards that go with engaging and meeting concerns motivated by our biological nature (2000: 120, 123).

These criteria can be rejected as too broad. They might easily be satisfied by items we would not think of in aesthetic terms, such as a video of our wedding ceremony or of our favorite team winning the grand final. Indeed, Dissanayake's criteria are likely to pick out everything that humans find interesting, rather than only things that are distinctively aesthetic or art-connected. In mortal combat, one's success in firing on one's enemy is likely to be accessible and striking, of tangible relevance, evocative of ideas and associations, and satisfyingly full! Besides, even if we confine our attention to paradigm artworks, the vague condition of "satisfying fullness" surely will prove inadequate to capture the heights of aesthetic value we associate with, for example, King Lear, The Creation of Adam, War and Peace, the Hammerklavier, The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, and the Taj Mahal. Dissanayake's focus on the satisfaction of biologically programmed imperatives is simply too narrow to take in the



scope of art's greatness. Her attention is fixed on art's form and on matters appreciated intuitively, emotionally, or pre-verbally. She puts aside art's content along with its cognitive, symbolic, referential, allusive, or representational nature and the culturally distinctive art traditions and conventions that it presupposes. While Dissanayake does not deny that some art can be symbolic or cognitively demanding, those ideas do not feature in her accounts of art's origins or of the source of its highest aesthetic values. "My own ethological viewpoint does not treat content—the actual thoughts, wishes, or images inherent in the actions or objects that are being made special (shaped and embellished) ... I am not particularly concerned with the symbolic character of art: I find its presymbolic sources much more crucial to understanding its nature as a biological endowment" (1995: 85, 94). Such remarks seem to concede that a single-minded evolutionary focus is plainly inadequate to giving great art its due. In trimming the scope of her inquiry to a level at which ethology might provide the answers, Dissanayake ditches the greater part of art's artiness and intellectual value.

This last observation leads to a second line of objection.

Dissanayake's account must link the production and consumption of art to direct pay-offs in terms of reproductive success. To her credit, she has a sophisticated and rich view of what makes for reproductive success. But, inevitably, in tying all making special to reproductive success, she is forced always to look for making special's common denominators. These turn out to be very low indeed. As well as arising out of the human proclivity to "make special", the creation of art depended on our making and using tools, needing order, developing language and speech, classifying, conceptualizing, symbolizing, creating culture, and on our self-awareness, attraction to novelty, and sociality (1988: 112-25). Quite

so, I agree. But so did every other complex human institution and practice. Like the modes of interaction between mothers and infants, art involves repetition, elaboration, mimicry, exaggeration, rhythmical patterning, mutuality, and the like. Quite so, but equally, so does all human learning and communication. Far too often, Dissanayake seems to think she can derive her conclusions about art from a much more general discussion of the human biological condition. The bonds that connect art universally and at every point to the potential for reproductive success are generic and ubiquitous. Accordingly, they say little that is specific to art as such, notwithstanding her contrary claims.

In other words, Dissanayake must look for humanly universal common factors in accounting for art's evolutionary role because she sees art behavior not merely as an incidental byproduct of selective processes but as directly targeted by evolution and thereby as of adaptive significance for every individual. It turns out, however, that the human factors that are common to all individuals raised under circumstances in which art making is likely seem not to be suited to explaining what is distinctive to art behaviors. Hence, they are also not suited to explaining why we make and appreciate art. In my opinion, Dissanayake's contrary belief reveals less about art and more about the strength of her conviction that evolutionary theory alone can account for art's existence and nature.

Here then is the third objection: Dissanayake fails to establish that her topic is art, though her goal is to argue for the centrality of art in human life. She anticipates this criticism but fails to dispose of it, as I now explain.

It is plain that Dissanayake's theory applies most comfortably to what might be called "low" or "folk" art; that is, to domestic and personal decoration, or to local conventional and common public practices, rites, and ceremonies in which all members of the community participate, often together. To be suited to meeting the evolutionary functions she describes, art must be local, current, and accessible, not alienated from the wider populace and incomprehensible without a background of "theory" and the mediation of critics. Moreover, art must be functional; it must make things aesthetically special in a fashion that enhances or supports their makers' or consumers' potential for reproductive success. As Dissanayake is aware (1988: 5, 41, 105, 156; 1995: 39-41, 195-8), her assumptions about art are seemingly at odds with the view that has prevailed in the West over the past two hundred years. According to this alternative, art is non-functional; it does not have the prime purpose of making other things special. It is to be contemplated and valued for its own sake. Artists are distinct from artisans, just as art is separate from craft. Whereas artisans are rule-followers and technicians, and craft objects derive their worth from their usefulness in meeting our independently specifiable goals and ends, artists are creative and seek originality, and artworks possess unique, inherent value. In general, art should be treated as separable from both nature and life's more quotidian aspects. It is never merely the servant of the church or state, even where it remains associated with them. It is to be regarded in a manner that distances it from the appreciator's ordinary cares and concerns, and, where possible, is to be located within a special environment—the art gallery, concert hall, theater, opera house.

Just as she believes that contemporary life is at odds with its biological destiny, and that modern art is the same, she concludes that

this comparatively recent, European conception of art is aberrant. It distorts the underlying, long-established history of art making and the evolutionary imperatives that underpin this. "It seems safe to say that what is usually thought of today in advanced Western society as art and aesthetic experience—a disinterested response to an object or activity for its own sake, or the making of such objects—would not have been selected for in human evolution. In the first place, there has not been time enough for persons with the proclivity to have any effect on the common Homo sapiens gene pool. Moreover, selection would not have favored nonfunctional proclivities: an art that is truly for its own sake would have to be by definition not (except perhaps fortuitously) for the sake, evolutionary or otherwise, of anything else at all" (1988: 156).

Still, if the goal is to characterize art as we understand it, and if our concept is the one just indicated, according to which art is distinct from craft and is to be contemplated in a distanced fashion for its own sake and apart from its possible utility,<sup>v</sup> then it is not art that Dissanayake is talking about. How does she respond? One of her strategies is to concede the point, while suggesting there is something else we should really be discussing.

(1) Sometimes Dissanayake says she is describing not art behaviors as such, but the proto-behaviors on which these were to be based (1988: 108). But even if this is one of her goals, she plainly intends and believes herself to go far beyond it. After all, she criticizes (in 1998) ethologists who claimed that national polls initiated by the Russian émigré artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, provide insight into human art making or aesthetic experience, either today or in the Pleistocene, despite revealing an unexpected consistency across different and widespread

societies in their habitat preferences, including geographical type, vegetation, subject content, and color scheme. These polls identified features that can be called, at most, protoaesthetic, Dissanayake observes. Ethologists who regard them as explaining Pleistocene aesthetics ignore the facts that in the arts we respond to more than adaptive preferences and single qualities, we experience the aesthetic not only as pleasurable or beautiful but as significantly persuasive and memorable, and we distinguish between the merely pleasing and the aesthetically superior. Moreover, such ethologists neglect to show how the preferences that were identified connect to important life concerns that people rightly cared about in earlier millennia. In making these criticisms, Dissanayake obviously intends to describe the standard that must be met by any satisfactory theory, and she regards her own theory as at least satisfactory.

(2) At other times she suggests the concept of art should be abandoned. More precise, narrower terms should replace it. "Is it possible that art could be a conceptual vapours or phlogiston, eventually to be replaced, when our powers of discernment or diagnosis have improved, by a number of more specific terms?" (1988: 59). "I think our understanding of art as a human behavior would improve if we altogether banned the word art in its singular, conceptual form, just as we no longer find it useful to invoke a broad term, vapours, for diverse complaints that gain nothing by being clumped together" (1995: 57).

Sometimes Dissanayake claims to be characterizing the arts, not art (1995: 41), as if she would prefer to replace talk of art with individual narratives concerning painting, music, dance, song, story telling, play acting, and so on. That does not seem to be her main point, though,

because, in contrast to the vapors or phlogiston, we have long been aware of the individuality of the various component artforms. It is not clear to me, when it comes to the reductive analysis of art, what "more specific terms" can replace it in Dissanayake's view.

(3) Elsewhere, Dissanayake advocates a confusingly contrary idea: that the word "art" should be abandoned in favor of a more general category. There is no clear ethological basis for distinguishing between art and ritual (ceremony/religion) or between art and play (1988: 78-87, 2000: 56). All these can be subsumed under the more conceptually foundational notion of "making special" (1988: 92, 98; 1995: 49) or "elaboration" (2000: 131, 138) and, once this is recognized, talk of art may be otiose.

Dissanayake cannot get off the hook so easily, though. We do distinguish art from ritual and from play, even if art can join with these in making objects, activities, or events special. And if her account is about art specifically, not about some more general category in which art is merely one element—and that is how she usually represents it—she owes us a story about what is distinctive to art.

(4) Often, Dissanayake prefers to emphasize art as a behavior rather than as an object. "Regarding art as a behavior—an instance of 'making special'—shifts the emphasis from the modernist's view of art as object or quality or the postmodernist's view of it as text or commodity to the activity itself (the making or doing and appreciating), which is what it is in many pre-modern societies where the object is essentially an occasion for or an accoutrement to ceremonial participation ... Looked at in this way, art, the activity of making the things one cares about special,

is fundamental to everyone and, as in traditional societies, deserves to be acknowledged as normal" (1995: 223)

It is hard to see this last response as escaping the question about what art is, given that works of art or art-events are the product of the arts, that is of the artforms. After all, surely the act of production leaves its mark on the product, and the product as preconceived and intended shapes the course of its production. So we cannot dismiss as irrelevant all questions about the nature of the product while insisting on the seriousness of the process or means of production.

As I have indicated, Dissanayake makes lame attempts to change the subject, instead of providing substantive rebuttals to the rejection of her central claim, that art making is universal and innate. And obviously her heart is not committed to these equivocations, for she always moves on to talk about art, both in our own and in other cultures, just as before, by invoking the common or garden concept every one of us (including contemporary Westerners) is supposed to know and understand.

How, then, should she answer the objection? She should argue that the modern European conception is of Art with a capital "a", while her concern is with a broader but no less legitimate sense of the term; namely, art with a lower case "a". Also, and this is the difficult part, she needs to establish that these two meanings are connected, with small "a" art as the genus and capital "a" Art as one species alongside others, such as folk art, domestic art, religious art, and so on.<sup>vi</sup> She should show how her account picks out a pre-theoretic, intuitive notion of art that we share and that provides a conceptual umbrella capturing the fundamental unity of the art of pre-modern societies, the art of traditional, small-scale

cultures, and the approach to and conception of art that emerged in eighteenth century Europe.

I do think some such argument can be given. In fact, I have tried to present a version of it (in Davies 2000). But I do not believe the required argument is available to someone with Dissanayake's commitment to evolutionary theory. When it comes to the basement floor of biologically conditioned dispositions, those common to pre-modern art and contemporary Western art will be shared also with many other non-art activities. Dissanayake concedes as much when she allows that, viewed in terms of biological adaptiveness and its mechanisms, there may be nothing to distinguish art, play, and religion. To account for art's distinctive nature and cultural contribution, what is needed, I suspect, is a story about cultural histories and lineages, and about the factors and constraints in terms of which social practices change, grow, and develop while preserving their basic identities. That narrative is not one the ethologist is equipped to deliver in its entirety. The ethologist surely will have much that is vitally important to say about proto- and early artistic activity—and here one cannot deny the value of Dissanayake's achievement—but it will be in terms of cultural pedigrees, as well as common ancestral beginnings, that the continuity between the past and present—between lower and upper-case art—will be made recognizable.



## REFERENCES

- Davies, S.: 2000, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', in N. Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, pp. 199-216.
- Dissanayake, E.: 1988, *What is Art For?* University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Dissanayake, E.: 1995, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Dissanayake, E.: 1998, 'Komar and Melamid Discover Pleistocene Taste', *Philosophy and Literature*, 22, 486-96.
- Dissanayake, E. 2000, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Dutton, D.: 2003, 'Universalism, Evolutionary Psychology, and Aesthetics', in S. Davies and A. C. Sukla (eds.), *Art and Essence*, Praeger, Westport, pp. 213-26.
- Miller, G.: 2000, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*, Doubleday, London.
- Orians, G. H. and Heerwagen, J. H.: 1992, 'Evolved Responses to Landscapes', in J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, and J. Tooby (eds.), *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 555-79.

Shiner, L.: 2001, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

## NOTES

- 
- <sup>i</sup> I cannot resist quoting the following: "Far from being a new mode of consciousness, postmodernism is rather the inevitable conclusion of a blinkered philosophical tradition that by the very tools of its profession is constrained in its presuppositions about language, thought, and reality ... Postmodernism (and indeed Western philosophy) is scriptocentric in the same way that the pre-Copernican world was geocentric" (1995:202-3). "Like children of the rich who disdain and criticize their parents' materialism while they accept monthly handouts that make possible their bohemian style of life, postmodern writers bite the hand that feeds them" (2000:210-11). "Looking at a text [in which an Amerindian talks about his cooking pot] with unsentimental postmodern eyes, we could conclude that like any cultural product Lame Deer's interpretation of his cooking pot is limited and partial: it can be deconstructed. But so what? The desk at which I write gives the illusion of being solid, although physicists inform me it is really composed of atoms with vast spaces between them. But it still supports my books and typewriter, and should the lights go out and a visitor unfamiliar with the room—say Jacques Derrida—bump into it, it will be solid enough that he won't fret about being irremediably separated from Reality. In a similar way, solid, substantial meaning and 'impact' can be found in our cultural constructs once we look to the universal species reality they embody" (1995:215).
- <sup>ii</sup> Perhaps Dissanayake implies that art behaviors arose initially as a byproduct of adaptive mother-infant behaviors and subsequently became selected for in their own right because they led to further reproductive success.

- 
- iii For an account that sees the biological function of art mainly in terms of sexual selection, see Miller 2000.
  - iv It has been suggested (Orians and Heerwagen 1992) that Constable and Turner were such careful observers of the weather that they used their treatment of clouds to induce emotional responses to their works. Calendar artists are more likely to favor the bland and comforting, perhaps, and therefore to produce less aesthetically interesting results.
  - v For a powerful argument to this conclusion, see Shiner 2001.
  - vi Brian Boyd has suggested to me that a more nuanced image would have art as the genus, and painting, music, sculpture, drama etc. as different species (with some species, like opera, created by hybridization, which now seems to be a way some biological species have started), but with folk art, popular art, mass art, and high art as different ecological forms. The same species can have radically different forms according to the ecology its members encounter, and surely we find the same in art.