The Pleasure and Meaning of Making

By Ellen Dissanayake

In her books *What is Art For?* (University of Washington Press, 1988) and *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Free Press, 1992), the writer and educator Ellen Dissanayake looks at the role of art in human society from a biobehavioral standpoint, suggesting that art is a biological necessity in human existence. This article is abridged from the talk Dissanayake delivered October 15, 1994, at the Great Lakes Regional Symposium on Craft at the Detroit Institute of Arts, an event jointly sponsored by the DIA's Friends of Modern Art/Modern Decorative Arts, the Center for Creative Studies College of Art and Design, and the American Craft Council.

In considering present-day art and life and their relationship, I begin with the premise that there is a more natural way of art and life that contemporary people have departed from and, to some degree, consciously or not, long for. While I acknowledge the opportunities, comforts and pleasures that the industrial and postindustrial, modern and postmodern worlds have brought, I am very much preoccupied with the psychological and spiritual benefits we appear to have forfeited. Rather than blame science and technology and preach that we get rid of them, I argue that we have to look at ourselves, at human nature, not only in the usual psychological or political or economic senses, but also in a Darwinian, biological sense: where did we come from? It is only by knowing where we came from in human evolution that we can know what we are and thus have some informed idea of where we are going and how best to get there, or not, with or without science and technology, as we choose.

In my work, I have found three good places to go for insights into what we are and what we most need to live a good life. First, I look to what is known about the origin of our species in human evolution. Additionally, I look at our own origins as individuals—the early life of young children. Third, I find it helpful to look at how art and life interpenetrate in what are called premodern or traditional societies. I can suggest any or all of these as touchstones for getting to the heart of things when one is confused by apparent complexities.

For example, I begin with a statement that I'm sure craftspeople would agree with: there is an inherent pleasure in making. We might call this *joie de faire* (like *joie de vivre)* to indicate that there is something important, even urgent, to be said about the sheer enjoyment of making something exist that didn't exist before, of using one's own agency, dexterity, feelings and judgment to mold, form, touch, hold and craft physical materials, apart from anticipating the fact of its eventual beauty, uniqueness or usefulness. Apart from feeling and then asserting that humans have an inherent *joie de faire,* can we then demonstrate it?

Going for enlightenment to one of my touchstones, premodern societies, I find that every single study of their art objects and activities stresses the sociocultural *function:* funerary figures, masks used in healing ceremonies, musical instruments for initiation rituals, bowls painted with sacred symbols, jewelry used to indicate social status. Anthropologists, who like ourselves come from modern and postmodern societies, where the arts are generally considered to have no function, are at pains to point out how in earlier or simpler societies the arts are inextricably involved in everyday life, embodying the norms of the group, articulating its deepest values. I myself am impressed by and write about that, but I think there is something more elemental to be said.

My daughter's birthday came while I was thinking about this talk, and though she's now a wife, mother and playwright, I suddenly remembered her as a preschooler saying "Mommy, let's make something." Like me, she now makes things with words, but then we went through construction paper and Elmer's glue and crayons like locusts through fields of grain. Snowflakes and snowmen on the windowpanes in the winter, macaroni dyed with food coloring or rolled up paper that became beads, jack-o'-lanterns, costumes of pieces of cloth and lace for her and her friends and even the cats. Nothing especially creative or marvelous. They were "functional" in that they decorated the house, or us, or were to play with, but the pleasure was in the making more than in what we did with the result.

Homo Faber

The memory of my daughter's early years coalesced with my current studies of the early stages of human development, that is, to infancy and childhood—one of the sources of insight that I just mentioned, and I saw a further connection with the origins of humans as a species. Just as these areas have suggested to me so many things about the functional importance of the arts to human individual and social life, it is there that I was able to substantiate my intuition that there is something vitally and humanly important about the pleasure of making.

It is well known that the earliest cultural artifacts of our hominid ancestors were stone and then bone tools—implements for obtaining and preparing food and other of life's necessities. It is now believed that among the advantages of walking upright is that the already dexterous and flexible primate hand was left free and could be used to carry, to make gestures, but also to make tools and, unlike other animals, to use tools to make tools.

This adaptation is quite evident in infant development. Both monkey and human fetuses make reaching and grasping movements in the womb, but the human baby is born with incipient hand movements that presage its future life as a tool user and communicator par excellence. Newborns can see much better than was earlier suspected, and they make prereaching movements in the direction of objects that their eyes track. Around four weeks, babies begin to be truly sociable, responding to others' faces and sounds with unmistakably social facial expressions and sounds of their own. Their hand movements become expressive, like conversational gestures, and pre-reaching toward a "target" temporarily declines. By two months these gestures have characteristics of speech: temporal patterning, emotional dynamism and direction toward others.

But along with a baby's ability to use its hands communicatively, its drive to master the skills of tool use reasserts itself, with increasing control and coordination. In the human brain there are different paths for perception and for acting on the world. The baby's coordination of eye and hand is developed first by practicing bringing its hands in contact with each other, and then reaching out more successfully and precisely to things in the outside world and, ultimately, truly grasping them.

Reaching, grasping and investigating by eyes, hands and mouth are repeated again and again, allowing us to learn that our actions can have an effect on the world. (In fact, all these motor skills from the very beginning have beneficial effects on cognition.) At first we can only release our grip accidentally, but when we achieve the coordination to let go deliberately, dropping objects becomes as enjoyable as grasping them was earlier. Not only do we have an effect on the world, we can plan (to drop) and predict (that someone will pick it up), and these cognitive pathways in the brain become more developed. Subsequent developmental stages of motor activity include using the precision grip of opposable thumb and fingers (which is unique to humans, as is our rotating wrist) and our improved eye-hand coordination all together.

Manipulation (*manus* means "hand" in Latin) also is developed in person-person-object games, where babies and their partners hand objects back and forth, and do things with them. Rhythmic banging is synchronized with syllable babbling at six months, indicating the inherent coordination and pleasure in rhythm. It is important to realize that handling and using are inextricably connected with social interaction and communication—reaching out to others as well as to the inanimate world. Both persons and objects have meaning, and the imperative to have an effect on both is mediated with the hands.

Such specialized anatomical and cognitive abilities, and their emotional/social correlates, indicate that surely the use and making of things manually—that is, handwork—is something we were born to do. And indeed, one could say that nothing recognizably human is achieved without hand use—writing, painting, carving, sewing, building. If we haven't realized this before, it is only because in our lives machines do these things for us—but until very recently, human lives were made by human hands. Early anthropologists called us *Homo faber*—the making, or toolmaking animal. The earliest humans were the earliest craftspersons: to be human was to make. It can even be said that, unlike other species, we use tools not just functionally but, even as babies, to leave our mark on the world, to achieve our ideas. The ability to use tools lets us leave a permanent trace of our actions *and* thoughts for others to see.

This reconstruction indicates that pleasure in handling is hardwired into human nature for good reason: it predisposes us to be tool users and makers. The infant drive to reach, grasp, investigate with mouthing, looking and dropping has critical biological importance. And as a critically important biological drive, it is something all babies everywhere want to do. So one must presume that handling, like walking, talking and playing, is pleasurable.

What about *making?* In a premodern society the infant's and child's pleasure in handling and then using objects evolves naturally into making them—implements, vessels, houses, regalia. The important universal behavior of play provides opportunities for children to imitate the activities of adults and thereby learn the ways of their society. If the adults make and use tools, children will too. If adults don't, then children won't either, and

their natural drive to move seamlessly from handling to making will atrophy just as surely as the predisposition to smile or share will wither if not encouraged or mirrored by positive example. At best, children may say, "Mommy, let's make something," but in our society most people make little of what they use. We buy it, or consume it as images presented by media. Thus it seems that the normal and necessary human pleasure in making can easily be overlooked, even by those who describe the works of people in premodern societies who still do make the things they use.

Homo Aestheticus

My work emphasizes that humans are inherently artistic animals, that *art* (or "the arts") is (or are) normal, natural and necessary. In other words, in our species, *it has not been enough simply to make things, but to make them art-fully.* In order to avoid the word "art," which often carries with it a penumbra of unexamined assumptions about rarity, uselessness, privilege, specialization, hierarchy, remoteness and refinement, I usually put it another way. I say that from very early on (as much as 250,000 years ago), humans have been naturally attracted to the *extra*-ordinary as a dimension of experience. Even more, from that far back they seem also to have been moved to make the ordinary extraordinary, especially when their deepest feelings and concerns are engaged.

I began my quest some years ago by wondering why the arts should ever have arisen at all, since in our society they are believed to be superfluous, even dispensable. Because I had an interest in ethology, or animal behavior, I decided to think of art in a new way—as a behavior (like play or aggression or language or tool use) that evolved to become an inherent part of human nature because, somehow, it enhanced our survival. Even thinking of art as a behavior was difficult: the word "art" usually refers to entities (like paintings, carvings, or poems) or to a quality or X-factor that makes some paintings and poems "art" but denies that label to others, or has historically distinguished between art and craft. Although there is not a verb "to artify," I was looking for evidence that making something artfully (rather than just making it) has been intrinsic to our species even though I wasn't exactly sure how to describe what this activity is. More and more it appeared to me that the best and most inclusive way to characterize the human art impulse or "behavior" was that it is a way of making ordinary experience, of whatever kind, *extra*-ordinary. When "artifying," one shapes or elaborates everyday, mundane reality, thereby transforming it into something special.

For example, one can begin with body ornamentation. Everywhere humans to some degree make their bodies different from the way they come into the world. As early as 70,000 years ago, some peoples artificially elongated their skulls, as we see in ancient Egyptian statues and in present-day Mangbetu. Teeth were filed. This may not sound like art or pleasure, but it is evidence of making the body special, different from the everyday. Surely hair was plaited or bound, as it is today in every human society, to make it different from animal fur or hair. Skin was painted, ears pierced. It is important to note that these things are everywhere done with care. When young people are tattooed or scarified as part of an initiation ceremony, they are not simply slashed or dotted haphazardly. On the contrary, patterns and designs are carefully made, even though any old scar would theoretically indicate that one had achieved the new state of adulthood. Everywhere the transformation, which itself is considered important, is shown by making ordinary flesh extraordinary or beautiful.

Why did people ever start to do these things, and even more important, what was the reason they persisted? What real benefits did they provide so that natural selection would have acted to allow people who made the ordinary extraordinary to survive better than those who didn't bother?

One reason I can suggest is that if people took the trouble to make important tools special—that is, if by carefully adding decorative or magical marks to their spears, shields and other implements, this "special treatment" would extend to the care they took of these artifacts. The care or control required to fashion and embellish an important tool was like a metaphor for the care and control one wished to exercise in using it and the value one imbued it with. People who handled their tools sloppily would use them sloppily, and thus be less successful hunters, warriors and curers. In this sense, art or craft is a necessary part of the technology, not a superfluous addition.

Another evolutionary benefit of making the ordinary more than ordinary is evident when we look at the extraordinary but universal human practice of ceremonial ritual. If you think about it, a ceremony—every ceremony—is a one-word label for what is really a whole collection of arts: song, ordered movement and gesture, or dance, poetic language, visual display, spectacle and performance.

Why do people engage in ceremonies? There is a large and rich literature about ritual that points out how it is *liminal, limen* being the Latin word for "threshold," that is, a time of transition between one state and another. Think of the nuptial threshold that used to symbolize the borderline beyond which the bride and groom take up married life (the period of engagement, wedding and honeymoon all being the special ceremonial time that is outside of ordinary life). For the time of a ceremony, an initiate, or ill person, or dead person, is between the old state and the new. Transitions are times of uncertainty and danger, where everyday rules do not apply.

Rituals are performed in order to affect an uncertain situation—to restore or assure prosperity, health, victory, successful passage to a new state of being (adult, wife, mother, warrior, graduate), or to avert misfortune, defeat, bad vibes. Because people care about the results, rituals are not performed casually: words, voices, actions, movements, bodies, surroundings and paraphernalia are made as impressive or sacred or beautiful or extraordinary as they can possibly be. And, as with tools or weapons, this makes the ceremonies work better, though in a communal as well as individual way. One such ritual is *mbari* from West Africa.

The Example of Mbari

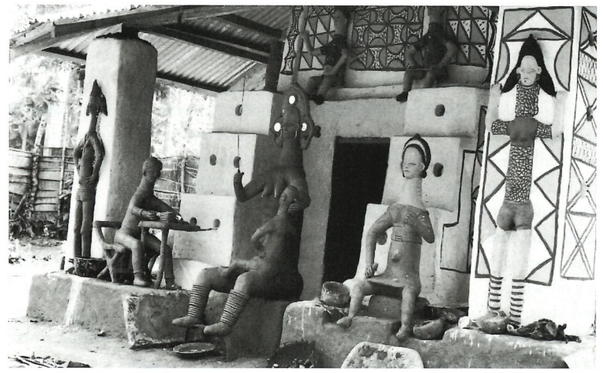
Today, living in a society whose worldview values efficiency, rationality and the bottom line, it is hard for us to justify elaborated ritual behavior, unless like sports events or entertainment extravaganzas they bring in a lot of money. It is hard to believe that a small village's prosperity will be enhanced, or that it can avert famine, plague, death, or debilitating warfare, by holding a lavish, expensive ritual ceremony. Mbari, practiced until recently by the Owerri, a southern Ibo group in Nigeria, uses the labor of 30 to 40 people, who are secluded in a special enclosure and supported by their families for a two-year period. They construct a large two-story edifice of mud that they decorate with colored clay designs applied (like a gigantic piece of cloisonné) between outlining strips of raffia. In addition, anywhere from 35 to over 100 large painted images are modeled of claylike anthill mud that, like that for the walls, has been collected at night, then specially pounded and puddled. After the completion of the structure, the villagers incur additional expenses, with new clothes, a great feast and dance for visitors, and animal sacrifices.

What seems most extraordinary is that after this concluding feast, the mbari house and figures are left to crumble to dust or melt in the rain and ultimately fuse with the earth. Imagine the World Bank or the National Endowment for the Arts funding such a project. Surely the former would say that the people would be much better occupied doing their farming and the NEA would object to the structure not being transferred to a museum or at least photographed and thus preserved. But it is our society with its World Banks and other granting agencies that is aberrant. Throughout human history and prehistory, societies have engaged in undertakings like this. So what could have been their evolutionary value? Such grand efforts probably didn't have the effects that individuals believed they did—bringing rain, attracting game, curing infectious disease, and protecting from floods or famine. Such phenomena would have occurred (or not) with or without these activities.

My suggestion is that the evolutionary reason the ceremonies persisted is that they mobilized, coordinated and unified the members of the social group, ensuring that they worked together in a common cause, believing in the validity of their worldview and the efficacy of their action. Groups who worked together in confidence and harmony would have prospered more than those whose members acted individually, selfishly, haphazardly, without reference to communal purpose. And, it should be clear, the arts were vehicles for this kind of unification. They riveted joint attention, synchronized bodily rhythms and activities, conveyed messages with conviction and memorability, indoctrinated right attitudes and behavior.

There are several important implications illustrated in the example of mbari for our understanding of a "behavior of art" (or "making special"). First, the primary emphasis is on the process, or the making, not the product. Herbert Cole and Robert Brain, whose accounts of mbari I have used, remind us that activity and process even precede and supercede the actual making, or modeling and painting of the mud: they include the formalities of initiating the ritual and enlisting the workers, as well as the formalized life of the workers—the special nonordinary clothing that they wear and the prayers, sacrifices, games, songs, and other activities that they engage in while secluded. All these are highly stylized, or "choreographed," in what is essentially a two-year-long multimedia performance. When finally unveiled, the product (the mbari house and figures) becomes important as a magnificent emblem or material testimony to its makers' efforts and, being so splendidly *extra*-ordinary, it is ritually effective. But there is no desire to preserve it.

A second point is that every step of the process is imbued with meaning. There is meaning in the making itself, what I have called the *joie de faire.* Then, to the villagers, the images that are portrayed are all in some way extraordinary. There are things which are especially good or beautiful—embodying values and virtues such as hard work, wealth, productivity, fertility. There are things which terrify—like spirits from the underworld, forces of nature or mythological figures. There are things which are otherwise forbidden—openly sexual and even indecent imagery—and also entertaining things, which provoke laughter, such as caricatures of white people or bawdy scenes. The largest figure, sculpted and painted last, is Ala, mother of people, giver of yams, goddess of the earth. Thus it is fitting that after the long liminal period of the ritual, the natural environment reasserts itself, and mbari is allowed to become one with the very earth of which it was made and which, personified as Ala, called it into being.



Mbari to the earth goddess Ala in process, community of Umuedi Nnorie, Nigeria, 1967.

A third point is that in human evolution meaning has been overwhelmingly communal, or rather individuals have made things extraordinary for communal, not purely private, purposes. And as the individual is an integral part of a community, so the arts, more frequently than not, are themselves inseparable, with objects being made to be part of performances that include music, dance and poetic language. The villagers who participate are as much makers of meaning as the people who actually construct the house and figures.

This multiplicity and sensuality of meaning in mbari, and the communal participation in making the meaning, further implies that mbari could not be confined to or exhausted by verbal description or interpretation. As Cole himself said in his article (written in 1969, so that I doubt he was aware of or addressing postmodern theory): "*mbari* defies understanding by discursive thought." While few of us would claim that visual, musical and performative works are best responded to or understood by verbal description and interpretation, in our modern text-based art world, we might be seduced into forgetting this.

Holding on to the Meaning of Making in a Postmodern World

The mention of the word "text" leads me to describe a personal experience that provides a point of departure for some observations about the meaning of making in a postmodern world. During occasional bouts of insomnia while I've been living in Scotland, I've discovered that between midnight and 6 A.M., the BBC World Service broadcasts some wonderful radio programs.

On one occasion, when I awakened at 3 A.M. and couldn't go back to sleep, I happened upon a program with music critics discussing new recordings. One critic compared different conductors' interpretations of a movement from a Beethoven symphony, playing short examples of the same few bars; another discussed recordings of Gregorian chant in different cathedrals and by different ensembles of monks or singers.

As I listened, it dawned on me that the critics were saying a lot of words that sounded "good" but didn't really add up to anything. Once I suspected this and listened more carefully, I was increasingly sure that the whole program was a hoax. But I couldn't be absolutely sure. Nothing in the voices or syntax gave it away—there were the usual hesitations, groping for words, qualifications, that would occur when anyone formulates real

judgments without a script. However, the precise and large vocabularies uttered in these educated voices with their somewhat snooty manner weren't conveying meaningful information. I was reminded of listening to adults when I was 10 years old. Except I knew what all these words meant, and they were still gobbledygook.

My first reaction was a kind of complicity: I mentally congratulated myself for catching on. Presumably some people might listen and think they were hearing something informative, based on high critical acuity that they would then agree with. The program seemed a marvelous takeoff on pretentious commentaries and the ridiculous hairsplitting they are based on. I thought to myself, "I am experiencing exactly what the postmodern condition is about: this program is a deliberate illustration of the inability to tell pretense from reality. After all, it might really be real—those people might really be making comparisons that make a difference to themselves, if not to me."

But as the program continued, other submessages occurred to me. If these guys *were* in earnest, it was bad enough. But if they weren't, what was that playful expertise suggesting? Primarily that we have such a glut of interpretations that the distinctions between them are meaningless. The vast array of recordings of Gregorian chant or Beethoven symphonies are not so different from the carnival of shampoos or deodorants on supermarket shelves or the superabundance of programs on all the television channels—more than any one society or consumer could possibly need or process. Who cares what Professor Precious or Dr. Effete think about these things when the inner cities are decaying, children are hungry, whales and forests die, and ethnic groups continue to try to obliterate each other? However, wasn't that what my work is: examining and evaluating events, ideas, definitions and accounts of the world? I eventually fell back to sleep, but it was to disturbed dreams, and I felt depressed the next day.

I relate this anecdote because it is a forceful illustration that to one degree or another, we all *are* affected by postmodernity. We live in it, like it or not. Images *do* compete with or override reality. There is an abundance of information. As in the radio program, Real Life is frequently veiled and Real Distinctions, even when important, are often hard to make. Indeed, the common reactions to this incoherence have been to assert that we *can't* find the real or true, that they don't exist, or else that they are interchangeable and any interpretation is as good as any other.

I don't agree with this reaction, and for insight into what is important and real, I return to my triumvirate of touchstones: infants and children, human evolutionary history and premodern societies. My earlier example of babies (who being without language or culture are not yet, even today, postmodern) showed that the impulse or need to handle and make material objects is primary and pleasurable for the human individual. From a premodern society like the Owerri we see that the enactment of a performative ceremony, a long event of participation and making things of valued meaning to the communal group, is critically important to the maintenance of a human society. From early stages of human evolution, which underlies both child and culture, our individual and cultural needs and development, we recognize that making the ordinary extraordinary must have to do with life concerns, otherwise the behavior would not have persisted. Thus, by any but the most perverse interpretative criteria, the impulse of the child to handle and make, and the need for individuals and societies to make important things and occasions special, must be real and important, and it is unlikely that these are less important today than they were a quarter of a million years ago.

Pleasure in handling is hardwired into human nature for good reason: it predisposes us to be tool users and makers.

Some concluding thoughts I hope will offer justification and direction for craftspeople today. *Making and making special arise from human nature and can continue to address human concerns.* I have traced what modern and postmodern societies call "art" (and "craft") back to the toolmaking and ceremonial practices of our human ancestors from the distant past, although in historical times, and especially in the West during the past two centuries, human social life has changed so drastically from its origins that the continuity with ancestral ways is often difficult to discern. But if we use terms like "making," and "making extraordinary" or "making special," instead of "art," it becomes evident that many of us are still doing the same sorts of things: shaping and elaborating artifacts, utensils and surroundings, thereby making ordinary life more than ordinary. What has changed are other things like our purposes, intentions and justifications for making, our fellow humans' endorsement and responses to our making, and the lack of regard by the larger society for any kind of making except that which receives excessive monetary reward.

The makers of the mbari house and figures knew that what they were doing was valued; their purpose was nothing less than to bring prosperity and well-being to themselves and their community, who in turn not only wholeheartedly endorsed and responded with pleasure and satisfaction to the finished work but themselves initiated its making and participated in its consecration. Is it any wonder that in comparison we present-day "makers" often feel lonely and faint of heart? How can we justify our handwork (in my case, wordsmithing) when the world is all too full of objects (and, in my case, words about objects and words about words)? It is undeniable that postmodern society is more complex than Owerri or prehistoric society, and that adulthood is more complex than infancy. There are more options, more choices, more influences, more opportunities for good and ill. We can make objects for any reason at all, or no reason, or we can make nothing.

Yet, let us not forget that underneath the veneer of modern life we are still affected by the perennial concerns that mbari, in its multiplicity of subject matter, treats—concerns that people have been drawn to make extraordinary for hundreds of thousands of years. For finding pleasure and meaning in making, we won't go wrong if we turn to these universal human interests and verities, among them the forces of nature, love, death, attachment, loss, hope, helplessness, memory and aspiration.

Making is an important antidote to hyperverbality and superanalysis. In a world where pretense and reality are hard to distinguish, as in the radio program I described, there is an elementary sanity and satisfaction in handwork for several reasons. There is the irreducible materiality of handling, and the *joie de faire* of having, like the child, an undisputable effect on the world. Mbari, in its emphasis on process, illustrates the adult satisfaction and meaning to be found in making. In this regard I think one can defend the ordinary workmanlike, even repetitive, actions of scraping, sanding, weaving, stitching, knitting, hatching and polishing that are traditionally part of craftwork or careful making. This is a kind of engagement with the real world that many artists, in their concern with "ideas" and "concepts" have often forfeited. Let us not forget that nature itself is cyclical, or repetitive, and human work in the world, concerned with the daily round and the cycles of the seasons, has a rhythm and recurrence that for millennia have given satisfaction to many. Such work engenders a kind of contemplative state with access to remote parts of our mind, unknown to those who dash continually after novel experience.

Perhaps I should emphasize here the importance to our *minds* of making. In addition to providing a ceaseless and unrelated superabundance of images, postmodern life is at the same time irrevocably dependent on a kind of hyperverbal and superanalytical mentality that is quite new in human history. For those who are to succeed in negotiating its choppy waters, it demands a mastery of sequential analytical thinking, related to but different from the old skills of literacy. Even people who no longer have the habit of reading must, if they use computers, develop this type of superanalytical mentation to a degree far greater than it exists in children, groups like the Owerri, prehistoric humans or even our own grandparents. What characterizes the minds of all these is a kind of prelinguistic or nonverbal, global, synesthetic, amodal, analogical or metaphorical way of thinking. When postmodern theorists, literary critics, analytic philosophers, and even psycholinguists and cognitive scientists make their pronouncements (e.g., that thought depends on language, and language is made of words, which are arbitrary, so that thought doesn't refer to reality because words don't, and anyway there are a thousand different points of view so nothing is real, or, as one contemporary philosopher has memorably phrased it, "human beings are simply incarnated vocabularies"), they disregard half a million years of preliterate human existence and experience. Children, premodern and prehistoric people, and *artmakers* commonly and naturally use spatial, mechanical, musical, or kinesthetic—that is, *nonverbal*—modes of thought.

Both discipline and sensuality are ingredients of making. Craft has perennially been associated with disciplined, careful work. The word "craftsmanlike" means skillful, complex, well-made. I find it ironic that today the old distinction between art and craft— that a work of art is "finer," "timeless" and "beautiful" because it is not made for use but is "for its own sake"—is now turned upside down. Since art has become concerned primarily with ideas and thus is often insubstantial, indifferently made, or all-in-the-head, craft objects have become the main repository of beauty, fineness and lastingness. Donald Kuspit has pointed out that many collectors who want something substantial or of human scale for their money find that "craft" objects are more satisfying purchases than "art." The distinction between the two has never seemed more pointless.

But apart from winning the timelessness or beauty contest, craftspeople should be aware that discipline and carefulness *are* virtues that have sustained humans for millennia. Until very recently, making *special* meant making with care, that is, taking pains and doing one's best. In an age that values unfettered sensuality, spontaneity, nonhypocrisy and letting it all hang out, it is good to be reminded that discipline and decorum have had an important place, not only for social control, but for indicating the value we attach to a thing.

Passing the Torch

In today's world, for the first time in human history, the fleeting and transient, the throwaway and perpetually novel, and the "virtual" or mediated predominate over what is lasting, substantial, irreplaceable, traditional and "real" or "true." Unlike children in the traditional societies of the past, children today grow up in an environment where handwork and personal agency are rarities, and life is experienced at several removes. Our kids don't walk, but ride in cars. They don't learn to spin, weave, knit and sew but buy their clothes. They don't need to cook, much less grow or spear their own food, but can open a box and push a button. What happens on television or computer screens is what is real. They are rarely idle or alone, without background noise, so that their own thoughts can come to the surface and surprise or engage them. Although their minds may be trained at school to be computer-literate, their visual-spatial, mechanical and musical abilities are neglected and their kinesthetic ability, apart from driver training or competitive athletics, is hardly addressed. They will be taught to look things up, and press buttons, and to retrieve information processed by others about the world.

Someone acquainted with human evolutionary history must question whether our species can prosper if so many of its evolved abilities are not fostered and so many of its evolved needs are not met. Making is not only pleasurable, but meaningful—indeed it is because it is meaningful that it is pleasurable, like other meaningful things: food, friends, rest, sex, babies and children, and useful work are pleasurable because they are necessary to our survival as individuals and as a species. A society that devalues making, and making important things special, forfeits a critical component of its members' birthright. Treating important transitions with respect and care and acknowledging their extraordinariness in a socially shared endeavor is another universal human practice. What avenues do we give our children to allow them to even articulate, much less achieve, expression of their values, individually or collectively?

While in Scotland I visited the Shetland Islands, including Fair Isle, where the crafts of spinning, weaving, knitting and fiddle playing of traditional Shetland music are an integral part of community life and education. It occurred to me there that Shetland craftspeople (and on Fair Isle, *everyone* is a craftsperson) do not worry about who their audience is. They create it, by passing on their skills in community-sponsored classes and associations. We are not a traditional society, like the Shetlanders or the Owerri, sorry to say. But craftspersons can still contribute prosperity and well-being to their communities by passing on their *joie de faire,* by example and instruction, especially in the schools. It would not only create an audience for craftwork but also offer to many a desirable reconnection to our human heritage.

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