

Critical Discussion

ART AND SELECTION

by BRIAN BOYD

IN THE INTERESTS OF full disclosure: Denis Dutton, the author of *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, not only edits this journal but has also published here a number of my essays. We share enthusiasms and aversions, but we also now and again disagree. And we both enjoy spirited discussion, which is why I asked him if I might review his book for this journal. *Now* can we begin?

Ellen Dissanayake, the first to take a modern evolutionary approach to art, in her *What Is Art For?* (1988), doubts that sexual selection can explain much about art. After all, she notes, men can compete about anything, even about who can pee the highest.¹ Denis Dutton, the first *philosopher* to take a sustained evolutionary approach to the arts, suggests that much in art arises from sexual selection—and he spends a good deal of time discussing and dismissing the kind of philosophy of art that orients itself around the urinal that Marcel Duchamp christened *Fountain*.

Dutton begins by reporting recent research into the universality of human landscape preferences. Although these preferences explain little about art in the round, they vividly demonstrate the link between human emotions and preferences across cultures *now* and human sur-

The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution, by Denis Dutton; 279 pp. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009, \$25.00. Oxford: Oxford University Press, £16.99.

vival needs thousands of generations ago. In chapter 2, Dutton shows that although recent philosophers of art have not sought to ground art in human nature, that has been an aim of their predecessors from Aristotle to Hume and Kant.

But Dutton really starts with the intuitions that art seems a fundamentally similar pursuit around the world, and that artworks like Duchamp's *Fountain* or Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* should not be central to our thinking about art, even if they have been central for prominent philosophers of art like George Dickie and Arthur Danto. Dutton stresses that we can appreciate art across cultures. He did so himself when he lived in India while in the Peace Corps, and, an accomplished pianist, learned the sitar from a student of Ravi Shankar, or later, when he lived by the Sepik River in northern Papua New Guinea to ascertain whether "local criteria for beautiful art agree with what Western aficionados and connoisseurs of Sepik art call beautiful. My conclusion was unequivocal: Sepik standards of beauty closely match the opinions of Western experts, including curators and collectors who enjoy a wide experience with Sepik museum collections but who have never set foot in the country" (p. 11).

As this passage makes clear, Dutton is not your average armchair academic analytical aesthetician—thank goodness. Unlike the typical professional philosopher of art, he does not hide behind the porcupine quills of philosophese, good for defense and a certain kind of bristly display but utterly rebarbative. Like that other maverick philosopher, Daniel Dennett, he instead engages with work, the world, and readers outside his discipline.

Dutton argues convincingly for the need to focus first on indisputable examples of art rather than on problematic cases, just as discussions of murder should not begin with assisted suicide, abortion or capital punishment (p. 50). One of his best chapters offers a cluster concept of art, a dozen features shared by the most unequivocal art. Doubtful cases will satisfy fewer than the full checklist, but there is no fixed threshold, no necessary and sufficient number of criteria. And no criterion by itself distinguishes art from non-art. Indeed one of the most fascinating aspects of his cluster concept is that, for each criterion, he parenthetically notes examples elsewhere in human life that would satisfy *that* criterion but that nobody would consider art. Skill and virtuosity, for instance, he insists on as features of the indisputably artful, but he adds also: "High skill is a source of pleasure and admiration in every area of human activity beyond art, perhaps most notably today in sports.

Almost every regularized human activity can be turned competitive in order to emphasize the development and admiration of its technical, skill aspect. *Guinness World Records* is full of ‘world champions’ of the most mundane or whimsical activities; this attests to a universal impulse to turn almost anything human beings can do into an activity admired as much for its virtuosity as for its productive capacity” (p. 53). An explicit recognition of partial similarities on this model might silence many a philosophical quibble.

In his next chapter Dutton superbly counters the familiar claim “But they don’t have our concept of art.” He applies his analytic acumen against confused challenges—such as pitting Indian trousseau art against Western high art and declaring Indian and Western concepts of art therefore incommensurable (pp. 67–70)—and the relativism that underpins them. He also deploys his practical knowledge of indigenous arts against a famous theoretical example, Danto’s thought experiment of the Basket Folk and the Pot People, designed to show that it is not *what* people produce but *how they regard it* that defines art for them. Danto’s imagined Basket Folk revere their basket-making but not their functional pots, as his Pot People revere their pot-making but not their functional baskets, yet these neighboring peoples produce identical pots and baskets. Dutton demonstrates that the difference in the two tribes’ regard for basket- and pot-making would render it impossible for them to produce identical baskets and pots: the differences would be readily discernible to both insiders and outsiders (pp. 76–84). We can easily add to his examples of the cross-cultural nature of art. The Samoan novelist and poet Albert Wendt, the leading Pacific Island writer, recalls attending the first two International Pacific Festivals of the Arts, which brought together artists from the vast expanse extending from Papua New Guinea to eastern Polynesia. At the first festival, almost none of the participants had encountered any of the art traditions of their Pacific neighbors. At the second festival, four years later, almost all had appropriated elements of some of the exotic traditions they had encountered in the first festival.²

For Dutton the natural context for explaining the cross-cultural accessibility of the arts is evolutionary and not definitional. That too makes him different from many in the analytical tradition dominated by definitions and nit-picking exceptions. But before he turns to consider in depth the adaptive advantages of a particular art, he offers an excellent discussion of the complex mix of adaptation, sexual selection, byproduct and design in many human activities, and therefore of the difficulty of

determining whether art is adaptive. In evolutionary biology an adaptation is a physical or behavioral feature of a species that has been shaped by natural selection because on average it offers advantages in terms of survival and reproduction. A byproduct is a feature of a species *not* selected for by natural selection, but merely a consequence of features especially selected. A sexually selected feature is one established, despite survival *costs*, for reproductive *benefits*, either through selection by the opposite sex, as in the case of peacock tails or bowerbird bower-building, or through same-sex selection, usually by combat, as in the case of stag horns or sea-elephant size and strength.

Although I have thought long and hard about the adaptiveness of art, Dutton's examples made clearer to me than ever before that any rich human practice or product could and in fact likely would be turned to multiple ends that complicate the analysis of its origins. To add to his examples, writing can be used for a variety of social or individual ends: account-keeping; reliably transmitting military, diplomatic or trade messages or private correspondence; composing, communicating, and critiquing religious covenants, civil laws, scientific hypotheses, and literary texts from seductive love poems to rousing hymns. Computers can be used for military, scientific, bureaucratic, financial, or commercial ends, for video games or the social communing or individual display possible through cellphones or Facebook, or the individual expression and social status possible through blogging.

Such a complex mix of functions, original or derived, foreseeable or unforeseeable, socially cohesive or individually competitive, can surely be found also in a behavior as various as art. Such a mix therefore makes it that much more difficult to decide whether the arts emerged as an adaptation, a byproduct, a product of sexual selection, or some combination of these, or must be classed as only consciously designed activities that may serve adaptive or non-adaptive ends. In the cases of writing and especially computers, we can disentangle the causal chains—and we can be sure that however advantageous these cultural products are, they are not biological adaptations. In art, which became established so long before the first written records, we will find it correspondingly more difficult to assess it as an adaptation, a byproduct, sexually selected, or a cultural invention supervening on adaptive or non-adaptive human features. This does not mean that we should not try to establish how such an important behavior emerged, but it does warn us that the quest will be arduous.

Dutton then turns in chapter 6 to a test case, fiction. He emphasizes

the central human role played by imaginative experience, and cites three proposed adaptive benefits of fiction: as surrogate experience without the costs and risks of real-world activity; as a means of memorably imparting factual information; and as a mode of refining social cognition. He introduces and assimilates here proposals advanced by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides and Pascal Boyer, who stress the decoupled nature of fictional experience, Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, who stresses fiction as a means of imparting ecological information, especially in hunter-gatherer societies, and E. O. Wilson and Joseph Carroll.

Dutton synthesizes the various proposals eloquently in his own terms, especially echoing Carroll on the core function storytelling has in helping us make sense of experience—of the whole range of human experience:

the features of a stable human nature revolve around human relationships of every variety: social coalitions of kinship or tribal affinity; issues of status; reciprocal exchange; the complexities of sex and child-rearing; struggles over resources; benevolence and hostility; friendship and nepotism; conformity and independence; moral obligations, altruism, and selfishness; and so on. . . . these issues constitute the major themes and subjects of literature and its oral antecedents. Stories are universally constituted in this way because of the role storytelling can play in helping individuals and groups develop and deepen their own grasp of human social and emotional experience. (p. 118)

After showing fiction's uses, Dutton in chapter 7 introduces Geoffrey Miller's proposal in *The Mating Mind* (2000) that the other arts (and much in fiction) can be explained in terms of not their uses but their uselessness, in terms of not natural selection but sexual selection.³ The arts involve behaviors too extravagant and singular to explain in terms of natural selection, Miller claims.

Miller's sexual selection account of art has been rejected vociferously by a number of those who have written books on evolution and art: Nancy Aiken, Joseph Carroll, Kathryn Coe, Ellen Dissanayake, and myself.⁴ Dutton wants to issue a corrective, to reintroduce sexual selection as part of the complex antecedents of art. What roles *should* we see for sexual selection in art?

Dutton often echoes Miller's assertions that sexual selection can account for most of the advanced features of human minds and personalities, but does not confront the many challenges leveled at Miller's arguments. Here's another I can add. A typical Miller claim that Dut-

ton lingers over is that the sixty thousand words in the average adult vocabulary can be explained only by sexual selection: since we do not need all the synonyms we have for, say, *blue* (*azure*, *cerulean*, *cobalt*, *sapphire*, *turquoise*, et cetera) the only explanation can be sexual selection— attempts to impress the opposite sex. But the figure linguists usually proffer is twenty thousand word families (*bluish*, *bluer* and *bluest* would all come under *blue*)—but only for college-educated adults. And the size of the lexicons in different languages corresponds to the complexity of the cultures that employ them. Some small-scale societies have only two words *in toto* for colors (the equivalent of *black* or *dark* and *light* or *white*), others three, four, or five. This should not be the case if sexual selection determined lexicon size, since sexual selection would have equal force even in small-scale societies where multiple males still need to compete for available females. The thesis of enormous superfluity of vocabulary not only does not fit the small-scale societies in which most human generations have lived and evolved, but ignores the complexity of the world: under the best lighting, the human eye can distinguish twenty million colors, say three million in the blue range. And just how does Miller suppose that in the minority of societies with many color words, that terms like *cerulean* or *turquoise* come into being: through male suitors inventing them in the course of addressing romantic prospects? Might *turquoise* or *sapphire* not come from the existence of a gem trade? Might *cerulean* not come from English's borrowings from the Latin kept alive by celibate clerics?

Unlike Miller, Dutton knows a great deal about art, Western and non-Western, high and low, but his accounting for art seems somewhat skewed by his encounters with Sepik carvers. In their big-man cultures, sexual selection does indeed seem to play an important role in the flamboyance of carving. In Maori culture, by contrast, carving followed strict tribal rules and motifs. Steven Brown shows that only group selection and not sexual selection can account for the most elaborate song in other animals (duetting songbirds and gibbons) and in humans.⁵ Ellen Dissanayake rightly stresses the role of mothers in singing lullabies, and in engaging with infants in the protoconversation (“more like a song than a sentence”)⁶ that she and others see as a start for art; sexual selection, by contrast, predicts that males (the sex, in humans, more subject to selection) should be much more central to art. Nancy Aiken identifies the communal rather than the sexually-selected role of art in a range of African societies.⁷ And even in the cases where sexual selection and human art most unequivocally meet, as in the costumed dance

displays of young Wodaabe males, make-up and costume are applied and supplied socially, not only individually, unlike in every known case of non-human sexual selection.

Because he knows and intuits so much about art, Dutton seeks to account naturalistically for aspects of art he thinks not explained by natural selection, like our response to skill and virtuosity, our engagement with other minds in our engagement with art, and the greatness of great art. He writes: “Adding sexual selection to natural selection, we begin at last to see the possibility for a complete theory of the origin of the arts” (p. 152)—in part because he supposes that “sexual selection shifts the focus to the relation of members of a species to each other” (p. 139).

I suggest that many of the problems Dutton addresses in the last third of *The Art Instinct* could be solved better not by adding sexual selection to natural selection as the second strut of a naturalistic account of art (although sexual selection no doubt *does* often amplify effects) but (1) by incorporating the extensive recent research on human social selection and ultrasociality and (2) by considering art, like life, within a problem-solution framework.

Dutton suggests that adding sexual selection to natural selection “shifts the focus to the relation of members of a species to each other.” But natural selection already encompasses intraspecific relations. And in humans *social* selection plays a lifelong role outside the much more restricted circumstances where sexual selection operates. We assess each other constantly in terms of sex, age, affiliation, status, size, looks, personality, intelligence, mood, and choose whom we wish to associate with or avoid on such bases. Miller claimed that sexual selection, because of the consequences it can have for reproduction, easily trumps any other aspects of social selection. That claim, plausible in 2000, was much less tenable by 2008, after the work of Christopher Boehm (1999), Michael Tomasello et al. (2005), David Sloan Wilson (2007) and D. S. Wilson and E. O. Wilson (2007).⁸ These and other researchers have shown that what distinguishes humans from other vertebrate species is their ultrasociality: this has allowed humans to cross a threshold of cooperation that unleashed the power of culture and language, and therefore to undergo what biologists call a “major transition in evolution” as momentous as those from single-celled to multicellular organisms and from solitary to social species.

Human social selection and ultrasociality explain much of our assessment of and engagement with artists, but I think we also need to

add a problem-solution lens, which allows both a broader and a finer perspective. Problems emerge with life, and all life is problem-solving. *Sociality*, for instance, arises when animals, by remaining together, find better solutions to their problems, beginning with the simplest survival problems: for both avoiding threats and obtaining resources, many eyes, ears and nostrils are better than a single pair. *Sexual selection* offers a solution to a key reproductive problem of combining the most or the best available genes with one's own in the next reproductive round. *Intelligence* provides a flexible instrument for devising new solutions to existing or new problems, and therefore adds a powerful weapon to the problem-solution arsenal of natural selection. *Social learning* offers a still better solution, since it often allows individuals to avoid the cost of trying to solve problems on their own. For social learning and intelligence to co-evolve further, to become still better problem-solvers, animals need new solutions to the problem of cooperation. Unlike even chimpanzees, humans have found them. We are not only social, we have become, uniquely, ultrasocial, and our readiness to solve problems together has transformed our planet.

To become ultrasocial, we need to be motivated to *engage* with one another. In humans our intense engagement with others begins from birth. Human mothers and infants have evolved so that they can and *want* to share their gaze while the infants feed, unlike in any other species. Human eyes have evolved to *reveal* the direction of their attention, whereas other primate eyes have evolved to *conceal* eye direction. Human one-year-olds engage in joint attention—following others' hands or eyes and checking to see that the others follow theirs—and in proto-declarative pointing—indicating objects or events simply for the sake of sharing attention toward them, which apes never do. They expect others to share interest, attention and response: "This by itself is rewarding for infants—apparently in a way it is not for any other species on the planet."⁹

Because, for a very long time, our main survival tool has been other people, we also have to *assess* one another carefully: in order to identify and if need be punish the insufficiently cooperative, to make our group more cooperative, and therefore more competitive against other groups; in order to know whom to associate with to improve our prospects within our own group; and in order to recognize and foster our own comparative strengths to render us desirable associates and allies to others in our group.

We need not only to assess *individuals* but also to understand their

particular actions and especially *intentions*. All advanced animals have had to interpret actions and intentions even of predators or prey, and all highly social animals have to read finely actions and intentions within their own species. Now that humans have achieved ecological dominance, we face exceptionally strong pressures to understand other humans' actions and intentions. And we understand others in particular contexts through their intentions—through understanding the problems they face and the solutions they will most likely take. Mirror neurons, which fire when we perform an action *or* see another perform it, fire even more strongly in response to goals than to actions.

Dutton ends his sexual selection chapter by discussing the preference for the costly in art. He reconsiders Thorstein Veblen's claim that costliness augments our sense of beauty in light of Amos and Avishag Zahavi's costly signalling theory of sexual selection: animals display their worth by showing they can afford to squander resources. Dutton adduces many colorful examples of our preferring art costly in terms of materials or effort. But we can link this not only to sexual selection but more broadly to social selection, to the drive for status *within* groups, to the competitiveness that naturally, biologically, accompanies our cooperativeness. And it is not always true that "rarity and expense add to beauty and cheapness detracts from it" (p. 160). Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd discuss human gene-culture evolution in terms of the two key heuristics of human social learning, "imitate the best" and "imitate the commonest."¹⁰ Some do like to follow only those who can afford the costliest, in terms of time, resources, or rarity: those who can afford an expensive original art work, or an expensive seat at the opera, or the time and effort to fathom *Finnegans Wake*. But many others value precisely what is common: what novel or song is currently high on the charts (think *Harry Potter*) or saturating the airwaves or the cinema screens, what singer or actor can draw the biggest crowds or earn the most media stories. Teenagers even compete to be first to catch what the radio will play incessantly over the coming weeks. Unlike a sexual selection explanation, a social selection explanation can incorporate both our attraction to what is rare and to what is common.

In chapter 8 Dutton discusses intention, forgery and Dada. He rightly rejects as atypical of art the twentieth-century post-Duchamp dismissal, even in art schools, of skill and virtuosity. Around the world people naturally appraise artists in terms of mastery—in terms, in other words, of the ability to solve artistic problems particularly well. Dutton observes: "it is impossible for any sophisticated, informed speaker of English to read

[*Pride and Prejudice*] without feeling twinges of admiration for [Austen's] extraordinary skill and style." So far, so good, but he ends the paragraph claiming that our admiration of skill and virtuosity "itself is an adaptation derived from sexual selection off the back of natural selection" (p. 175). He offers no compelling reasons to accept this assertion. Indeed we do judge others all the time, from infancy and into old age, and on all sorts of criteria, but why should our social selection be explained in our ultrasocial species as always a derivative of sexual selection? As Joseph Carroll nicely notes, "in humans all sorts of adaptive features are also sexually attractive," but this does not mean that most of the human mind and personality evolved as sexual signals.¹¹

Dutton rightly rejects the anti-intentionalism that has been seen as sophisticated in the academy since Wimsatt and Beardsley's "intentional fallacy" in the 1940s and the "death of the author" in French theory of the late 1960s. Works of art, he writes, "are pretty things suited to disinterested contemplation. It is naive, however, to treat them exclusively in this way, because works of art are also windows into the mind of another human being" (p. 192). But he explains the importance of intention thus: "works of art are skill displays, Darwinian fitness tests, and dependent on an innate information system that emerged in sexual selection" (p. 188; see also p. 175). But the intentions of others matter much more to us than merely as fitness tests.

Via an evolutionary analysis—but via natural selection for sociality rather than via sexual selection—we can strengthen the already strong position that our attempts to infer artistic intentions naturally form part of our richest responses to art. Understanding others in terms of intentions is a widespread capacity across species and particularly well developed, in highly social and flexible species, for understanding conspecifics. Understanding the intentions of others offers an especially fine-tuned way of understanding the actions, or the products of actions, of others. Merely observing behavior does not suffice: as Tomasello et al. note, "the exact same physical movement may be seen as giving an object, sharing it, loaning it, moving it, getting rid of it, returning it, trading it, selling it, and on and on—depending on the goals and intentions of the actors" (p. 675). And understanding the intentions of others means understanding what problems they are trying to solve—problems that will usually recombine familiar elements, but that even in more novel cases we can tease out from what we can recognize.

Wimsatt and Beardsley claim modestly that intentions not expressed within a work are irrelevant, but offer no reason except for the

fetishization of the autonomy of the work of art. But for the vast bulk of the human past, “literary” works have been oral, and passed on face to face. In these as in other circumstances we have always been interested in both assessing and engaging with others, and assessing others on their capacity to engage us. The fact that modern recording technologies allow for different means of dissemination does not change the human fundamentals, although obviously we do lose the real-time responsiveness and the physical cues of voice, gesture, and enactment.

But if we lose those clues, we can sometimes find compensatory evidence. However efficient it may be, our evolved capacity for understanding others works better the more relevant information it has: about the individuals, the actions they take (telling stories, for instance), the conventions they adopt (writing in English or Linear B, say), and the contexts within which their actions or artifacts have been produced. In responding to works of art there can be no good reason not to use our fine-tuned capacity for inferring the intentions of others, not only from their actions and the products of their actions, but also from whatever else we can find that proves relevant.

Building on Tomasello’s work, evolutionary linguist Arie Verhagen shows that construal in language—our awareness of how another might understand what we say—depends on the exceptional capacity humans have for engagement with others, and for seeing from the point of view of others.¹² As another evolutionary linguist, James Hurford, writes: “We humans use language so effortlessly that we tend to overlook the fact that an understanding of the other person’s intentions is involved in the productive planning of an utterance and in its receptive interpretation.”¹³ The same applies to non-verbal “utterances” in music or visual art. If we discarded artistic intention, as the more extreme statements of Barthes and Foucault propose, if we renounced our rich evolved system of social comprehension, we would simply not be able to understand others: we would all be in the position of those at the extreme end of autistic spectrum disorders, who have difficulty comprehending language, stories, humor and irony.

Because our human reading of the intentions of others is a highly evolved system does not mean that it is infallible. Evolution tends to build remarkably efficient systems, including information-processing systems that are more often right than wrong (or if frequently wrong, wrong in adaptive ways), but it does not yield perfection. Precisely because we use evolved systems of social comprehension to understand others, and because we have become so cooperative, we have very high expectations

of the precision we would like from understanding others. But we also know that we can misconstrue the intentions even of those we love. We can only *infer* intentions, and we have evolved to infer intentions especially from those we engage with face to face. Inferring intentions from artifacts of past eras, when the artificers have long since died, will not be easy. But we *do* not and we should not *pretend* to ignore artists' intentions. Whatever the difficulties of inferring intentions from such evidence, and whatever our *theory* about intentions, none of us *in practice* abandons a method so central to our understanding of other human actions or artifacts. The method will never be failsafe, but any other would condemn us to incomprehension. And our comprehension of, and our *interest* in, stories and other works of art, depends on the emotional contagion that first evolved in face-to-face contacts—including, but certainly not limited to, the contacts in mate selection.

In chapter 8 Dutton also discusses three fascinating instances of artistic forgery, and explains our antipathy to forgery in terms of cheating in the “fitness test” element of art and in terms of our engagement with art. Both factors seem relevant, although again social selection can explain more deeply. Conscious of status as we are, we assess one another constantly, and we resent others who wish to gain status or resources they have not earned, as forgers do by presenting their own work as someone else's (Han van Meegeren faking Vermeer) or someone else's as their own (Joyce Hatto's doctored recordings of earlier pianists). We also value engagement with others and feel cheated when the advertised engagement is faked. To take a new example: someone lipsynching a recording of her own song is not trying to pass off another's work as her own, yet if we discover the deception it still rankles. Why? Again a problem-solution model helps. We instinctively assess others' actions in terms of solutions to the problems they face. The singer has presented herself as solving the problem of singing this song *now* in front of this audience. We have felt attuned and admiring at her facing the challenge of singing up to her usual standard. When we know her actual problem was different—merely keeping time with a pre-recorded version, and projecting engaged spontaneity—we feel cheated of our engagement and hoodwinked in our assessment of what she accomplished on stage, however rousing her recording may have been.

Dutton entitles his final chapter “Greatness in the Arts” but begins it with a critique of social explanations of the arts. He questions “the widely held views that the arts evolved to build stronger societies” (p. 223). But this misinterprets those who view social cohesion as a feature

of art. Art can be socially cohesive—and have local costume, bodily adornment, carving, and architecture, local song and dance, and local storytelling, not repeatedly been so?²—without supporting the claim that the arts evolved *for* this. Art may well begin with an individual benefit, say, for the minds and skills of those who engage in it, whether as artists or audiences. But this does not mean that there cannot be additional functions of art at levels of selection other than the individual, and that functions that enhance group cohesion cannot have a powerful impact on survival and reproduction, and therefore embed the predilection for art still more deeply in our species.

Dutton declares that “*The arts are not essentially social*” (p. 223), and adds: “Wondrous aesthetic experiences are possible in the absence of larger community: the response an individual has to a beautiful landscape, for instance, or to a private, silent reading of a novel” (p. 226). Yet he has earlier, and correctly, written: “the author’s palpable presence means that stories are essentially communicative, and therefore social, events” (p. 125). As we read *War and Peace* we have a strong sense of engaging with Tolstoy, and Pierre, and Natasha, and scores of others. Dutton proposes that if the arts were essentially social, “we could expect that people would not only flock to hear authors’ readings of their works . . . they would also take pleasure in attending readings of novels together” (p. 226). But we all have different reading speeds, so that even reading a newspaper or magazine article, let alone a whole novel, with just one other person can be a frustrating experience as one waits for the other to turn the page. Before reading was widespread, storytelling took place orally and communally. In eighteenth-century homes, novels were often read to servants who devoured with pleasure novels of the caliber of *Don Quixote*. In the middle-class worlds of Victorian England, the paterfamilias would read to his family the latest installment of a Dickens or another serial novel. Someone who could recite with an expressiveness greater than a lone imagination could readily supply, might attract sell-out performances: Dickens’s highly dramatic readings of his own works were regarded by many as the greatest theatrical experience the mid-nineteenth century had to offer. More recently one reason for the comparative success of film and television over prose fiction is that in moments of leisure families or couples can be transported to fictional worlds *together*, in exact emotional synchrony and close attunement. Many read novels or listen to i-pods in snatched moments, but when those they are close to also have free time, they watch videos or listen to music together.

Or to look from another side at Dutton's "wondrous aesthetic experiences . . . possible in the absence of larger community": Although we can speak to ourselves in a more or less continuous inner monologue, our capacity to focus, direct, and extend our private thoughts through inner speech is only an invaluable byproduct of language. It does not show that language is essentially individual—and all who investigate the evolution of language agree on its social origins. Like language, art can also engage our attention when we are on our own, but even then puts us in communion with at least the artist, and in the case of narrative, with characters as well. For anybody with normal social relationships the intense engagement with a work of art can then become the occasion for sharing reactions or recommendations with others.

In the final section, on the greatness of great art, Dutton proposes four criteria for the greatest art: *complexity*; *serious content* ("The themes of great works are love, death, and human fate" (p. 237): but how would this fit Bach's Preludes?); *purpose* ("a sense that *the artist means it*"); and, most interestingly, *distance*, "a cool *objectivity* . . . about the greatest works of art: the worlds they create have little direct regard for our insistent wants and needs; still less do they show any intention on the part of their creators to ingratiate themselves with us" (p. 241). Dutton illustrates this claim delightfully, contrasting Melville and Khalil Gibran, opera and musical, the cold, white peaks of art and the slushy crevasses of kitsch. He ends on a note that should dispel the idea that seeing art in the light of evolution means reduction:

The oft-described spirituality of artistic masterpieces . . . involves a feeling—experienced by atheist and believer alike—that standing before a masterpiece you are in the presence of a power that exceeds anything you can imagine for yourself, something greater than you ever can or will be. . . . Theists may wish to attribute all this to the power of God, Darwinian humanists to the near miraculous power of human genius. Both will approach such works as suppliants: we yield to them, allowing them to take us where they will. (p. 243)

Wonderfully felt and said. But even here I want to counter-propose to Dutton's somewhat undecided explanation ("If art is a vestigial fitness marker for courtship, or a way of knowing another mind in social interchange," p. 235). Again, I offer a problem-solution model incorporating our ultrasociality. We engage powerfully with others, we assess others, and we understand others by seeing the problems they face and the solutions they attempt. Most of the time these problems and solutions

are routine. Earlier Dutton has cited Collingwood's distinction between artist and craftsman: "the *craftsman knows in advance* what the end product will look like" (p. 227). Artists do not. Intelligence helps us solve problems, and human ultrasociality allows us to share solutions—partly by assessing so instinctively others and their problems and solutions. At its very best intelligence can make it possible even to generate entirely new kinds of problems and to open up whole dimensions of possibility. The degree of novelty of the problems great artists pose and solve provides the deepest measure of artistic success. The problems Shakespeare posed himself in transforming the mundane stories of Hamlet and Lear that he found in his sources into the masterpieces we know expand our sense of human possibility, in the characters, in the writer who creates them, in the audience who engage with characters, writers and one another. We feel proud that we belong to a species in which a few can use what we all share to pose and solve problems unimaginably richer than the rest of us could foresee.

I have focused especially on my disagreements with Denis Dutton over the role of sexual selection in art—one of my hot buttons. As I have written elsewhere, "Art as sexual display does not explain *nothing* about art. But the very flexibility of human behavior suggests that sexual selection has been an extra gear for art, not the engine itself."¹⁴ But as a philosopher of art, Dutton covers much more ground, from Aristotle and Kant to Danto, Dickie and the evolutionists Dissanayake and Carroll. He stresses the universality of the arts, their distinctness from and their integration with the rest of human life, their manifoldness and messiness, their mix of natural selection and sexual selection. He knows that "The motives of art . . . are ancient and complicated" (p. 226). He wants to provoke argument, and he has succeeded. But he wants above all "to make sense of the universality of art" (p. 221), and he does so throughout *The Art Instinct* with a refreshing common sense and trust in common experience. After citing Clive Bell's claim that a sophisticated art lover always ignores what a canvas might represent, for instance, he asks: "Have you ever met anyone who, having seen a painting, could only remember blue rectangles, green mottled areas, and pinkish brown smudges but couldn't recall if they were cars or trees or people? Neither have I, but then Bell would just say that we move in the wrong circles. This loopy quotation . . . shows how far aesthetic formalism has been willing to go in trying to shame people out of admitting to such pleasures as enjoying the represented content

of a work of art” (p. 160). The word “loopy” perfectly reflects the spirit of this cheerful contrarian and blaster of the bogus. *The Art Instinct* is a fine achievement, always philosophically alert, never verbally inert, engaging, nimble, vivid. Read it—and see if you have as much pleasure in agreeing and disagreeing with it as I did.

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1. Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), pp. 10–11; *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).
2. Personal communication.
3. Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
4. See, for instance, Nancy Aiken, “The Arts: Beyond Sexual Selection,” paper read at International Society for Human Ethology Conference, Montreal, 2002; Brian Boyd, “Evolutionary Theories of Art,” in Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, eds., *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), pp. 147–76; Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Kathryn Coe, *The Ancestress Hypothesis: Visual Art as Adaptation* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
5. Steven Brown, “Evolutionary Models of Music: From Sexual Selection to Group selection,” *Perspectives in Ethology* 13 (2000): 231–81.
6. Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam, 2006), p. 36.
7. Brown, “Evolutionary Models”; Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Coe, *Ancestress Hypothesis*.
8. Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Tomasello, M. Carpenter, J. Call, T. Behne, and H. Moll, “Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28 (2005): 675–735; David Sloan Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin’s Theory Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives* (New York: Delacorte, 2007); D. S. Wilson and E. O. Wilson, “Rethinking the Theoretical Foundation of Sociobiology,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 82 (2007): 328–48.
9. Michael Tomasello, quoted in D. S. Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone*, p. 169.
10. Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

11. Personal communication.
12. Arie Verhagen, "Intersubjectivity and the Architecture of the Language System," in Jordan Zlatev, Timothy P. Racine, Chris Sinha, Esa Itkonen, eds., *The Shared Mind: Perspectives on Intersubjectivity* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008), pp. 307–31.
13. James R. Hurford, *The Origins of Meaning: Language in the Light of Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 270.
14. Boyd, "Evolutionary Theories," p. 160.