

Retrospective on Homo Aestheticus

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Although I've been asked to revisit *Homo Aestheticus*, my second book, I will begin by describing the laborious and uneven emergence of its predecessor, *What Is Art For?*, which was published four years earlier, in 1988. I began writing it when I was a housewife in Sri Lanka, in the middle 1970s. I had some ideas and wanted to see where they would go. Writing was a way of finding out.

And write I did, over and over, over years and miles. I added to the book in 1977-78 in Oxford, where I had a six-month fellowship to do nothing but read in the Bodleian Library. Later versions ensued in 1978-79 in Nigeria, and in Papua New Guinea between 1982-84.

Finding a publisher took more than five years. These were pre-email days, necessitating intercontinental airmail letters that took as long as three weeks each way to reach their destination. And publishers are not known for prompt replies. I found myself waiting as impatiently for the mailman each day as Radha and other women in Indian miniature paintings waited for their lover.

Most publishers whom I queried did not even want to see the book. One editor looked at the manuscript and asked me to cut it by about a third. I obliged, but she could not obtain strong enough recommendations from readers and, after eighteen months of hope and dread, turned it down. Devastated, I put the careworn pages away for a

year and then rewrote it yet again, this time in Papua New Guinea. Finally, Naomi Pascal, the Editor-in-Chief at the University of Washington Press, took a chance and accepted a first book by an unknown and academically unaffiliated author. She phoned me with the good news on Hallowe'en 1985. Still, even after that, my production editor became ill and the book appeared only in April 1988, thirteen years after I first began to write it.

Some reviewers of *What Is Art For?* pointed out that most of the references were from the 1970s and earlier. There was good reason for that. Apart from the months in Oxford, I was dependent on what I could find in "Third World" university libraries (even though the anthropology collections at the University of Ibadan and the University of Papua New Guinea were superb and up to date). I had no colleagues from whom to learn about new research and ideas. In fact, none of my Sri Lankan friends or associates suspected that I was a closet academic, secretly writing a scholarly book.

Although *What Is Art For?* did surprisingly well for an academic book by a nobody (it has to date had five paperback printings), its yearly sales have now been surpassed by *Homo Aestheticus*, whose genesis and gestation were far different. During the 30 months that *What is Art For?* was in production, I had amassed material for a second book and had begun to write it. I was leading an academic life in the United States, teaching at the New School and attending anthropology seminars at New York University. I had an introduction to an editor at the Free Press, who not only accepted an unfinished manuscript but gave me a small advance. Publication took only six months.

I feel very maternally fond of and protective about the begetting, birth, and personality of both books. If *Homo Aestheticus* benefited from my familiarity with contemporary scholarship, *What is Art For?* has the kind of freshness and enthusiasm of someone who is trying to formulate a new discourse on her own. Although my ideas continue to develop, I do not wish to apologize for anything in either book, as each is of its time and very much connected to my place in the world when I produced them. (Both, incidentally, were written and rewritten on manual portable typewriters).

There are *terms* in *Homo Aestheticus* that are problematic, but I have not found solutions to the problems.

First, the title. My working title had been *Deep Art* ("deep" in several senses: deep in evolutionary time, deep in our biological nature, deep as being of profound importance in human lives). But my editor said that title wouldn't do. He wanted to call the book *The Aesthetic Ape* unless I could come up in three days with something he liked better. I desperately

and unavailingly ransacked books of poetry and Bartlett's Quotations. Finally, the night before the deadline, "Homo Aestheticus" came into my head. The editor liked it, and his boss, the director of the press, added the subtitle: "Where Art Comes From and Why."

A few years later, Arthur Danto pointed out to me that "the aesthetic human" is not really what the book is about. It is concerned with humans as art *makers*, not appreciators of art's aesthetic qualities. Had I known Latin better, I should have titled the book *Homo Artifex*, although some readers might not have thought it was about art at all (as they seem to do with "Aestheticus") but perhaps about bones or sports equipment or rubber. Even though the title is, strictly speaking, inaccurate, very few of my readers apparently realize it. Only Danto has ever mentioned it.

Two other terms are ones I devised for the book and have not used since, "species-centric" (Chapter 1) and *dromena* (Chapter 4). With regard to the latter, I wanted to find a term that sounded more serious or academic than "doing something" or "something that is done," and went again to a classical language, this time Greek. "Species-centric" was a term I coined, opposing it to self-centric or ethnocentric—terms that judge others as different from (usually inferior to) oneself or people of one's own kind. To me, it seemed a positive term, recognizing that all human beings belong to one species, and therefore we are all more alike than different. Since then, I've learned that animal rights advocates use the same term to mean the mental or moral elevation of one's own species, implying that members of other species are inferior so that we can kill or eat or experiment on them with impunity. That is certainly not what I meant by the term.

The biggest terminology problem is, however, with the phrase "making special," the subject of Chapter 3 and the chapter that has been reproduced in this volume of the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*. I heartily wish that there were a better term. I have tried alternatives—"making the ordinary extraordinary," "elaborating," "artifying"—but none of these seems to communicate what I mean or why I think the concept is important.

Two oversimplifications of "making special" have dogged me from the beginning. The first is made by people (the "Softmindeds") who love the term and uncritically apply it in a sentimental sort of way to almost anything. I think they trivialize it. The second group (the "Hardheadeds") find the word "special" to be wishywashy, and they point out to me that with that word I am including the black and white striped uniforms of convicts, the yellow stars that were worn by Jews in Western Europe, and other such examples. "That's not art," they say. In *Homo Aestheticus*, I try to differentiate my use of the phrase from both the unrigorous application

to everything and the rigorous application of it to obvious non-art. In *Art and Intimacy* and subsequent articles, I “operationalize” the term as to what actions make something special. All this does no good. People go on loving or snidely dismissing the term for the same reason: its apparent wide applicability.

I don’t *define* art as “making special,” but in the simplest sense, I do think making special characterizes what artists of all kinds do. Even more, it describes a common trait that, in a Darwinian sense, is a noteworthy feature of human nature. My concern is to emphasize a simple observation that evolutionary biologists tend to overlook: that humans sometimes are not content to leave ordinary reality alone. Take skin, for instance: it is tattooed, pierced, painted. The same for ordinary hair: it is cut, combed, braided, feathered so that it will look different from its natural state. Other creatures do not do this. Then there are our Paleolithic ancestors who painted on cave walls and made them unlike ordinary cave walls. Instead of saying, trivially, “Gee, we need to find an animal to kill today,” people whose subsistence relies on hunting perform ceremonies in which words are made different from ordinary language—rhymed, inverted, repeated, and otherwise made unlike usual spoken utterances. Ditto with ordinary bodily movement and dance, with ordinary vocal prosody and song.

I think this penchant in humans needs to be noticed, first, and then explained. Why don’t we simply leave things as they are? Archaeologists recognize that at some point in their evolution, humans began to make and use symbols. Symbolizing is considered to be a watershed in cognitive ability and “art” is often automatically considered to be a subset of symbolizing.

Yet, I think this is incorrect. Symbols in themselves need not be special, or artful, at all. Think of a symbolic mark scratched on a piece of paper, or on a blackboard. X marks a spot, and it *is* a cognitive achievement to place a hand-print on a wall, blow pigment around it, and make an image of a hand: “I was here!”

Handprints are generally considered to be “art,” but not because they are symbols. Paleolithic handprints are found in special (unusual) locations (deep underground) and are usually placed with regard to other marks on the wall. Another example is cicatrization, which in some parts of the world “symbolizes” adulthood. Although it should be enough just to slash the body any old way (pain is pain), the marks are invariably patterned.

Nearly all artists I talk to know what I mean by “making special.” It is what they do with materials and ideas (or tones, meters, movements, words, plots). I know artists who seem to make everything in their lives

special or considered, even the way they address an envelope or arrange food on their plate. In some societies (Bali comes to mind), ordinary people make things special all the time.

I think it is important to realize that there is this unusual but elementary fact about humans: when they care about something they are generally inclined to make it special. This is not to identify it (like yellow stars) or to indicate that it is specific (like a ribbon over auditorium seats reserved for distinguished guests)—but to show that one cares about it: “This treatment surpasses what is common or usual, because it has emotional relevance to me.” I claim that it is an evolved feature of human psychology that when we care, we make special. Some may think of this activity as art.

It is helpful and important when we are thinking about the arts, or teaching or doing them, to realize that we are engaging in a human proclivity that has characterized our species for hundreds of thousands of generations. Making special is not *being* special, but is doing what humans naturally are inclined to do. If art seems unusual or rare today, it is because of many intertwined changes in the ways we live and in the ways we think about art.

References

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¹ First paperback edition printed in 1995 by the University of Washington Press, Seattle.