



THE ART OF RITUAL AND THE RITUAL OF ART

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All artists and writers know that inspiration may come suddenly and from a surprising source. My work was given an unexpected and powerful new direction in the autumn of 1983 when I taught a class called "Ritual, Play, and Art" at the New School for Social Research in New York. At the time, I was formulating my hypothesis that what artists do in all times and places is to "make special." The class was a way of exploring other behaviors—play and ritual—which also make special, to see what else art, ritual, and play had in common.

A colleague at the New School told me about the playful ritual between mothers and their infants described in a book called *The First Relationship*, by Daniel Stern.¹ As I read about the affectionate sounds, gestures, and facial expressions that adults (not only mothers) use when they talk to babies, I realized that "play" and "ritual" were not the only way to describe what was happening. Stern's descriptions reminded me so much of what *artists* do. I began to wonder: Could it be that artistic making and aesthetic responsiveness originate at the very beginning of life?

At first, this was only an indefinite question, one that I wasn't really sure how to approach. But, as with the germ of any fruitful idea, my rudimentary insight gradually unfolded, inspiring further ideas which themselves have become intriguing paths to explore. During the twenty years between my first exposure to Stern's book and today, I have continued to find truths about art and life in this "first relationship."

Eventually I would be led to learn about such unexpected subjects as hominid evolution, the anatomy and function of the brain, and "ritualized" displays in birds. I would study the behavior of humans in other cultures with their young and of primates with theirs. Such subjects do not noticeably seem to have anything to do with art, or for that matter much to do with ritual or play. But like the unpromising and recalcitrant mud or metal, planks or fibers with which artists make their creations, my findings from biology, anthropology, and psychology have become, after careful consideration and handling, something worth working with, something to share with others, and something to enrich our understanding.

The elements of the mother-infant playful ritual really *are*, I believe, the origin of later aesthetic behavior—though not in the simple, nurturant way ("good mothering produces artists") that might be expected. What I will describe in this essay is the importance of the innate psychobiological mechanisms that create emotional intersubjectivity (that is, the ways in which emotions between two or more people are coordinated and exchanged) which is at the core of making and experiencing art. My studies show that the techniques of making special as manifested in art and ritual turn out to be elaborations of the standard human equipment for creating and maintaining intimate and affiliative relationships.²

What does this mean for us as makers and experiencers of the arts?

Today, ritual is often dismissed as empty and conventional, while art may be thought of as a self-indulgent pastime or a sham. However, describing the components and commonalities between ritual and art makes clear how important they are to our species and, by extension, to us as individuals. In their origin, ritual performance and artistic making were like two overlapped lenses trained on the same needs, arising and developing as ways to achieve and demonstrate emotional concord and to publicly manifest matters of vital concern. The psychobiological vestiges of these origins remain and remind us of the continuing importance of art as ritual and ritual as art to full human lives today. It is in rare communities such as Penland that these values flourish and persist, even though they may not be explicitly articulated.

THE ART OF RITUAL

My studies reveal that mother-infant play can be justifiably described as a dyadic (that is, two-person) ritual in which innate aesthetic or protoaesthetic elements first appear and are developed. Although the following description may seem at first to be far removed from the making (or the "ritual") of art, it is good, I think, to be aware of the deep-rootedness of our aesthetic nature as it appears even in infants.

MOTHER-INFANT PLAYFUL RITUAL

Babies come into the world prepared and eager for human company. They prefer human faces to any other sight (be it sharply contrasting or brightly colored shapes or cute stuffed animals) and human voices to any other sound (be it tinkling bells, soft music, or the Chipmunks). They can estimate and anticipate intervals of time—that is, form expectations of when the next beat will come, based on a pulse or rhythm that has been set up, say, by gently patting, rocking, or singing rhythmically to them.

These inborn abilities allow normal infants to interact with the people around them, and unobtrusively to persuade these people to talk, make funny faces, and move their heads in ways they would never do with anyone except a baby. It is a mistake to think that we speak in high-pitched voices to babies, or make abrupt head-bobs, nods, and open mouths just to attract their immature attention. On the contrary, babies train *us* to do these things because such sounds and expressions are what they most like and need; they are born wanting others to act like this. For our efforts, they reward us with their smiles and kicks and reachings-out, persuading us to do it even more. For them and for us, this is *play*.

Adult behavior to babies seems natural, because it is. People in cultures everywhere spontaneously (i.e., without deliberate practice or intention) talk to babies in short rhythmic, repetitive utterances, at a high pitch and with exaggerated vocal contours. They exaggerate and sustain certain facial expressions: wide eyes, open mouth, or pursed lips; they

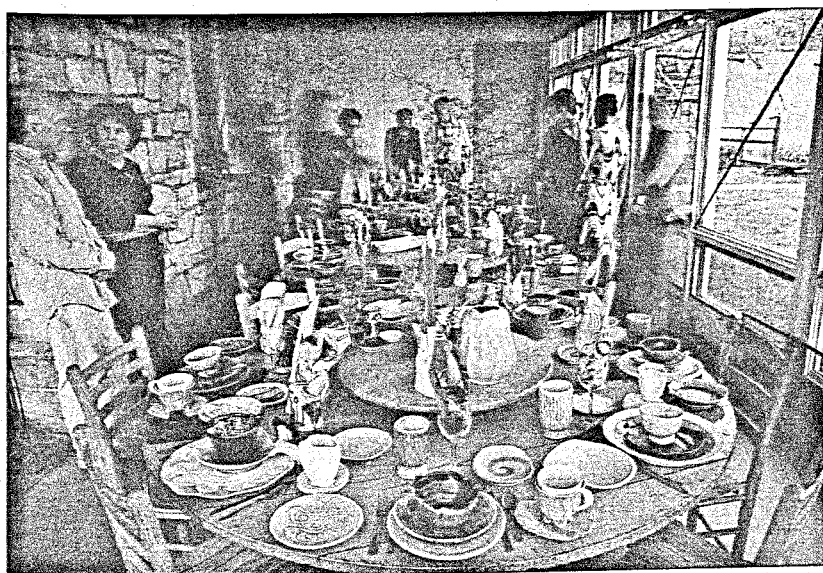
move their head forward toward the baby's face and back again; they look deeply and intimately into its eyes. They pat or stroke or rub babies steadily and rhythmically:

Although these behaviors are "natural," they are nevertheless quite unusual. At least they would be noteworthy—or even alarming—if we adults did them to each other. What is unusual is that these vocal, facial, and gestural expressions are extreme or "special" forms of the ordinary, daily ways we show friendliness to, interest in, and accord with other people. When used with infants, our everyday and unremarkable smiles of pleasure and affection, nods of agreement, looks of interest, or sounds and pats of support or sympathy become stereotyped or simplified (formalized), exaggerated in time and space, and elaborated through repetition (sometimes with variation). What is more, these vocalizations, facial expressions, and body movements are temporally coordinated, with adult and infant responding to the other as if in reference to a common pulse. It is possible to accelerate or decelerate gradually, but a sudden change of tempo disrupts the smooth flow. The behavioral coordination echoes or reinforces emotional conjunction, where both partners are feeling and acting not alone, but with reference to each other.

Until films revealed the intricacies and exquisite attunement of these interactions, no one suspected that infants of only six weeks of age—before they can even hold their heads up reliably, or reach for and grasp an object—could be so receptive to these special signals and their presentation in time. Although the adult leads the performance, the baby is essential to it, for with its own sounds, facial expressions, and body movements it influences the pace, intensity, and variety of signals that are improvised. Indeed, one can think of adult-infant interaction as an impromptu multimedia duet, in which each partner responds with supreme sensitivity to the others' moods and actions.

Film analyses of this interaction show that it is also a *multimodal* duet. Each partner will respond pretty much the same to a signal whether it is aural, visual, or gestural. That is, a baby's sudden arm movement might be answered with the mother's voice becoming suddenly, sharply loud; as her remarks become faster, the baby might kick faster. A blind baby in a film I saw raised her arm and spread her fingers as her mother's singing swelled.

In a later book,³ Stern introduced the concept of "vitality affects" to describe the emotional valence of qualities of such multimodal behaviors and responses—qualities related to intensity, shape, contour, direction, duration, and movement.

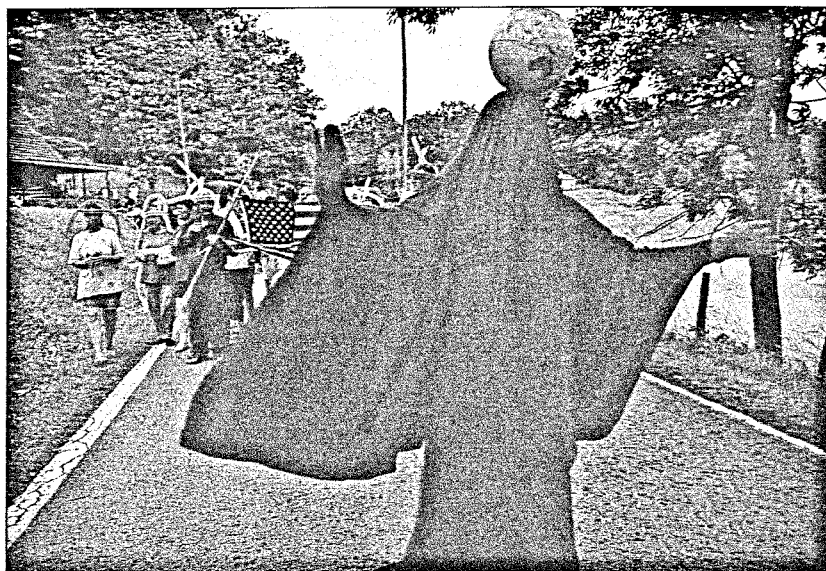


"What artists do in all times and places is to 'make special.'"

In *Art and Intimacy*, I called these qualities “rhythms and modes.” They are not exactly emotions, but kinds of abstract “forms of feeling” that are common to many sensory experiences, whether from sight, hearing, touch, or movement. Although difficult to describe, the words used to try to describe these are often drawn from music or movement—such as “accelerando,” “crescendo,” “steady,” or “jerky.” But these and other descriptive words—such as fleeting, surging, fading-away, tentative, smooth—also apply to vision and touch. Visual artists who read this will easily think of lines, shapes, forms, and colors with these and other “multimodal” qualities.

Most parents are unconcerned about the “purpose” (or the silliness) of their interactive play—like babies, the important thing is to have fun together. But a biologist or psychologist has to wonder about what is accomplished by such a complex, closely attuned behavior. A number of intellectual, emotional, and social benefits have been identified. For example, mother and baby can adjust to each other’s individual tempo or personality, gradually coming into “sync,” as the level of arousal is mutually modulated up or down. The baby discovers that its behavior has effects on others—an important social lesson. The interaction contributes to eventual learning of language, both words and grammar, and the non-verbal indications of a partner’s age, sex, mood, and intention. The interaction helps a baby “self-regulate” its feelings, that is, to become familiar with them, calibrate them with those of another, and eventually deal with them.

A scientist might also wonder how such an interaction came about. It is possible to infer that as humans evolved over several million years, the mother-infant ritual arose as a behavioral adaptation that contributed to the ancestral baby’s very survival. Because of upright posture, the birth canal in humans is smaller than in a four-legged creature. Obviously, as brain size was increasing over evolutionary time, childbirth became a serious predicament for both mother and baby. A number of anatomical changes are known to have taken place to permit easier births of large-brained infants: their skulls can be compressed at birth, much brain growth takes place outside the womb, the female’s pelvic symphysis can separate slightly at parturition. But in addition to these changes, it is clear that mothers of babies who were born at a less-developed, smaller stage had a better chance of a successful birth, and those smaller, less-developed babies would themselves later tend to produce smaller, less-developed babies. (For a human infant to be as mature at birth as a newborn chim-



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panzee would require a twenty-one month gestation period and the baby would weigh twenty-five pounds).

By simplifying, repeating, exaggerating, and elaborating the already existent signals that communicate good will to other adults, an ancestral mother expressed intense love and abiding interest to her baby. Additionally, she unwittingly reinforced affiliative neural circuits in her own brain, thereby helping to ensure that she felt such positive emotion toward her infant that she would be willing to devote the necessary effort and time required to care for such a helpless and demanding being. Infants who called forth these sorts of behaviors by coordinating with maternal rhythms and showing other appealing responses (like smiling) helped to assure that their mothers felt this way. Gradually, over generations, infants and mothers who became affectively attuned survived and reproduced better than those who did not.

ADULT RITUAL

The word “ritual” typically refers to prescribed performances required by a religious or other solemn occasion, such as an inauguration, graduation, baptism, wedding, or funeral. Although the term can be broadened to refer to almost any activity that has a conventional kind of progression—a meal, sports event, class, church service, even the pattern of an ordinary working day—typical usage presumes that a ritual is

characterized not only by repeatability or conventionality but by unusual behavior that sets it off from the ordinary or everyday. Time, space, activity, dress, paraphernalia are made special or extraordinary, and so we can speak of ritual time, ritual space, ritual activity, ritual dress, ritual paraphernalia, and so forth.

What is the purpose of unusual, special, *extraordinary* behavior? In our remote past, tens of thousands of years ago, our ancestors, at some point and for some reason, began to invent the multimedia packages that we today recognize as ceremonial rituals. These exist in every society that has ever been known, and enormous amounts of time, physical effort, and material resources often are devoted to them. Ceremonies obviously contribute something important to the people who perform them.

My suggestion is that ceremonies began as the behavioral expression of people's feelings about what they desired and needed most. They were a society's way of exhibiting in the most vivid, compelling ways how much they cared about the vital subject of the ceremony, whether it be procuring food, protecting from harm, ensuring prosperity, or healing the sick. At first, perhaps people simply moved and moaned together at a time of anxiety. Finding that it made them feel better, they were inclined to do it again at a later anxious

time. Perhaps they imitated for each other the animal they wished to kill, were successful in the hunt, and decided to imitate again. Over time the movements and sounds became more elaborated to what we recognize as dance and song, with visual decor added to attract even greater attention to what was done and said. When dress, implements, and surroundings were made more considered, sumptuous, and dramatic, they became more expressive of the underlying need or wish.

Because these early humans had of course all been babies, they had an innate susceptibility to emphasis and extravagance in visual, vocal, and kinesic modalities; they already were responsive to the emotional effects of formalization, repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration. Without consciously setting out to build upon these protoaesthetic sensitivities, they discovered that it was exactly these "operations" on sounds, words, movements, sites, objects, and bodies that gave form and expression to their deepest concerns and made them feel emotionally united with each other. As in maternal messages to babies, these operations communicated "Look at [pay attention to] this message [matter, outcome]!" or "I care about this, and I care that you know that I care. I want you to care too."

In this way, components of "the first relationship"—between mother and infant—became transmuted into the first arts, developed in ritual ceremonies as what we now call dance, song, poetic language, dramatic performance, and visual display. As with mothers and infants, ceremonial arts generally occur all together as "multimedia," and they have multimodal, interpenetrating effects.

In adopting the protoaesthetic operations of formalization, repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration, ritual ceremonies, then, became the cradle of the arts. The "art of ritual" is not only a metaphor, but an accurate description of what makes ceremonies emotionally affecting. They are troves of arts.

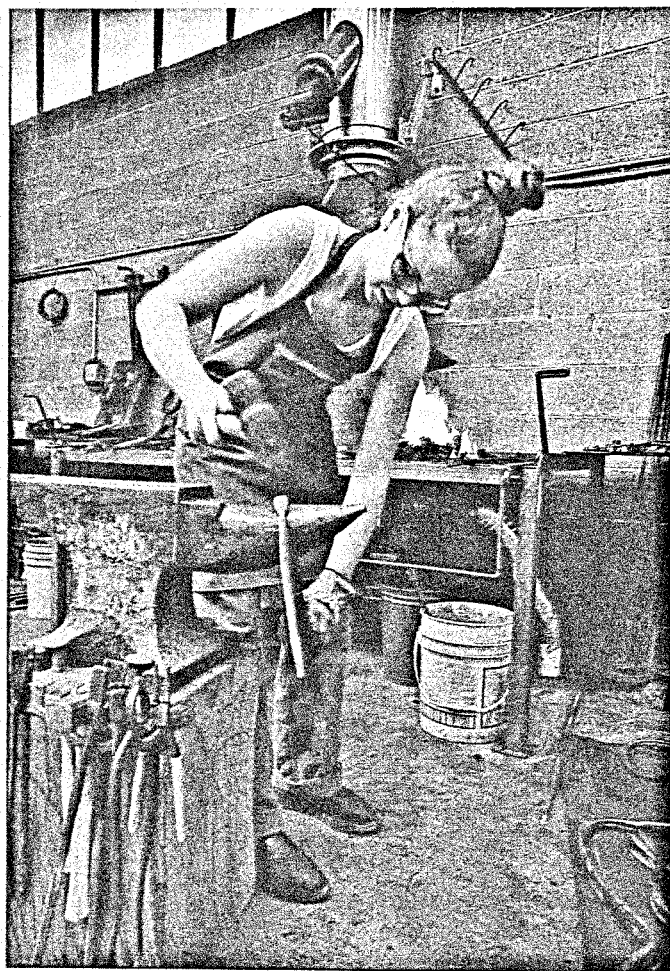
THE RITUAL OF ART

In a similar way, the "ritual of art" is not only a metaphor for, say, the way an individual artist sets to work every day, or for the customary routines of an institutionalized art world. In this section, I want to make the case that the arts today still contain important components from their origin in ritual—deriving from both the playful ritual of mother-infant interaction and ritual ceremony itself.

Photo: Ann Hawthorne



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"Craft is ineluctably grounded in the life of the body, the physicality of material and material objects—their feel, their weight, their resistance, their fragility or durability."

It may sound simplistic to say that fundamentally what artists do with their materials, images, and ideas is—like mothers (as well as practitioners of ancestral rituals) with their sounds and facial-bodily movements—to shape or formalize, repeat, exaggerate, and elaborate them. Yet to realize this is also to realize how the arts are embedded in our biology. These aesthetic operations attract and hold attention, and make us recognize that the material or image or theme has been made special and that someone wants us to notice and heed. Drawing a frame around something, making it or a part of it larger or smaller than one might expect, emphasizing one place rather than another, adding color or a repeated design—these are the sorts of practices and decisions that artists deal with, unlike, say, makers of ordinary tools or dwellings, hunters or fishers, and food preparers or herb gatherers in early societies or the industrial designers, engineers, cooks, and pharmacists who do such work today. Insofar as these occupations do emphasize or elaborate (and

so forth), they are adding ritual or art, but in the simplest sense, aesthetic operations are not strictly necessary to achieving the practical goal. This use of aesthetic operations is what I described in the previous section as the "art" of ritual, and these same operations are used, and further elaborated, in the arts today. If ceremonies are troves of arts, the arts are suffused with the physical and emotional components of ritual behavior.

CRAFT AND RITUAL

So far in this essay, I have used the word "art" pretty much as a generic category that refers as much to "craft" as to "art." That is, I have not tried to distinguish between craft and art in my examination of what makers or practitioners do when they make their behavior, materials, or ideas special. In this concluding section, however, I am going to be more direct and claim that it is in craft, and craft communities like Penland, that the "ritual of art" (or the ritual in art) is most evident and contiguous with ancestral forms.

In a recent essay,⁴ Bruce Metcalf, a metalsmith and craft historian, points out that the ideas comprised by today's term "craft" are, like those of "art," of relatively recent origin—even though, of course, the roots of craft are in pre-industrial technology. Both are post-Enlightenment concepts that come out of a cultural world that is heavily influenced by the marketplace, with its concomitants of buying, selling, advertising, and competition. In this recent usage, craft has typically been considered the stepsibling of art—although, as Metcalf notes, there are degrees of both and they may meet in the middle (e.g., the "artist-craftsperson").

Metcalf, however, chooses to consider the two categories separately. Among his criteria for craft are (1) handwork, (2) knowledge and use of traditional craft media, techniques, formats, and history, and (3) a sense of the primacy of the object and its function. Although he recognizes that contemporary craft includes "hybrids," many of which may be interesting and worthwhile, his notion of craft generally would exclude activities like installations or performances, techniques like computerization or electroforming, materials like plastic, and useless or found objects or the "anything at all" that has come to characterize visual art of the past several decades.

I like Metcalf's analysis of craft history and his insistence on the differences between craft and art today, based on historical knowledge and acquaintance with the contemporary art scene. The view that I have presented in this essay—which

might be called prehistorical—supports Metcalf's criteria of craft, although I speak here of craft and art when they were the same activity, when all art (including music and dance) was craft, in Metcalf's sense. That is, in its origins and in subsistence societies, "art" was—and had to be—functional, material, and communal.

1. Function.

As I have described, the aesthetic elements (or artful "operations") of mother-infant playful interaction arose to aid the survival of helpless babies; in ritual ceremonies, they were co-opted and developed in order to make the ceremony work—to better achieve its purpose. Presumably an ailment could be healed simply by applying a poultice or drinking a potion. But in healing rituals around the world, these remedies alone are usually perceived as insufficient. Special (that is, formalized, repeated, exaggerated, elaborated) words, movements, designs, costumes, behavior are required, not optional. They demonstrate that their makers have taken trouble to show how much they care.

This notion of function allied with specialness or artfulness remains inherent in craft. Although any hollowed out piece of wood can serve as a container, or a cured animal skin be worn as clothing, craftworkers of today, like their predecessors, include artfulness as necessary to function. In this they are aware that humans evolved to care about their lives, and to show this care by making special what is most important to them.



"For the perceiver, a made object implies not only a hand, but a person with hands—someone mortal like ourselves who fashioned this object, brought it into being."

2. Materiality.

Our ancestors evolved in a material, physical world to which they had to adapt. Their bodily attributes and abilities, their psychological needs and desires were developed with reference to that world in which they had to make a living. Craft is ineluctably grounded in the life of the body, the physicality of material and material objects—their feel, their weight, their resistance, their fragility or durability. Humans are familiar with the products of craft in a way that they may not be with "works of art" that are meant to fool the eye or mind, that disguise the marks of the hand that made them, and which suggest a transhuman world. We focus not only on the subject or theme of a craft work, if there is one, but on its *thereness*, its substantiality, its *madeness*.

Madeness implies a hand or hands. Hands are one of our most distinctive human characteristics, one of the bodily attributes that evolved so that we could make tools and construct from natural materials the necessities of our lives. Humans possess *joie de faire*, the pleasure of making things with their hands.⁵

Apart from appreciating how it is to make things, we have other associations with hands. We know how things feel to the hand and we know the varied touches of others' hands. The sense of touch and being touched (like the senses of vision, hearing, and movement, which also evolved in relation to materiality) provides us with rich, interpenetrating, multi-modal associations—the "vitality affects" described earlier—with the natural world and the products made from it, as well as with our earliest interactive experiences with other persons.

If hands communicate directly by touch, they do so indirectly, too, with gestures. (Even infants make hand gestures that are communicative, different from their attempts to grasp and manipulate). And in what we make, our gestures take on permanent form so that, whether intended or not, making is a sort of presentation. Something made implies the age-old, open-handed gesture—"here, take this from my hands"—which offers not only a handmade object but evidence, as in one's handwriting, from which other humans can sense what underlies the maker's action and experience.

For the perceiver, a made object implies not only a hand, but a *person* with hands—someone mortal like ourselves who fashioned this object, brought it to being. The knowledge that "someone made this" can become an integral part of our experience of the object. In some cases of strong emotional connection, it can even lead to something very like "affect



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attunement" with the work/maker, an ardent, moving certainty of shared human feeling and the quality of that feeling.

3. Community.

At the core of ritual and art as I have described them is the emotional intersubjectivity developed and practiced in mother-infant interaction. Making and making special are inseparable from the innate human impulse to share feelings and from the need and ability to express ourselves in relationship with others. And as just described in the preceding paragraph, we experience the works of others intersubjectively also. The gestural traces in handmade objects, like the bodily signatures in dance and song, contribute directly to another's reception or appreciation of them.

Yet in contemporary art theory and practice, works, their makers, and their perceivers are typically treated as lone individuals. Works are decontextualized and displayed as isolated, unique entities. Makers are said to be exploring their unique subjectivity and its preoccupations. Perceivers typically view works silently and alone, from a unique personal sensibility.

Although contemporary craft partakes of the modern art world's insistence on museum-like display and its requirement of originality—these being necessities of the marketplace—I believe that insofar as hand and material presence are maintained the transaction between maker/work and audience remains insistent and inescapable. Additionally and importantly, human relationship is manifested in craft not only horizontally, in the immediacy of close association, but vertically through time.

Craft practitioners generally work within the communal, guild-like process of tradition transmitted from master to pupil. This can be a powerful source of meaning. I remember feeling solemnly touched when my piano teacher told me that he had studied with Karl Schnabel, who had studied with his father, Artur Schnabel, who had studied with...back to Carl Czerny, who had studied with Beethoven. A poet friend, David Evans, tells me that he writes "for or towards those writers whose works I can't get enough of—artists who have given me great pleasure and understanding of myself as well as other human beings and the physical world. I've always had a great driving need to be a part of what they do and are."

At Penland, the vertical and horizontal of communality intersect. Members of the immediate community live and work together, but even when working alone after leaving Penland, the community is implicit. Creative artists sometimes feel that they are conduits for messages from something or somewhere else. Such a feeling takes on a natural, as opposed to supernatural, relevance when one becomes aware that at Penland, one belongs not only to the accidental community of everyone who happens to be there at the time, but additionally of all who have been there over the past seventy-five years, and the company of handworkers from the Pleistocene to today.

NOTES

1. Daniel Stern, *The First Relationship: Infant and Mother* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).
2. Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
3. Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
4. Bruce Metcalf, "Contemporary Craft: A Brief Overview," in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory, and Critical Writing* edited by Jean Johnson (Toronto: Coach House Books with The Craft Studio at Harbourfront Centre, 2003): 13-23.
5. Ellen Dissanayake, "The Pleasure and Meaning of Making," *American Craft* 55(2), (1995): 40-45.