**Headline:** Anthropology for Kids and Visual Assembly Are Reimagining Work, Education, Money, and More

**Teaser:** These interactive books and events encourage fresh perspectives on long-standing social systems.

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

Rigid thinking has been [linked](https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.pn.2023.04.4.34) to social and professional problems, difficulty in adapting to societal change, and mental health issues that can lead to suicide and mass shootings.

The challenges associated with inflexible thinking have become more evident post-pandemic. “While rates of depression, anxiety, and mental health conditions have increased in the general population during this time of rapid change, individuals with greater inflexible thinking have had the most difficulty adapting to our continuously changing environment,” [explains](https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.pn.2023.04.4.34) Psychiatry Online.

No one is insusceptible to cognitive inflexibility. The Society for Personality and Social Psychology [theorizes](https://spsp.org/news/character-and-context-blog/ho-functional-fixedness) that “once you’ve become accustomed to a particular simplification of reality, you will have trouble switching to a new one even when it would be more useful to do so. Switching is hard because it takes effort to reconfigure how to think about a problem.”

The works of artist and writer Nika Dubrovsky encourage flexible thinking, particularly in how we perceive firmly established social structures. Her project [Anthropology for Kids](https://a4kids.org/) hopes to inspire young people to think outside the box on subjects like work, jobs, education, food, money, beauty, and art. The importance of this work is underscored by evidence suggesting that efforts to increase cognitive flexibility early in life [may have lifelong benefits](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886920304207).

Anthropology for Kids’s [books](https://a4kids.org/#books) are inspired by what the website refers to as the “democratic Soviet children’s literature.” This genre, invented in the 1920s, served “as a means to communicate with the general population in a language that everybody could share.”

Anthropology for Kids’s books contain spaces for readers to fill with drawings and writings. This is intended to provoke thought on “questions that every human needs to have an opinion on,” Dubrovsky says.

In 1990, Dubrovsky immigrated to the U.S. from Saint Petersburg, Russia. As a migrant in New York and the mother of a young boy, she “spent a lot of time trying to figure out how the education system works in the U.S. and what education is [in the first place],” she explains.

Dubrovsky’s late husband, the anthropologist and author David Graeber, helped expand her knowledge of anthropology, which she saw as “the best possible education for kids, because that’s the way to [stop] reproducing all of our patriarchal, Eurocentric ideas about things like family, money, and property.”

The spirit of open-ended anthropological inquiry meshed well with Dubrovsky’s background in contemporary art, which Walker Art Center’s [website](https://walkerart.org/visit/what-is-contemporary-art/) describes as art that “reflects the complex issues that shape our diverse, global, and rapidly changing world.” The site adds that “many contemporary artists explore personal or cultural identity, offer critiques of social and institutional structures, or even attempt to redefine art itself. In the process, they often raise difficult or thought-provoking questions without providing easy answers.”

In the early 2000s, Dubrovsky began fusing art with anthropology by creating interactive workbooks for her young son. This evolved into Anthropology for Kids, which also holds [workshops](https://a4kids.org/about-workshops/) where participants are encouraged to work with the project’s books as a group.

In 2024, MIT Press published [*Cities Made Differently*](https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262549332/cities-made-differently/), the first English-language Anthropology for Kids book. This is the first in a three-book series that also aims to [explore](https://a4kids.org/about/) new perspectives on museums and artists.

An outgrowth of Anthropology for Kids called Visual Assembly emerged during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the U.S. in 2020. The website for the [Museum of Care](https://museum.care/), which honors the legacy of Dubrovsky’s late husband, [describes](https://museum.care/room/visual-assembly/) Visual Assembly as “a democratic form of creative collaboration used to reimagine new ways to run and organize our social systems.” While it uses artistic tools, it “is not only an art project. Mainly it is about a public debate on how to rearrange” social institutions and services like education and health care.

A [Visual Assembly event](https://davidgraeber.institute/cities-made-differently-a-visual-assembly-mayday-space-nyc/) in Bushwick, Brooklyn, in February 2025 typifies these experiences: A multigenerational, culturally diverse group of approximately 20 participants sat at a table covered with a map of an imaginary city. Attendees collectively imagined and designed the city they would like to inhabit.

Visual Assembly events have been held in locales like Spain, Iceland, Germany, Cuba, New York, and London. “It’s interesting how people from very different backgrounds have similar reactions to the [same] questions,” Dubrovsky notes. “For example, when people imagine dystopian spaces, [their descriptions] are always poetic, but [when Visual Assembly participants] imagine utopian spaces, they’re very practical. They immediately start to think, ‘How would we produce our food? Where would we deal with our trash?’”

Dubrovsky feels that these commonalities among event participants indicate that people of different cultures and ideologies can build grassroots social spaces together. “If we just started to provide people with the spaces to think together and share their ideas about how they can do that, maybe [we would discover] that many more people than we think agree with each other. All humans need the same things, like kindergartens, hospitals, and housing. It’s interesting to see [similarities in] ideas of what an ideal society [would look like when] we refrain from using [left-versus-right] language and start talking to people just as people. That’s what children’s literature does, and that’s what anthropology has always done because it’s trying to figure out the differences between cultures and groups of people. But also it’s the belief that everyone is a human being, so we’re all fundamentally very similar to each other.”