

# Animal Artistic Agency in Performative Interspecies Art in the Twenty-First Century

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**ABSTRACT:** Traditional aesthetic places non-human animals in nature and not in culture. Non-human animals are generally considered to be artless beings without any urge or capacity to create aesthetic objects. To the contrary, the ability and the need to produce art is perceived as one of the last thresholds of humanity. Nevertheless, in the last decades more and more contemporary artists involve living non-human animals in artistic productions. By doing so they declare some non-human animals to be co-authors of artworks and trust in their creative agency. But is it legitimate to take animal contributions to installations, sculptures, video works, or paintings seriously? Can non-human animals be aesthetic actors in their own right? The text focuses on interspecies artworks that only come into existence with the help of non-human animals. While it seems clear that the participating non-human animals display some form of agency, it is debatable if they can be called artists.

**KEYWORDS:** Artistic Agency; Animal Agency; Interspecies Art; Animal Aesthetics; Contemporary Art.

## Agencia artística animal en el arte performativo interespecies en el siglo XXI

**RESUMEN:** La estética tradicional sitúa a los animales no humanos en la naturaleza y no en la cultura. Los animales no humanos son generalmente considerados seres carentes de arte sin ningún impulso o capacidad para crear objetos estéticos. Por el contrario, la habilidad y la necesidad de producir arte es percibida como uno de los últimos umbrales de la humanidad. Sin embargo, en las últimas décadas cada vez más artistas contemporáneos involucran a animales no humanos vivos en producciones artísticas. Al hacer esto, declaran a algunos animales no humanos coautores de obras de arte y su confianza en su agencia creativa. Pero, ¿es legítimo tomarse en serio las contribuciones animales a instalaciones, esculturas, obras de vídeo o pinturas? ¿Pueden los animales no humanos ser actores estéticos por derecho propio? El texto se centra en obras de arte interespecies que solo llegan a existir mediante la ayuda de animales no humanos. Si bien parece claro que los animales no humanos participantes muestran alguna forma de agencia, es debatible que se les pueda llamar artistas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Agencia artística; Agencia animal; Arte interespecies; Estética animal; Arte contemporáneo.

Animals inspire artists and are used in their creative productions. In his influential essay «Why Look at Animals», the art critic John Berger not only put forth the much-cited thesis that non-human animals constituted the first motifs and metaphors, but also argued that animal blood was the first paint, so animals are also the first material for artmaking (1980). But what if animals are more active agents in the creative process and contribute not only with their mere presence but with their actions to the design and configuration of an artwork?

According to an anecdote, in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the famous Japanese artist Hokusai created a painting for the shogun by drawing a thick blue line on a piece of paper and then dipped the feet of a rooster in red paint and sent him over the sheet. Hokusai titled the resulting image *Tatsuta river with autumn leaves*. And indeed one could easily recognize a river represented by the blue line and falling maple leaves represented by the red traces of the rooster's claws. Hokusai's method of calculated coincidence was doubtless innovative, but he used the claws of the bird not much different from



1. Steven Kutcher, Darkling Beetle making footprints,  
© Steven Kutcher, [http://bugartbysteven.com/?page\\_id=658](http://bugartbysteven.com/?page_id=658)

a brush or other painting material. This popular anecdote illustrates the genius of a human master not the artistry of his animal tool.

200 years later Steven Kutcher uses bugs as living brushes in a similar way. He also dips the feet of animals, in wet paint and lets them crawl over his canvases [1]. As an artist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century working with animals, other than Hokusai Kutcher feels obliged to assure that the paint is not toxic and that the insects involved are not harmed in the process. Other than Hokusai he claims: «I have to take good care of them. After all, they are artists!» (Thomas, 2007) And other than Hokusai he does not try to interpret any representational meaning into the developing lines and compositions, but rather accepts them as mere traces of animal activity. Nevertheless, Kutcher just like Hokusai looks for a certain visual effect by instrumentalizing animal locomotion. But still, by calling the bugs artists, Kutcher gives up some of his own artistic agency and attributes artistic agency to non-human animals.

What has changed in the notion of art and the notion of agency that a non-human animal can be called an author or rather a co-author of art? For a long time, the art scene formed a self-sufficient system closed to animals as agential beings in their own right. Even live animals appeared primarily as muse, motif, material, model, and medium. They have been (and mostly still are) consumed as exhibition pieces,

manipulated as objects of study or for the pure spectacle, rendered as material or anthropomorphized. Animals functioned as substitutes, stand-ins, examples or category specimens representing a particular idea concerning a species, the abstract concept of animality, a vague ideal of «nature» or simply the Other. Hence the use of animals was based on a hierarchy of beings: Creative human artists forced passive animals into images. There was rarely any concern for the individuality of those animals and their (artistic) agency as they disappeared behind their symbolic or metaphoric meaning.

The participation of live animals in performance art might point to ways beyond such an anthropocentric framework. In parallel to performance art asserting itself as an autonomous genre in the 1960s, animals became increasingly exhibited in the form of live ready-mades in the white cube of museums and galleries. At least hypothetically, the involved animals promised – unlike, for instance, paintings – a certain unpredictability and unavailability that could be encountered through all of the senses. Performances are not supposed to be based on a performer's pre-determined and authoritative subjectivity but tend to display greater openness towards the recognition of the existence of non-human subjectivities. Contesting the notion of an autonomous, intentionally agential subject, it was supposed to be the occurrence of performativity itself that produced agential subjects. So it comes as no surprise that dialogic interactions with animals were now deemed worthy of art for the first time, for example in the video works by Carolee Schneemann and William Wegman, in which the artists each interact with their companion animals in staged trivial day-to-day practices: Schneemann exchanged intimate kisses with her cats Kitch, Cluny and Vesper, and Wegman negotiated in a humorous manner quotidian or absurd questions with his dogs Man Ray and Fay.

Talking of William Wegman's collaboration with Man Ray for his videos of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Susan McHugh has coined the term pack aesthetics (McHugh, 2001: 234). She has shown that in certain performative interactions initiated by Wegman, dog and human develop collective artistic agency as a team [2]. Only together they are able to successfully create an interesting artwork. And the videos would certainly look differently if one of the collaborators acted differently. The emerging relational aesthetic that McHugh observes is reminiscent with definitions of art as a deeply social activity. The anthropologist Alfred Gell for in-



2. William Wegman, *Before/On/After* (detail), 1972, The Metropolitan Museum of Art © William Wegman, <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/william-wegman-videos-met-museum>

stance, discusses art as a «mobilization of aesthetic principles in social interaction» (Gell, 1998: 4). And indeed, art is a relational activity at the core. So artistic agency does not have to be understood as the capacity of some exceptional human genius but rather as a distributive and relational phenomenon. Such an understanding would allow other animals in into the realm of art as creative agents.

But only since the turn of the millennium, however, has it truly become possible to speak of such an animal turn in contemporary art. To suggest an animal turn is not merely to state that one encounters an increasing number of animals in the visual arts, but more importantly that the attitude by which artists approach animals has changed. Whilst animals have traditionally been used primarily for reflecting on the human, much contemporary art is marked more strongly by a real interest in individual animals and concrete animal-human-relations. Influenced by academic animal studies and

new insights in ethology and cognition studies, paired with a general strengthening of animal protection and animal rights as well as a growing ecological consciousness, artists increasingly perceive animals as different-yet-equal. A symptom of the change animal-involving art has undergone since the beginning of the twenty-first century is Interspecies art.

Interspecies art was established as a technical term in recognition of the new approaches taken in art by at least five exhibitions taking place roughly around the same time in 2009. These were, in the U.S., *Intelligent Design: Interspecies Art Exhibition*, in the UK, *Interspecies*, in Canada, *Animal House: Works of Art Made by Animals*, and in Germany, *Tier-Werden Mensch-Werden [Becoming-Animal Becoming-Human]*<sup>1</sup> and *Tier-Perspektiven [Animal Perspectives]*<sup>2</sup>. The degree of change in attitudes becomes evident in the respective exhibition announcements. The curators of *Interspecies*, for instance, asked: «Can artists work with animals

as equals?», implying a position antagonistic to animals as mere use objects in art. And the curators of *Intelligent Design: Interspecies Art Exhibition* Tyler Stallings and Rachel Mayeri considered the works in their exhibition as a challenge to «the anthropocentric perspective of the world, placing human perception on par with other animals» (Sweeney Art Gallery, 2009: 1). *Animal House* dedicated a whole exhibition to animals' aesthetic products, showing, among others, paintings by elephants and chimpanzees as well as scratching pictures by dogs and turtles. The exhibition *Becoming-Animal Becoming-Human*, referring in its title to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of becoming-animal as a decentering of the human (1980), explicitly assumed the existence of an animal agency that can express itself in artworks. And *Animal Perspectives* claimed that animals have their own perspective on the world, a standpoint of their own that is to be taken into account in artworks.

In spite of the recent surge, the term *interspecies art* was coined much earlier – by concept artist, composer and environmental activist Jim Nollman, who has been making music with animals, among them turkeys and whales, since the early 1970s, and who continues to run a website on interspecies music and interspecies art. Furthermore, in 2006 the MassMoCA hosted an exhibition under the title of *Becoming Animal*, which brought together various important protagonists of interspecies art, described as such. Also in 2006, American multimedia-artist Lisa Jevbratt began teaching a course in «Interspecies Collaboration» at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She continues to run a website of the same name, which constitutes an important resource for the theory and practice of interspecies art.

Since 2009 at the latest, the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and the 150<sup>th</sup> jubilee of *The Origin of Species*, there has been a rapid increase in the number of exhibitions and publications putting forth a new conception of the human-animal-relation and a new understanding of animal-involving art whilst questioning the role of animals in art with an emancipatory claim.

But what exactly is interspecies art? It is literally art in which members of various species interact with one another. The number of entities involved or the question of which species they belong to, however, is not predetermined, nor is the form the interaction takes. Possible definitions are further complicated by the fact that it is neither clear how to de-

fine art nor how to define species. A provisional attempt at a definition could be that interspecies artworks are relationally intended artworks in which a human artist interacts with a non-human animal, so that both play a work-constituting role, and in which a fundamental critique of anthropocentrism is, at minimum, implicit. In interspecies art, the animals involved are given at least a rudimentary agential status – even though, granted, they often still function as muse, motif, material, model or medium. In its ideal form, interspecies art is dialogic and respectful in its engagement with the animal involved and attributes a value of its own to the creativity of the non-human participant. Animals are perceived, or reflected, as the co-creators of art. In this respect, interspecies art contributes to a further fracturing of the boundary between human and animal: in the ludic manner enabled by art as a protected site of experimentation, it questions the notion that phenomena such as aesthetic expression, sensibility or artistic agency are solely human capacities.

Agency can be understood as independent from any metaphysical concept of free will but also as different from undetermined natural processes that mere things are subjected to. In a very basic understanding, agency is simply the ability to make decisions and to implement these decisions in the world. When agency is understood that way, there is no doubt that animals do possess agency. But not everyone feels comfortable with the notion of animals as artists. One of the main objections against the idea of animal artistic agency is the alleged lack of intention on part of the animal. The insistence on intention as an essential criterion for artistic agency is not up-to-date, though: Ever since the death of the author in so-called postmodernism, artists organize themselves in networks of multiple agency and leave it to the work and the audience to generate meaning. Furthermore, the field of animal studies has, indeed, long shown that animals can be social and historical actors, that they can have agency. Whereas agency is often described as a capacity of human beings only, the term is used to describe the capacity and efficacy of non-male and non-white humans in gender and post-colonial studies. In animal studies, too, the attribution of agency constitutes a tool for empowerment.

And there are still at least two more philosophical discourses that allow for animal agency: Following Bruno Latour's influential actor-network-theory, non-human entities can function as actors interacting with human actors in net-



3. Congo painting at London Zoo, 1957,  
<https://archive.ica.art/bulletin/last-living-surrealist-desmond-morris-paintings-chimpanzees-his-work-and-origins-ica>

work-like contexts: together they form a joint actor (Latour, 2005). And finally, as part of the emergence of New Materialism, theorists have developed a similarly open concept of distributive agency or non-intentional agency in so-called intra-action (Barad, 2007).

So, while the notion that animals can be actors is rather non-controversial, they are rarely considered to be the authors or initiators of artworks. But even before the animal turn, some artists declared animals to be the authors of artworks. This is especially true for the staging of apes or elephants as painters.

The first widely received academic analyses of the phenomenon and the history of ape painting is Desmond Morris' book *The Biology of Art* from 1962<sup>3</sup>. Morris was not only zoologist and ethologist but a painter himself. He understood his book as a contribution to the search for the origins of human art. At the same time, he offered an up-to-date alternative to the traditional concept of the art of his time. In the book he mostly depicts his own experiences with the chimpanzee Congo whom he made not only a painter and his subject for research but also a media ce-

lebrity. Between the ages of four and six, Congo produced almost 400 paintings and drawings [3]. Morris found several general compositional and calligraphic characteristics of ape painting and also individual styles. In his analyses he drew on a scheme that had been invented for children's drawings. According to Morris, Congo strove to symmetry, rhythmic variations and flashy color contrasts. He favored fan shaped compositions and made sure to always stay on the sheet of paper he was drawing or painting on. Furthermore, Morris states that Congo tended to destroy the shapes that he made by painting over them. This habit made it necessary for Morris to remove the paper once the painting had reached a certain state of perfection or attraction – a practice that has become common for all the following experiments with apes. This patronizing intervention deprives the apes of the power and authority over their own productions and results in a deeply anthropocentric value judgement: The painting is only complete when a human being says so. It never occurred to Morris and his followers, that precisely the painting over or repainting and thus the multiple overlapping of shapes and colors might not only



4. Arnulf Rainer, *Parallel Malaktion mit Schimpansen (Parallel Action Painting with Chimpanzees)*, 1979, oil, graphite, paper collage, watercolour and ink on paper, 62.5 x 89.5 cm, © Arnulf Rainer <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/arnulf-rainer-b-1929-parallel-malaktion-mit-6033116-details.aspx>

express the agency of the ape but also gives clues about his artistic aims and creative drive.

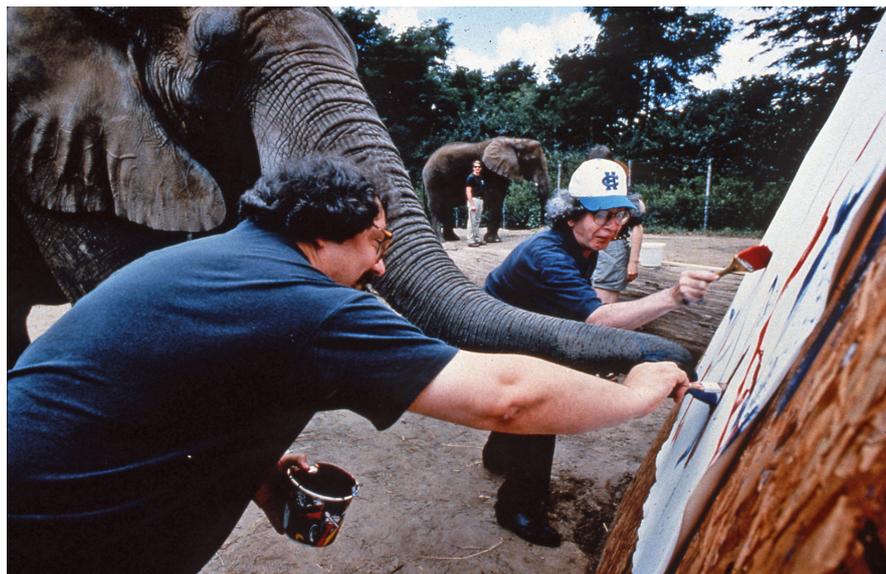
However, Morris concluded from Congo's eager cooperation that artistic activities were rewarding in themselves and followed a strong drive. Congo became world famous and his paintings were shown in many exhibitions, artists like Picasso and Dali were enthusiastic about him and many bought his works. The hype around Congo is probably owed to the fact that it was the heyday of abstract expressionism and Congo's paintings were formally very close to some of the celebrated works by human painters of the time. Despite of the approval of artists and the art market, it seems to be rather cynical that with ape painting not only the apes themselves are considered exhibition objects, for example in zoos and circuses, but also their products become exhibits.

Let us not forget that all ape painting we are aware of arises from apes in captivity, mostly from apes who are held in very restrictive laboratory situation. The whole setup of the painting experiments is deeply anthropocentric: Apes are provided with painting material that has been designed for humans and they are trained to show a certain favorable behavior and are usually rewarded when they perform as expected. Also ape paintings are usually analyzed by humans with methods that have been invented for humans. Nevertheless, Morris concluded: «Both man and ape have an inherent need to express themselves aesthetically.» (Morris, 1962: 151).

Whereas Morris pointed to the similarities between human art and ape painting, thirty years later French philosopher and art historian Thierry Lenain emphasized the differences. In 1990 he published *La peinture des singes: Histoire et esthétique*, which has been translated misleadingly into *Monkey Painting*. While Morris assumed that there was some kind of aesthetic order and compositional balance in ape painting, Lenain described ape art as visual destruction (Lenain, 1997: 146). In his view the painting ape experiences some kind of horror vacui and tries to trash and fragment the blank sheet of paper in order to work against its very emptiness.

Ape painting research fitted best in the times of action painting. But the artists themselves picked up the topic as late as the 1970s and 1980s. One of the most prominent examples are the parallel painting actions of Arnulf Rainer in which he painted alongside two tame chimpanzee, Jimmy and Lady, and imitated every brushstroke of the ape [4]. The project reveals almost nothing about the creative animal, but a great deal about Rainer's self-image and about his view on art. The chimps simply played the role that Rainer assigned to them in his stated quest to reveal the «mystery of art» and to solve the «riddle of artistic sovereignty» (Rainer, 2010: 183). Even when Rainer claimed that he considered his own capacities to be inferior, he nonetheless deployed artistic categories and methods that were distinctively human. He made the chimps involuntary participants in a game that only hu-

5. Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid: When Elephants Paint, 2001 (Documentation)  
© Komar and Melamid



mans understand and he or she functioned merely as an extra in Rainer's meditative conversation with himself. Rainer invented the whole setting. He not only implied a human cultural framework but also the typical techniques of his very own profession. The chimpanzees on the other hand were forced to act in conditions that were completely alien to them. Because one would expect that they could only fail in the given circumstances, it is no wonder that art historian Kay Heymer favors Rainer's paraphrases as «more spirited, wilder, and much faster than the ape's models» (Heymer, 1991: 9). If one compares the ape model and its copy by Rainer, though, both paintings look very much alike. It would be just as plausible to attribute a higher aesthetic value to the ape's paintings. Even if this project does not really reveal much about animal artistic agency it is an interesting artwork because it challenges the dominant idea of creativity and art as the result of individual inspiration, human genius and intention.

Just recently a whole new reading of ape drawing has been presented by Juliet MacDonald (MacDonald, 2014). She devoted her studies to the chimpanzee Alpha whose life as a research animal in the Yerkes laboratories is very well documented. Based on an empathic and attentive account of Alpha's living conditions, MacDonald suggests that the crossing lines and the violent scribbling over structures and shapes in Alpha's drawings could be read as resistance against the oppressive and constricting conditions in which she was

forced to live in. One could agree on some evident facts without following any of these views: Ape paintings, no matter if they are made in an artist studio, a zoo, or a laboratory, are documents of the motoric coordination skills of their authors, their ability to recognize shapes and some kind of pleasure of movement. Unburdened by art historical expertise, they are still always expressions of the agency of their creators.

About thirty years after Rainer's painting actions with apes, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's *Ecollaborations* initiated a project to teach captive elephants how to paint (Komar/Melamid, 2000) [5]<sup>4</sup>. They started their project in the mid 1990s with elephant Renee in the Toledo Zoo in Ohio, and in 1998 opened their first elephant art academy in Lampang in Thailand and founded the *Asian Elephant Art & Conservation Project* for endangered elephants. More than anything else, the project was a well-intended provocation. It questioned the seriousness of the art market and can be understood as an attempt to reveal the illusionary character of modern art. But Komar and Melamid also framed their work as a means for social change. The declared aim was to raise awareness for the precarious situation of Asian elephants. The project was an immediate success. In 1999 Komar and Melamid exhibited works by the elephants Juthanam, Phitsamai, and Nam Chok in the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennial. In the following years they organized big exhibitions in major museums in the USA, Australia, and in Asia and

paintings by elephants were sold for high prizes at auction houses. All elephant painters were introduced with complete CVs and with a description of their stylistic characteristics on the website of the project and in catalogues. Apart from questionable art historical classifications<sup>5</sup>, there really could be reasonable accounts of individual preferences of individual elephants. One could argue that an elephant who is been given a brush is not solely an instrument or a tool for a human artist. Some individuals enjoyed the painting activity while others were easily bored, some were slow workers, others wanted to finish quickly to be able to do other things. Each elephant developed with time individual techniques in the handling of the brush and favored certain shapes or colors. This could be understood as expression of their own ideas, unique patterns of behavior, movements and resistance. Observations that focus attentively on these aspects take into account the specific agency of the elephants.

Certainly, Komar and Melamid were the initiators and the managers of this project. They were the conceptual authors who contextualized the paintings, commissioned art historical categorizations and suggested potential readings. Moreover, the elephants were the property of human beings and their works stayed under the copyright of human artists. Above all, both Rainer's and Komar and Melamid's experiments with painting apes and elephants can be read as satirical commentaries on the art world or as provocations targeted at conventional notions of art. Looking at their work as well as at comparable projects by other human artists, it can be stated that even when animals play a significant role in constituting a work, they are never the sole actor, and they often do not act voluntarily or even intentionally. Given the requirement of a human actor to frame or initiate the event, a certain degree of dictation and exploitation is always in play.

There is the risk of anthropomorphizing animals as willing collaborators while they just serve as mere extensions of the artist's ego; such involvement in creative processes then constitutes only another kind of abuse. In order to prevent such a violent instrumentalization, multimedia-artist Lisa Jevbratt – already briefly mentioned – has developed a field guide formulating ethical demands and guidelines for the engagement with animals as part of *interspecies collaborations* (Jevbratt, 2009). Jevbratt defines *interspecies collaboration* as an instrument of empathetic identification with the body – and possibly the mind – of another animal. Studying the rele-

vant specific animal senses and forms of behavior is as much an integral component of the artistic work as the attempt to empathize with the animal other.

What Jevbratt possibly does not realize is the ambivalence of the term collaboration. In war times, it often refers to a working-together with the enemy party. In this sense, *interspecies collaboration* would imply a fundamental enmity between humans and other animals. Some proponents of Critical Animal Studies do indeed believe that humans are at war with the other animals (Wadiwel, 2015). If this is taken seriously, collaboration could be seen to constitute a way out for animals from a principally exploitative system, a way of safeguarding their interests and of saving their skin. Collaboration can also, however, be understood – and this is how Lisa Jevbratt understands it – as a cooperative or even equal form of working together. Yet in this respect, the notion of work appears disconcerting when it is ascribed to animals. After all, it is not generally assumed that animals earn their livelihood through work – even though this is exactly what most livestock is in fact engaged in. Nevertheless, according to the general public's imagination, animals do not work; the result of animal efforts is not usually valued as an achievement, or work. The terminology of *interspecies collaboration* may, then, both shed a critical light on the violence inherent in the animal-human-relation and carry an emancipatory impetus by recognizing animal activity as work.

Jevbratt in her fieldguide as well as in her teaching gives first priority to the animals' consent. Her reference to the fact that animals can defend themselves when forced into «collaboration» is more than a well-intended warning for art students – it also explicitly references animals' agency and autonomy. She writes: «Respect your collaborators and remember: no means no!» Animals, then, are not only able to collaborate, they are also given the power to refuse to participate. Either way, the resulting artwork will look very differently or there will be no artwork at all.

It is much easier to work with animals if an artist does not demand anything from the animal that is completely alien to the animal. And really, many artists involve animal participation simply by framing the animal's natural behavior. For example, there is currently a real boom of artistic collaborations with bees, spiders, ants, or other insects as part of sculptural projects. The hexagonal honeycomb structures of bees or the complicated nets of spiders and the swarming behaviour

of ants have rendered them appealing co-workers to human artists ranging from Ren Ri, Hilary Berseth, Aganetha Dyck or Tomás Saraceno, Rosemarie Trockel, and Nina Katchadourian to Katharina Meldner, Adriana Ramic and Yukunori Yanagi – to name just a few. A whole series of works is being developed in which human artists and human artefacts are confronted with animal swarm intelligence or animal architectural skills. Mostly the artist just makes a small intervention in the natural building activities of for example a bee or follows the paths of a moving insect and then presents the resulting object or drawing as a joint work. Butterflies, too, appear as makers of art simply by doing what they would anyway do: Joos van de Plaas, for instance, makes available to butterfly caterpillars printed paper, painted-on cardboard or plastic materials for the construction of their temporary habitations [6]. After the butterflies hatch, the empty cocoons remain behind as small objects. Van de Plaas calls the caterpillars her «co-workers»<sup>6</sup>. It is not only the art object that is transformed in such collaborative processes, but the participating human, too, finds a re-positioning and experiences a decentering of his or her role in the creative process: the human material or performative intervention turns into a component of the work (and world) of the other animals.

A similar process as in van de Plaas' collaborations with butterflies is initiated by Björn Braun for a series of sculptural



6. Joos van de Plaas: *Sleeping Beauty*, 2013, no. 10, 10,8 cm x 7,5 cm x 2,3 cm cocoon, cardboard, acrylic, paper, branch, © Joos van de Plaas

works with birds [7]. He provides his two zebra finch males with a variety of natural and synthetic materials, such as colored plastic threads or yarn, which they use to build their sleeping nests. The human artists can neither steer nor anticipate the construction of the cocoons or nests. Whilst they do influence the look of the finished objects through the provision of certain materials, they otherwise need to rely on the



7. Björn Braun, *Untitled (zebra finch nest)*, 2013, multimedia, 12 x 14 x 15 cm (photo: Nils Klinger)  
© Björn Braun

skill of the animal architect-builders. The collaborative works developed question traditional notions of author and work, turning against myths of art as reliant on inspiration and the human (male) genius or as controlled self-expression. Such interspecies works criticize the obsolete concept of the autonomous author governing over his work as originating creator and intentional centre of art.

Human beings themselves, however, cannot even fully grasp the aesthetic qualities of birds' or insects' architecture, at least when it comes to color composition. Compared to many birds and insects, human beings only possess a reduced color vision and cannot perceive the abundance of color of their architectures and structures. It may well be that the nests of the zebra finches presented by Björn Braun possess aesthetic dimensions that can neither be appreciated by the artist nor by a human audience but only by the birds themselves. Considering that there might be other aesthetic aspects to animal art as well, for example related to smelling, hearing in very high or very low frequencies or other sensing abilities like for example chemical communication, it becomes clear that humans are not the best art critics for the creative productions of animals after all. But at least with birds and insects, the human aesthetics experience might even be misguided and impoverished when staying in the safe and mandatory anthropocentric realm of assessing art by the beauty of color composition.

In involving birds as sculptors, the objects Braun passes on to the exhibition circuit are reminiscent of one of the most highly discussed examples of the formative capacity of animals: the artful constructions of the bowerbirds in New Guinea (Endler, 2012). The male birds decorate their elaborate bowers with carefully chosen and arranged berries, flowers, snail shells and beetle wings. The female then selects, to her own measure, the male that has constructed the most beautiful bower. Around 1900 already, such courtship bowers were considered examples of animal art, as indicated by the fact that Karl Woermann included in the first edition of his world-art-compendium *Die Geschichte der Kunst aller Zeiten und Völker* [Art History of All Periods and People] six plates featuring the «Art by Animals», such as the nests of widowbirds, or weavers (Woermann, 1900: 1).

The fact that animals can be creative and innovative seems uncontroversial. Whether something is defined as art, however, may not necessarily be inferred from the object itself

– rather, it is usually an effect of the discourse in which that object is embedded. Discussions on the inclusion or exclusion in art history of the so-called «Artistry of the Mentally Ill», of artefacts of «primitive» people or of children's art point to how ascriptions of art or not-art are tied to interpretative powers. That said, the capacity to produce art continues to be upheld as one of the few remaining traits distinguishing human beings from other animals. Traditional aesthetic places non-human animals in nature and not in culture. Non-human animals are generally considered to be artless beings without any urge or capacity to create aesthetic objects. To the contrary, the ability and the need to produce art is perceived as one of the last thresholds of humanity. Some randomly chosen quotes from different sources can illustrate this: The famous art historian Hans Belting for example said: «The concept of the image can only be taken seriously when we think of it as an anthropological concept.» (Belting, 2001: 11) Curator and art historian Emma Dexter comments in a handbook for art students: «To draw is to be human.» (Dexter, 2005: 6) The art history web portal *Artfocus.com* defines «art as the essential form of expression for human emotions and human thoughts.» And Alexander Alland writes that the «creation and the appreciation of art in its many forms are uniquely human activities» (Alland, 1977: 21). Looking at art history it becomes clear that the very concept of art is constituted by intellectual negotiation processes that are grounded in notions of human exceptionalism. If an artist is defined by being human or if art is considered to be an attribute of the human being alone, all creative expressions of any other species are excluded from the sphere of art and every possibility of aesthetic practices in non-human animals has to be denied.

But there is also quite a long list of the view to the contrary: from Democritus to Johann Gottfried Herder (2002), Charles Darwin (1871), Wilhelm Paulcke (1923) through to Wolfgang Welsch (2004), Winfried Menninghaus (2011) or Gilles Deleuze (1998), important thinkers have ascribed to animals a creativity preceding that of humans, an innate predisposition to making art, or aesthetic receptivity. For example, in antiquity Democritus argued that animal creativity has been prior to human creativity and that humans only follow animal models. He said: «In some of the most important skills men have been pupils of animals. Of the spider in weaving and healing, of the swallow in house-building, and of song-birds, swan and nightingale in singing, by imitation»

(Demokrit B, 154). Following Democritus, human beings became civilized by imitating animals.

Other historical references can be found in philosophy as well as in the natural sciences at least since the late 18th century. In 1784 Herder identified an inert art drive as well as artistry in animals and linked these phenomena to mechanical skill and sensual responsiveness (2002). In the 19th century Charles Darwin famously attested a sense of beauty to animals (Darwin, 1871: 359). And in the early 20th century some art historians believed the so-called «Schmucktrieb» (decorative instinct/ornament drive) to be a biological foundation of art and creativity. The geologist Wilhelm Paulcke for example stated that «the sense of form, sense of beauty, and predisposition for aesthetics can be found in animals, especially regarding their own beauty or the judgement about the beauty of others» (Paulcke, 1923: 3). More recently scholars of evolutionary aesthetics like Winfried Menninghaus are looking for the ontology of art in biology (Menninghaus, 2011). They assume that human art emerged from animal activities. Music is thought to have developed from bird song, architecture from animal dwellings; dance from courtship display. And philosopher Gilles Deleuze reads animal traces or animal signs as some kind of expression of artistic agency (Deleuze, 1998). He compared the marking of a territory with the birth of art itself. Marking can be a certain posture, sitting, standing, singing, or changing of color of an animal. According to Deleuze all these forms of expression are related and even prior to the essential features of art like line, color, or song. And the current discourse about the culture of non-human animals as it has been put forward by primatologists and philosophers explicitly allows for the idea of animal aesthetics as well. In the age of posthumanism and animal studies, the difference between humans and the other animals is getting more and more blurred. That paves the way towards an easier acceptance of the concept of art by animals.

An extension of the subject matter of art history that includes animal productions would mean that dear and customary aesthetic categories, value systems and beliefs concerning art, artistry and authorship have to be abandoned. In terms of judgement concerning the art-worthiness of animal productions as part of interspecies work, it is necessary to differentiate between whether primacy is given to the intention of the intellectual creator or the aesthetic experience. For it is certainly possible to enjoy the aesthetic formative ca-

capacity of animals in a similar way to a human artwork, to recognize it as the expression of a particular agential capacity and to admire it for its formal virtuosity or the alterity of the underlying mind.

If art is thought to be an attribute of humankind, non-human animals are automatically excluded from being art makers let alone artists. Maybe it is not even helpful to call animal paintings, animal sculptures or animal sounds art because of the anthropocentrism of the very term that does not have meaning for animals anyway. On the other hand, the definition of what counts as art and who is an artist has always been preliminary and mutable. So, there is no compelling reason not to call animal productions animal art and to call the creative capacities of animals *animal artistic agency*.

Of course, animals who are trained and manipulated in order to collaborate are always at risk of becoming mere extensions of human agency. But it does not have to be like that. Especially artists who share their lives with animal companions and work with them on a daily basis seem to be able to engage in attentive and meaningful relations with them.

Madeleine Boyd, for example, works with her ponies Picasso and Prince, with the purpose of providing space for an animal – and in this case equid – perspective. Boyd works with horses as this species has lived through a long-lasting and intense co-evolution with the human, and her own horse-keeping renders possible an immersive approach. Her work consists of videos recorded by body cameras attached both to her own head and to that of her horse Prince [8], of paintings to which the ponies contribute hoof print structures, and of their performances together, as part of which the pony takes the lead and determines the path to be taken. Boyd attempts to render conceivable a relational aesthetic practice neither situated in the context of equestrian sport or horse breeding nor predetermined by scientific approaches to the behavior of horses. She renders public her private interspecies everyday life, marked by empathy, playing and learning together. But her observations focusing attentively on these aspects also reflect the specific agency of the horses.

The artist duo Hörner/Antlfinger, too, work in a respectful, cooperative manner with their companion animals Clara and Karl, with whom they form an artist collective named CMUK<sup>7</sup> (2015). They consider their practice with the two grey parrots as a collaboration and share as studio site a working table diagonally divided in the middle. Birds and



8. Madeleine Boyd with Prince the Pony, *27 minutes*, 2016, Single channel digital video; 27 mins, digital tablet, horse hair and mixed media, © Madeleine Boyd

humans each have one half of a table and the birds are allowed to fly freely in the big loft. It is intended that the work in progress *Studio destructiones* gives space for joint as well as for separate human and avian creative productions. In this prepared environment, the two pairs can lead not only parallel, but intertwined lives. For their project *CMUK (weekly)* [9], for instance, Hörner/Antlfinger leave the newspaper ZEIT's weekly magazine to their animal companions for a reworking. The interventions of the birds include scratching and biting, they make tears and holes in the paper and thus create interesting vistas and see-throughs in the shredded journal which open up surprising insights in the relations of text and images on the various pages. The birds are certainly not aware of the formal and cognitive attraction or the art-historical reference point of the decollage. Nevertheless, the handing over of the newspapers is a ritual likely valued by the birds, and their gnawing, nibbling and scraping constitutes an enjoyable activity. It might not have any biological function but just be a playful, purposeless and self-rewarding occupation – and some people might define art as well as playful, purposeless and self-rewarding. The parrots decide if and when they want to work with the journal and how they want

to use it. Hörner/Antlfinger as well as Madeleine Boyd share their daily lives with birds or horses and know about their interests and needs. They treat them with respect and politeness. They discover in the animal activity an aesthetic – or at least aesthetically usable – quality they consider as art-worthy. It is true, though, that the art market is constructed on human agreements and that it cannot be figured out by animals. So, it stays to the humans and their artistic intervention to decide how to hand-over the collaborative work to the art scene. They frame their collaborations with their animal companions and they present it in exhibitions.

Jacob von Uexküll, whose theories have recently received increasing re-recognition, has emphasized how each species lives in a particular environment fundamentally distinguished from the world of perception of any other species. But if in the works discussed, the environments of animals overlap with those of humans, there is a poetic encounter generating new aesthetic experiences and, in the best case, ethical relations. Certainly, artists interacting with animals, too, remain caught in their environment. Unconsciously, they demand from the animals involuntarily engaged as actors an assimilation to a human understanding of art. Nevertheless, in

interspecies art, animals lose their traditional status as merely consumable exhibition objects. Even if the imbalance of power between humans and animals stays intact, non-human animals in art are not necessarily incapable of acting. Often their agency manifests itself in acts of resistance or destruction. Both can have creative or productive facets. Sometimes animal agency not only enables an artwork, but it also limits it. If non-human animals refuse to participate, there won't be an artwork or at least the artwork will be very different. Hence an engagement with interspecies art can open up possibilities for a relational art in which the encounter of and exchange between individuals of different species can be recognized as a productive and creative value. Artists' experimentation with interspecies art may lead to a growing acceptance of animal agency in non-artistic fields, too. An increasing visibility of animal agency and efficacy might, then, emerge as a political instrument towards further undermining a hierarchical human exceptionalism. If other animals were perceived less as instinct-driven beings, if they were instead perceived as creative, social beings with whom it is possible to interact, then such a paradigm shift could contribute to their ethical recognition. On the one hand, artists involved in interspecies art instrumentalize the animals involved, yet on the other hand, they recognize that the latter's cognitive, communicative and creative abilities have a world-generating, aesthetic dimension. So the growing visibility of animal art and the acceptance or assumption of animal artistic agency might be a tool to challenge the hubris of human superiority.



9. CMUK, *Weekly*, since 2014, décollage/photo, 40 x 60 cm  
(photo: Ute Hörner/Mathias Antfingler, © Hörner/Antfingler)

## Notes

- 1 I curated this exhibition together with Cassandra Nakas, Antonia Ulrich, and Friedrich Weltzien.
- 2 I curated this exhibition together with Friedrich Weltzien.
- 3 Experiments with painting or drawing apes are rather common in ethology and psychology, Nadezhda Ladygina-Kohts being one of the pioneers of the field with her studies with chimpanzees from 1913 onwards in a Moscow zoo.
- 4 Projects with drawing, music-making or filming animals will probably grow in the future – and not only in the art world. By now zoos all over the world have discovered whistling orangutans or painting seals as a fundraising instrument. Elephants as well as their mahouts increasingly earn their living by selling trunk-painted pictures. In contrast to human workers those animals do not have a say. They are not able to choose an activity that is worthwhile for them. Training apes and elephants to paint could well be similar to the drilling of animals in order to let them do tricks in the circus. It is even somewhat cynical to make animals raise money for the very institutions that hold them captive.
- 5 To judge an elephant's painting for the handling of color in order to assess their virtuosity as artists is not very meaningful: Elephants have only two color-receptors whereas human beings have three so that their color vision is not just very different but even restricted.
- 6 In 2012, as a participant at documenta 13, Kristina Buch created a butterfly garden called *The Lover*. On a raised bed covering 100m<sup>2</sup>, she planted 180 different plant species, and subsequently cultivated 40 different butterfly species in her studio, whom she then released into the garden. Her list of materials used for the installation features not only the scaffolding structure, earth and plants, but also the «wind, the possibility of freedom, uncertainty and hope, the infinite abyss of vastness, the ephemeral and hopeless, a beginning but no end». The butterflies were not noted on the list of materials. And most visitors of the documenta, were not able to spot in the flowerbed any of the butterflies released. If animals can, as it was obviously the case, emancipate themselves from the artwork they were involved in and can actively escape the given frame, they may yet emerge as the true actors.
- 7 The work came to an end in 2018 when Karl died.

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