



Dorota Łagodzka,
PhD

is an art historian, cultural studies scholar, and assistant professor at the “Artes Liberales” Faculty of the University of Warsaw, where she is co-initiator and coordinator of the BA program in Anthropozoology. The author of numerous publications on cultural studies of animals and contemporary art. She has curated four exhibitions, including “Ecce Animalia” at the Polish Sculpture Center in Orońsko.
dorota.lagodzka@al.uw.edu.pl

Can Animals Be Artists?

MONKEY PAINTING

Some prefer bold colors and broad brushstrokes; others go for more subtle blots and zigzags. Non-human art still holds much mystery for us. Will greater recognition for primates as artists deepen our respect for them, or lead to their further exploitation?

Dorota Łagodzka

Faculty of “Artes Liberales,” University of Warsaw

Starting in the mid-twentieth century, visual artists began increasingly involving animals in their work, utilizing animal bodies on a larger scale – not only as components of adhesives, canvases, or dyes but also using deceased animals as the material of the artwork itself. At the same time, there was a trend toward incorporating living animals into art, as participants, collaborators, or even as creators. This included the appearance of “monkey painting,” where primates, kept in human-like environments, began creating paintings. This phenomenon was not so much part of the art mainstream within cultural institutions or art criticism but was more aligned with studies in primate cognitive abilities, perception psychology, zoopsychology, and research into the evolutionary roots of art and aesthetic sense. The creative activities



KATARZYNA WEJCHERT

Chimpanzee Lucy at the Warsaw Zoo (with thanks to the Municipal Zoological Garden in Warsaw for sharing this photo)

of primates also became a pop-culture curiosity and a tool for promoting zoos. Occasionally, it has served as a means to discredit contemporary art – such as abstract expressionism – through comparisons with animal-created artwork.

Animal esthetics

Evolutionary aesthetics traces the origins of aesthetic sense back to well before the advent of art, primarily in the appreciation of natural beauty in bodies and landscapes. Philosopher and art historian Wolfgang Iser addressed certain gaps in this approach in his 2004 article “Animal Aesthetics,” where he explored when purely aesthetic perception might have first emerged in evolution. Invoking Darwin, Iser argued that an animal’s sense of aesthetics should not be reduced solely to practical functions. He suggested that animals possess a kind of pure aesthetics, one sourced in beauty *per se* and grounded in the pleasure of experiencing it. Similarly, evolutionary biologist and ornithologist Richard O. Prum, in his 2017 book *The Evolution of Beauty*, contended that animals’ aesthetic sense need not be subordinate to adaptive processes; it can be independent of those functions, or even run counter to them.

The most well-known researcher of art among primates (or more precisely: *non-human* primates) is zoologist and artist Desmond Morris, who documented an experiment with a young chimpanzee named Congo in his book, *The Biology of Art*, proposing – as the title suggests – a theory of the biology of art, rooted in human art’s evolutionary origins. In his later book, *The Artistic Ape*, Morris contextualized Congo within the history of research on animal visual perception and the artistic creativity of primates and elephants, calling it “non-human art.” He compared it to children’s art, tribal art, and prehistoric art, demonstrating that animal art aligns with the evolutionary development of cognitive, creative, and cultural abilities. To this comparison, one might add *art brut* and, more broadly, non-professional art.

The boundary between nature and art, between human and non-human animals, has grown increasingly blurred. Contemporary artists are more often positioning animals as participants and co-authors of their work.

Art historian Thierry Lenain, in contrast, in his book *Monkey Painting*, denies the status of “art” to primate-created paintings, contending that the creative process for animals is limited to the satisfaction gained from disrupting the pictorial field – an interest focused on marking a blank surface. Meanwhile, Jane Desmond has noted important differences between the painting practices of primates and other animal species, also exploring these phenomena



A painting by a chimpanzee at Leintalzo Schwaigern, Germany

in the context of the animal art market. In Poland, Monika Bakke, in her book *Bio-transfiguracje: Sztuka i estetyka* [Bio-transfigurations: Art and Aesthetics of Posthumanism], argues that artifacts labeled “animal art,” though created by animals, are human-initiated and merely resemble widely recognized art objects.

My own perspective on animal art is most aligned with that of Morris, albeit supplemented by Iser’s concept of animal aesthetics and Prum’s theory of the evolution of beauty (though they referenced bowerbirds – the ornamental creativity of these birds is a topic deserving of a separate article).

The history of monkey painting research

As early as 1913, Nadezhda Ladygina-Kots began a three-year experiment with a young male chimpanzee named Joni. When she gave him paper and a pencil, he eagerly began to draw. According to Desmond Morris in *The Artistic Ape*, this marks the first known case of an animal creating images. By comparing Joni’s development to that of her son Rudi, Kots observed that, unlike a human child, the chimpanzee never reached a stage of attempting to replicate reality. However, she did notice that over time, Joni made progress in drawing abstract forms. Moreover, he drew with more enthusiasm than her son, often asking for a pencil and showing dissatisfaction when it was taken away.

Kots’s research went uncontinued for decades – until 1951, when American psychologist Paul Schiller began an experiment with an older female chimpanzee named Alpha at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Florida. Schiller observed not only a progression in Alpha’s style of drawing shapes and lines but also

certain recurring patterns. By giving her sheets with various pre-drawn shapes, he examined her responses in relation to the pictorial field. For instance, Alpha kept her drawings within the page's borders, marked the paper's corners, tried to complete incomplete shapes, balanced asymmetrical shapes, and marked out central figures, such as by symmetrically outlining each side of a triangle. Although Schiller's goal was to study perception psychology, his methodology became a foundation for later projects by Bernhard Rensch and Desmond Morris. From 1954 to 1958, they analyzed primate painting from an aesthetic perspective, sparking the theory of the biology of art.

The medium of paint was first introduced to primates a little earlier, in 1953, in the context of scientific studies in the United States. Photographer Lilo Hess was working with a young female chimpanzee named Christine, whom he encouraged to draw on a wall with chalk. However, she responded most enthusiastically to paint, which she loved spreading across the paper with her hands. Around the same time, two other chimpanzees in the Baltimore Zoo – Betsy, a female,

Animals as creative agents have, from the latter half of the twentieth century, undoubtedly become part of the landscape of postmodern transformations in art.

and Doctor Tom, a male – were also given the opportunity to paint. Their finger-painting performances became a TV sensation.

Shortly thereafter, Rensch in Germany and Morris in the United Kingdom began scientific studies focused on animal aesthetics. In 1954, at the Institute of Zoology at the University of Münster, Rensch initiated research on the passive and active aesthetic abilities of a capuchin monkey named Pablo, noting connections between his findings and the pre-cultural origins of art. He later expanded his study to explore visual preferences across various animals, including capuchins (an Old World species of monkey), chimpanzees, as well as corvids and fish. His research found these animals favored symmetrical, rhythmic compositions with recurring patterns.

Pablo discovered on his own that rubbing a piece of chalk against his cell wall left a visible mark. He was later provided with crayons, a paintbrush, and paints. He attempted to paint using various movements, creating parallel and curved lines, as well as

rhythmic shapes formed by forward and backward strokes. There are records of his responses to pre-marked shapes; in one instance, he appeared to be attempting a clumsy copy a circular shape.

Around the same time, at the Zoological Society of London, Morris conducted studies with a male chimpanzee named Congo. Morris started this project in 1956, when Congo was two years old, and continued until Congo matured, becoming too strong and energetic for the method to remain safe and effective. Morris seated Congo in an enlarged highchair for feeding children, equipped with a broad tray to draw on, and consistently positioned the paper in the same place relative to the chimp. This allowed Morris to track Congo's reactions to different areas of the visual field while keeping the directions – top, bottom, right, and left – consistent.

Like in Kots's work, Morris guided the chimp during the drawing process (whereas in Schiller's experiments with the adult female chimp Alpha, the researcher had remained outside the enclosure while she drew). Congo quickly learned to hold a pencil or crayon in a way similar to humans, allowing for a full range of motion. He enthusiastically began drawing whenever given a crayon and paper, showing clear frustration if the supplies were taken away before he was finished. Once done, however, he refused to continue on the same sheet and insisted on a fresh one. Importantly, Congo received no treats or rewards for his artwork, indicating that the act of drawing itself was enjoyable and engaging for him.

Moreover, like Rensch, Morris also expanded on Schiller's studies on reactions to shapes and lines within a visual field. Morris noticed that, from the outset, Congo was far more captivated by the effects he could achieve with paintbrushes and colors than with pencils or crayons. He documented Congo's artistic development through several phases, including a period when the complexity of his abstract forms reached its peak. Morris observed Congo's basic sense of composition, a preference for balanced symmetry in his drawings, and recurring motifs, the most prominent and intricate of which Morris named the "fan pattern." Congo's responses to pre-marked shapes were, in essence, quite similar to Alpha's.

Between 1957 and 1959, five years after the first painting gorilla at the Basel Zoo, a large female gorilla named Sophie in Rotterdam created drawings of subtle blots and zigzags. As Thierry Lenain describes them, Sophie's drawings were so distinctive that they were easily identifiable as hers. In 1958, several other apes at the Amsterdam Zoo took up drawing, including a gentle chimpanzee named Bella, who painted with intense focus. Bella, known for her mild temperament, rarely showed frustration, even when her treats were withheld – unless her artwork was taken from her at

the wrong moment. Painting soon became a common enrichment activity in zoos, which also served as an engaging form of promotion for the institutions.

The chimpanzee Moja, who communicated using American Sign Language (ASL), created abstract paintings featuring various splotches and lines, which she described as representing a bird and a cherry. The gorillas Koko and Michael, who learned a modified form of ASL, also painted. Koko preferred working at a table or on an easel, while Michael liked to lay paper on the floor. According to the Gorilla Foundation, their paintings often depicted elements from their surroundings or expressed emotions. When given a full palette of colors, Koko selected pink and orange to symbolize love. After seeing a photograph of a valley with a stream surrounded by flowers, she painted in greens, blacks, pinks, and blues, describing it with the signs “pink pink stink nice drink.” For Koko, “stink” referred to a flower, and “drink” meant water. When shown a bouquet of flowers, Michael created a painting full of colorful spots, describing it as “stink gorilla more.”

Although the paintings shown on the Gorilla Foundation’s website are not part of a formal scientific study, they emerged on the sidelines of psychologist Francine Patterson’s research into apes’ communication abilities in human sign language. Patterson’s relationship with Koko evolved into a deep, lifelong bond that went beyond scientific study. While Patterson’s methods have sometimes met with controversy, it’s clear that Koko showed a capacity to link visual and linguistic signs and to connect these signs to both concrete and abstract meanings. Even Thierry Lenain, who denies ape paintings the status of art, acknowledges that training might help cultivate apes’ ability for graphic symbolization. However, Lenain only refers to Moja’s case, without considering Koko, Michael, or the bonobos Kanzi and Panbanisha – who, in research done by Susan Savage-Rumbaugh, learned to associate spoken words with corresponding graphic symbols.

In most primate sanctuaries today, animals that have been through challenging experiences – like having been former lab or circus animals – are regularly given the chance to paint. Not all chimpanzees show interest in this creative activity or enjoy it to the same extent; as with humans, it’s a matter of individual preference. Available online videos from these sanctuaries and accounts from caretakers reveal that primates have varied artistic temperaments and styles. For example, Cheetah from the Save the Chimps sanctuary in Fort Pierce, Florida, paints with broad, sweeping strokes, typically covering much of the canvas and often scrubbing the brush forcefully across it. She even enjoys spreading paint on furniture and walls or splattering it around. Brent from Chimp Haven in



CHIMPANZEE CONGO, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Keithville, Louisiana, painted with his tongue, creating relatively regular, rhythmic compositions. Jamie from Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest in the state of Washington prefers painting on unconventional surfaces, like walls or toys, and often incorporates objects like sunflower seeds into her artwork, creating collages. Santino from Furuvik Zoo in Sweden paints slowly and with focus, squeezing paint from the tube onto paper and carefully spreading it. Chiffon from the Chimfunshi Orphanage in Zambia often loads her brush with more than one color at a time. In Poland, a chimpanzee named Lucy at the Warsaw Zoo created paintings displayed at the Museum of Warsaw Praga in 2018, whereas Raja, an orangutan at the Gdańsk Zoo, enjoys drawing with crayons, and her artwork is exhibited in the zoo’s primate pavilion.

A painting by Congo the chimpanzee

Artistic collaboration between humans and chimpanzees

Another context for interpreting chimpanzee painting lies in the evolution of the concept of art itself, as shifting boundaries and expanded definitions unfolded throughout the twentieth century with successive avant-garde movements. Conceptualism, Dadaism, abstract expressionism, and postmodernism – along with the audiovisual and performative turns, *land art*, and *bio art* – have all played an important role in incorporating non-human animals into the processes of human art creation. These changes have made it difficult to resolutely exclude chimpanzee art from

A drawing by a chimpanzee
at Leintalzooschwaigern,
Germany



HEINZ HACHEL (KUNSTBÜRO DÜSSELDORF). CC BY-SA 4.0. VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (2)

the field of art, especially as professional human artists have engaged in inclusive artistic collaborations with them.

In the early 1980s, Austrian painter Arnulf Rainer contacted Werner Müller, the owner of a theater-circus featuring ice-skating chimpanzees, who also painted as part of enrichment activities to alleviate boredom. Rainer observed Müller's painting chimpanzees, borrowed some of their paintings, and attempted to imitate them, aiming to learn from the animals. According to Lenain, comparing Rainer's works to those of the chimpanzees reveals a human inability to create a purely instinctive, concept-free brushstroke. Rainer's interpretations of the apes' paintings, along with the originals, were recently exhibited at Kunsthalle Darmstadt in the exhibition "Animalia."

In 1987, painter Lucien Tassarolo engaged in an artistic collaboration with Kunda, a 14-year-old chimpanzee from the zoo in Fréjus, France. They painted

together on a large, vertically hung cardboard. Tassarolo allowed Kunda to take the initiative, creating freely, while he added small elements in between. In this way, they created, for example, a bird adorned with a fan-like pattern painted by Kunda – a motif common among chimpanzees, which Morris described as the favorite shape of Congo, a famous painting chimp. Kunda displayed exceptional intelligence, attentiveness, and focus. Tassarolo recalled that she would often enthusiastically accept his additions, though at times she would paint over them, insisting that he add something else. Both signed the finished paintings – Tassarolo with his signature and Kunda with her handprint.

Anthropomorphization or empowerment?

In the mid-20th century, artists began incorporating the natural world, with its aesthetic qualities, into art. The aesthetic value of animal creations is increasingly appreciated by contemporary artists. The line between natural creations and art, between humans and non-human animals, is becoming blurred. Modern human creators are more frequently positioning animals as participants and co-creators in their work.

One might wonder, however, to what extent this practice anthropomorphizes or symbolically instrumentalizes animals. Do animals remain mere material for the conceptual work of human artists, simply by being introduced into art? What status does chimpanzee painting truly hold within the fluid and ever-expanding boundaries of art?

Animals as creative agents are now undeniably part of the landscape of postmodern transformations in art from the latter half of the twentieth century to today. Viewing art as radically separate from nature, as a purely human endeavor – and thus positioning humans and their culture outside nature – not only limits artistic and intellectual perspectives but also overlooks available evidence of creative activity by both humans and animals.

From a visual culture perspective, ape paintings offer an aesthetically fascinating record of the visual diversity in brushstroke patterns. The more I myself study ape paintings, the fewer reasons I see not to compare them with the creations of human children, *art brut*, or abstract art. Without making a definitive claim, I am increasingly inclined to refer to the drawing and painting work of apes as art, without quotation marks or question marks. Yet the question remains: Could the status of apes as artists translate into greater respect for them and more empowered treatment, or does it merely expose them to greater risk of scientific or commercial exploitation? ■

Further reading:

Lenain T., *Monkey Painting*, 1997.

Morris D., *The Biology of Art*, 1966.

Morris D., *The Artistic Ape*, 2013.

Welsch W., *Animal Aesthetics*, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2, 2004, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0002.015>