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Is There a History for the "Art" Made by Animals? Considering Non-human Agencies in Art History

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Recent and accumulating evidence indicates that forms of culture permeate the lives of a wide variety of animal species and may have far-reaching implications for art history. Based on this evidence, I propose in this paper that aspects of the material culture of certain animals should be considered "art" within the discipline's debates. To this end, I draw on a survey of literature related to the topic, as well as on the analysis of examples of artifacts produced by animals, sometimes in partnership with humans. Among other aims, I seek to explore the resonances of human agency in non-human species as a means of countering Homo sapiens narcissism and promoting creative entanglements. By discussing parallels across the usual taxonomic divides, the paper ultimately aims to expand art history's imagination and field of study.

Keywords: animals, art, agency, art historiography, posthumanism

Introduction

Despite mounting evidence that cultural practices are not exclusive to *Homo sapiens*, the discipline of art history has remained largely indifferent to the material production of non-human species. Varied artifacts - paintings and drawings, stone tools and woven structures, mandala-like compositions and elaborately decorated constructions—created by animals and sometimes similar to what humans produce have been documented across diverse species. Yet none of these has found a place in art history's canonical narratives. The present paper seeks to address this gap, arguing that at least a portion of these artifacts ought to be considered "art" within the discipline's debates. By presenting a range of case-studies and engaging with the recent interdisciplinary scholarship on animal cognition, culture, and material production, this paper aims to expand the imagination of art history toward the recognition of non-human "artistic" agency.

Readers steeped in the anthropocentric worldview that predominates in Western culture will likely find such a proposal disturbing since it may appear to them as a direct assault on the privileged status accorded, in human societies, to concepts such as culture and art. The abandonment of the long tradition that affirms such concepts as the exclusive and defining predicates of *Homo sapiens*—as a species superior to all others—can provoke considerable unease. Aristotle (1998, 1253a), for example, stated that *logos*—understood as speech, reason, and rational discourse—separates humans from the rest of the animal world. René Descartes (1998), who grounded his worldview in the sovereignty of the thinking mind, conceived of animals as machines of flesh, stripped of both thought and consciousness. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, "mainstream anthropologists thought

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that humans might have arisen from a 'revolution' in cognition that ruptured us from the mute animal world" (Kim, 2024). An example of this type of orientation in art history is proposed by Ernst Grosse, who, in his book *The Beginnings of Art* (*Die Anfänge der Kunst*), from 1894, "recognised art or aesthetic sensibility as a human universal, a criterion to distinguish humans from animals" (Juneja, 2023, p. 59). More recently, according to Monica Juneja's assessment (2023, p. 75), "the capacity to produce and appreciate art [as] the outcome of a significant evolutionary leap in human cognition and neurological structure," has been advocated by proponents of the so-called neuroarthistory (Onians, 2007). In short, as Micah Tewers summarized at the 36th CIHA World Congress in Lyon, France, in 2024, today "few will deny that art begins with humans, that art is even what makes us human, the emblem of our transcendence over nature into culture" (Tewers, 2024).

However, such claims to human exceptionalism have proven increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of scientific discoveries that have reshaped our understanding of other species since the mid-twentieth century. Particularly from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, there has been an exponential increase in interest in animal cognition and communication. Studies on animal cultures have also gained impressive *momentum*, to the point that, in 2021, a paper published in *Science* challenged the entrenched view that culture belongs solely to the human species. In this paper, Andrew Whiten (2021) reviewed the recent and growing body of evidence demonstrating that cultures—understood as behavioral traditions propagated through social learning—permeate the lives of a vast diversity of animal species.

In this sense, the data provided by studies on animal languages are particularly revealing. For example, sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) possess a communication system based on sequences of clicks called *codas*. A subset of *codas* has been shown to encode information about the identity of each whale that "speaks," but *codas* also exhibit contextual and combinatorial structures, and can transmit other types of information (Sharma et al., 2024). New Caledonian crows (*Corvus moneduloides*)—one of the few birds that make tools, which I will refer to again below—live in complex social groups and transmit their techniques to their offspring through, among other means, their language. Investigations have shown that different groups of crows around the island of New Caledonia have distinct vocalizations, and these authentic dialects can help explain the cultural differences in toolmaking between groups (Bluff, Kacelnik, & Rutz, 2010). The scholarship on animal communication and language has expanded considerably in recent decades, rendering any exhaustive survey of the field well beyond the scope of the present discussion (see Slobodchikoff, 2012; Wohlleben, 2016).

In linguistics, the most recent approaches aiming to connect humans and non-humans in reciprocal cultural exchange have drawn on artificial intelligence tools, particularly large language models and machine learning systems trained on non-human communication data (Parshley, 2023; Kim, 2024). Several significant initiatives have gained prominence in this field. This is the case of the *Earth Species Project*,[1] a team of artificial intelligence scientists, biologists, and animal conservation specialists who are assembling a corpus of records across a variety of species, and training machine learning models on the resulting datasets. A further example is the *Cetacean Translation Initiative*,[2] which aims to decipher the language of a single species, the sperm whales mentioned above.

Proponents of these initiatives lend a certain moral urgency to their efforts, postulating that "talking" to animals can foster in humans a deeper empathic connection with the natural world and thus contribute to their

[1] Available at: https://www.earthspecies.org/ (accessed: May 29, 2026).
[2] Available at: https://www.projectceti.org/ (accessed: May 29, 2026).

conservation. While such motivation demands critical scrutiny,[3] I justify the present paper on broadly similar grounds—though my focus will fall not on animal language, but on another dimension of animal cultures: their material artifacts. My central hypothesis is that at least the artifacts that I will present throughout this paper ought to be understood as "art" within the debates of the discipline of art history. The choice of my examples accords with diverse criteria, such as formal complexity, communicative function, transgenerational transmission, and circulation within the art field. In the sections that follow, I will strive to historicize my hypothesis and develop it through a discussion of "artistic" artifacts produced by a variety of animal species.

Before doing so, however, I would like to anticipate a foreseeable critique, concerning the very use of the term "art" to qualify the material production of animals. Such a use can, and indeed must, be criticized as anthropocentric. Inevitably, both making and writing about art generally collide with the problem of how to overcome a deeply entrenched anthropocentrism. As Juneja (2023, p. 285) stresses: "Learning to look at the human world also from non-human points of view is beset with the contradiction that human modes of knowing are invariably mediated by languages that are ultimately human." From the standpoint of this critique, my proposal to recognize that animals make "art" would itself constitute proof of an inability to see and understand beyond the limits of anthropocentrism.

However, rather than simply remaining silent on the matter, what I will strive to do is to follow indications such as those of Jane Bennett (2010) and reverse the prevailing narrative in ecocritical studies, as well as "cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—[precisely] to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world" (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi). I will do so because I am convinced that the advantages of this approach outweigh its relative inadequacy, since it carries significant political implications, to which I will return in my final remarks.

A Brief Historiography of "Art" Made by Animals

Just as framing animal vocalizations as authentic languages may be instrumental to conservation efforts, acknowledging the existence of animal-made "art" may represent a significant shift for art history. Indeed, what Giovanni Aloi (2016) termed the "animal revolution"—the burgeoning presence of animals within artistic production over the last two decades—has thus far left few traces within the discipline. For instance, nearly all recent textbooks attempting to provide comprehensive or global overviews of art history (e.g., Summers, 2003; Bell, 2007; Edwards & Wood, 2013; Davies et al., 2016; Stokstad & Cothren, 2018) remain resolutely indifferent to the aesthetic appreciation of non-human material artifacts.

Such neglect, though predominant, has not gone uncontested, and a handful of earlier authors more or less connected to art history had already entertained the notion that animals produce "art." Since the so-called European Renaissance, for instance, authors such as Giovanni Battista Gelli and Michel de Montaigne have conceptualized that "all human art is only a continuation and improvement of animal art […] animals and animal sensory perception are only different in degree from the art appreciation of humans and that some may even be better suited" (Pfisterer, 2011, pp. 221-222). This paradigm was reshaped from the nineteenth century onwards by Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection. In his account of sexual selection (Darwin, 1871),

[3] As Leo Kim (2024) skeptically reflects, "subjected to even the mildest of scrutiny, it becomes clear that this salvific faith in technology betrays less a commitment to transforming ourselves for the better than it does a lazy desire to double down on the same traits that landed us in this mess: a persistent belief in the power of individual reason, an overreliance on techno-fixes, and a constant need to shape the world in our own image."

which posited aesthetic preference as a driver of evolutionary change, criteria of beauty, ornamentation, and the development of an aesthetic sense—particularly regarding bodily decoration—assumed pivotal importance. Thus, the production and appreciation of art could be interpreted as biological outcomes of natural selection, recognizing these capacities as inherent to the animal kingdom (Scott, 1895-1896; Schroeter, 1914; Clay, 1917).

In the early twentieth century, Johannes Emmer (1910) opened his discussion of what he termed "proto-history of art" ("Urgeschichte der Kunst") with illustrations of the beautifully sculpted "natural" art forms of organisms such as protozoa and corals (Figure 1). These images were derived from the lithographic plates produced by biologist Ernst Haeckel and lithographer Adolf Giltsch, originally published in *Art Forms in Nature* (*Kunstformen der Natur*, 1899-1904). While Emmer and Haeckel were both captivated by the complexity, diversity, and beauty of natural forms, they viewed them primarily as sources of artistic inspiration for humans, or as aesthetic objects to be admired. This perspective encouraged a rapprochement between the natural sciences and art, but ultimately left little room to account for the potential "artistic" agency of non-human organisms themselves.

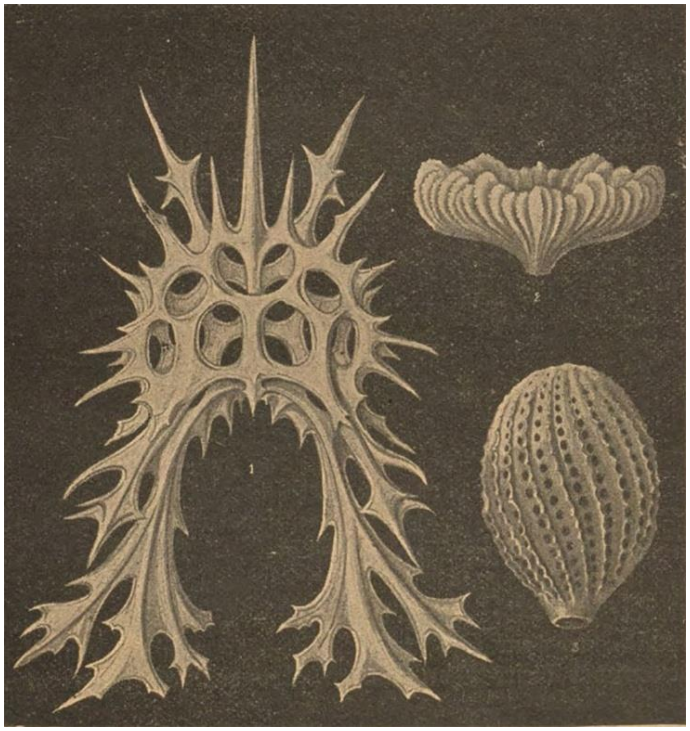

Figure 1. Drawings by Ernst Haeckel and Adolf Giltsch reproduced in *Illustrierte Kunstgeschichte*, by Johannes Emmer. According to Haeckel, the species are: (1) *Elaphospyris cervicornis*; (2) *Leptocyathus elegans*; (3) *Cyrtophormis spiralis.* Source: Emmer, 1910, p. 3.

A more promising approach was proposed by the philosopher and aesthetician Étienne Souriau in his 1960s book entitled *The Artistic Sense of Animals* (*Le sens artistique des animaux*). Souriau also refers to the generic notion that nature is a "creator of forms [whose] activity involves a hidden and profound art" (Souriau, 1965). But he also focuses on less diffuse artistic agencies, exploring the idea that animals possess their own artistic sensibility, and arguing that they have the capacity to create and appreciate forms of art in ways that are unique to them. Citing diverse examples—spider webs; nests of wasps, birds and rats; the "architecture" of termite mounds, etc.—Souriau suggests that the artistic sense of animals is a manifestation of the inherent duality of

organic life, according to which living beings do react to the environment but also transform it through their creative actions (Figure 2). The artistic sense of animals would be a function of their own behaviors, and their "art," in addition to being a means of survival, would often need to be understood as a mode of communication and social interaction.

Figure 2. The forms of a spider's web and of a termite mound, reproduced in photographs from *Le sens artistique des animaux*, by Étienne Souriau. He described the spider that built the web on the left as an "engineer," and asked whether the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí, in conceiving his Expiatory Temple of the Sagrada Família, might have drawn inspiration from "architectural" works such as those shown in the photograph on the right. Source: Souriau, 1965.

From a younger generation than Souriau's, the zoologist and ethologist Desmond Morris published, from the 1950s onward, the results of his studies on picture-making behavior among primates such as chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans.[4] In his book *The Biology of Art: A Study of the Picture-Making Behaviour of the Great Apes and Its Relationship to Human Art*, originally published in 1962, Morris documented the production of approximately one thousand paintings and drawings made by various primates, the most famous of which was the talented chimpanzee-artist Congo (1954-1964) (Figure 3). Since this production was not aimed at rewards, Morris argued that artistic creation was the result of an intrinsic impulse and constituted a voluntary and pleasurable experience for the animals he studied. In his substantial volume, he also dwelled on the formal analysis of the paintings and drawings, observing that the primates' compositions followed visual patterns of balance and harmony similar to those found in drawings by human children and in certain works of twentieth-century modern art.

[4] Morris was not, however, the pioneer of this kind of study. That distinction appears to belong to the Russian scientist Nadezhda Kohts, who, from the 1910s onward, explored the capacities of non-human primates in the perception and production of images. Further studies predating those of Morris are referenced in Pfisterer, 2011, p. 217, note 2.

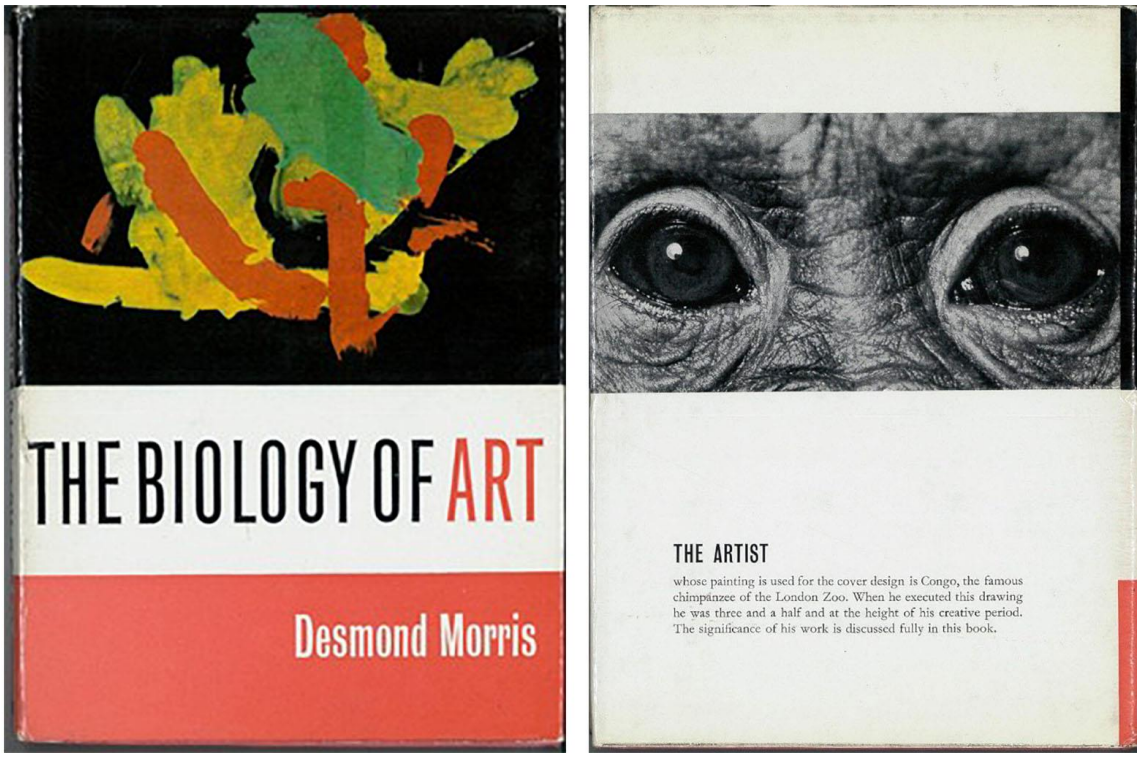

Figure 3. Cover of the first edition of *The Biology of Art*, by Desmond Morris, illustrated with a painting by Congo (1954-1964), whose gaze is captured in the photograph on the back cover. Source: Morris, 1962.

In the twenty-first century, we can find some authors unmistakably connected to art history discussing artifacts produced by non-human animals. This is the case of the aforementioned Tewers (2024) and of James Elkins who, starting from a suggestion found in the most recent edition of the traditional textbook *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (Kleiner, 2020, p. 16), drew attention to the Makapansgat cobble (Figure 4), a small jasperite stone discovered in a cave in the Makapan Valley, South Africa, in 1925 (Elkins, 2022). This cobble displays patterns of natural wear that make it resemble a rough version of a sculpted human face. Although the stone was not intentionally modified, some scholars suggest that an ancestor of humans (presumably an *Australopithecus*) may have recognized the face in it and carried it back to his or her cave. This fact would make the Makapansgat cobble one of the oldest *manuports*[5] ever found, dating back more than three million years (Bednarik, 1998). The appropriation of the cobble would thus be far older than the earliest known paintings or sculptures made by *Homo sapiens*, which date back only some forty thousand years.

A more extensive discussion of works of "art" created by non-human agents can be found in a recent paper by art historians Nina Amstutz (2021) and Deirdre Madeleine Smith (2023). Amstutz analyzes the way in which bowerbirds (belonging to the family *Ptilonorhynchidae*) construct their spectacular bowers, collecting and arranging objects from different sources to attract a mate (Figure 5). Drawing on this, she questions the humanist commitments of art history and explores what a post-humanist version of the discipline might look like, interconnecting several topics: Darwinian and post-Darwinian theories of aesthetic evolution; the role of natural history illustration in shaping artistic imagination; multispecies ethnographies; and the understandings of the

[5] In archaeology, the term *manuport* designates a natural object that has been moved from its original site by hominids. A manuport is usually distinguished by being made of a material clearly different from those found at the site where it was deposited.

Indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea regarding birds.[6] Smith's article, in turn, explicitly refers in its title to the "origins of animal art," and reviews the literature on paintings and drawings by non-human primates and on bowerbirds.

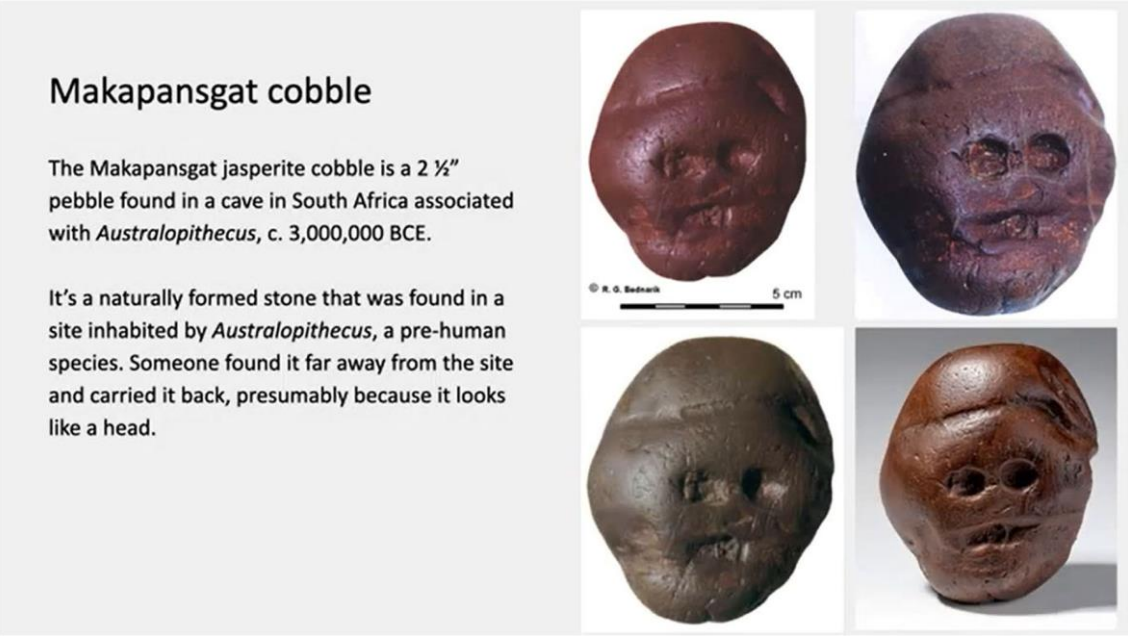

Figure 4. Still from the video *Concepts and Problems in the Visual Arts, Lecture H7: When Did Art Begin?*, by James Elkins, showing various views of the Makapansgat cobble. Source: Elkins, 2022.

Figure 5. Bower of a bowerbird (*Amblyornis inornata,* formerly *inornatus*), with its decorations. Photograph: Tim Laman. Source: Amstutz, 2021, p. 3.

[6] Amstutz's reference to the cosmologies of the Indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea is particularly noteworthy. Indeed, a fuller treatment of animal "art" would need to engage non-Western traditions that have long recognized the agency and creativity of non-human beings. This lies beyond the scope of the present paper, but it constitutes a necessary direction for future research.

The brief historiographical survey I have sought to present above clearly points to a non-homogeneous conception of the "art" produced by animals. On the one hand, we have those types of production in which animals make "art" in close contact with humans—such is the case, for instance, of the paintings and drawings made by Congo. A portion of this production clearly enters, however polemically, the institutionalized art field, as I will have occasion to demonstrate. On the other hand, there are those artifacts produced by animals without the deliberate collaboration of humans—such is the case of the bowers of bowerbirds. Respecting this basic division, in the following sections I discuss some aspects of these two distinct modes of production.

Shared Artistic Authorship Between Animals and Humans

On platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, it is common to encounter visual content featuring animals cast in the role of artists (Despret, 2016, pp. 195-201). In most cases, what we see are mammals of the most varied kinds—dogs, horses, elephants, dolphins, and so forth—painting in a distinctly human manner (Figure 6), a topic whose discussion could be traced back to the fables of Aesop (Janson, 1952).

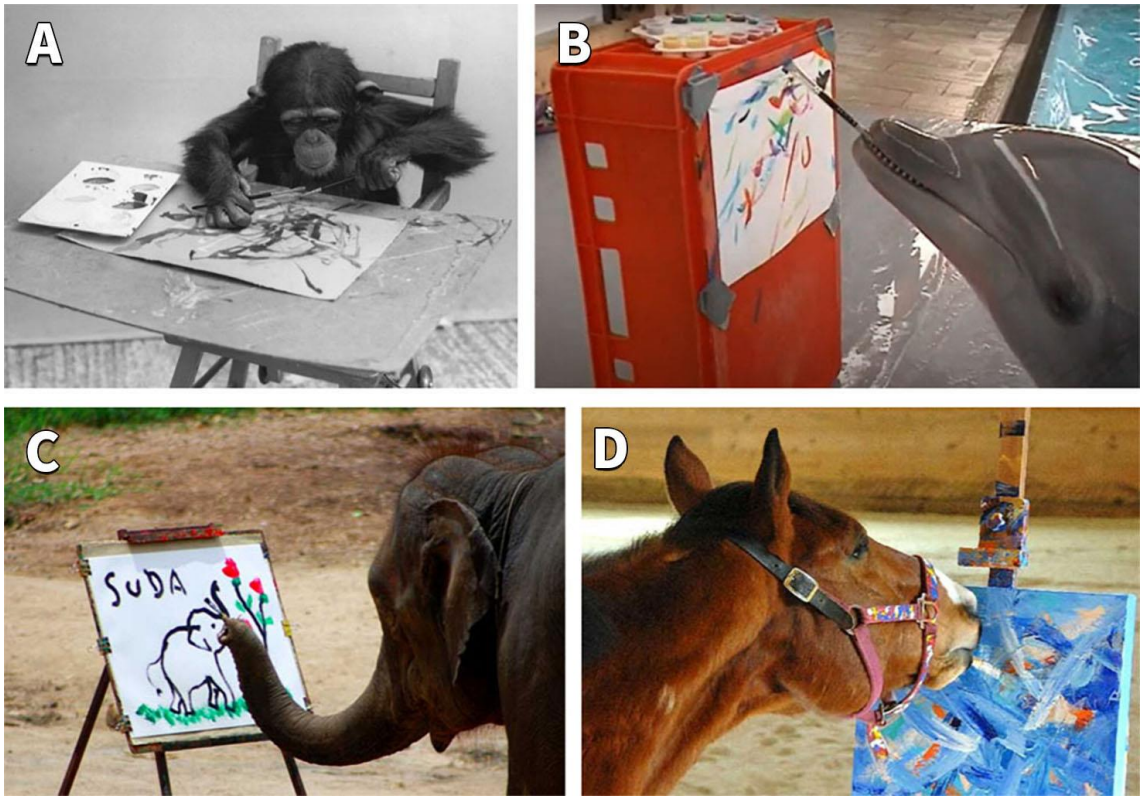

Figure 6. Mammal-painters: (A) the chimpanzee Congo. Source: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/dozens-paintings-1950s-chimp-artist-congo-go-sale-180973305/ (accessed May 29, 2026); (B) a dolphin participating in the Dolphin Painting Project. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_PjV8rRgcU (accessed May 29, 2026); (C) the elephant Suda, at Maetaeng Elephant Park. Source: https://youtu.be/foahTqz7On4?si=px-WqN1NLsY48Een (accessed May 29, 2026); (D) the horse Metro Meteor. Source: https://paulickreport.com/nl-list/metro-meteor-painting-ottb-dies-15-numerous-health-complications (accessed May 29, 2026).

The reception of this kind of production is typically derisive. In caricatures and cartoons, mocking references to this category of "art" made by animals are common, typically deployed to discredit styles of human art such as so-called abstract art. This mode of reception dates back at least to the early twentieth century, with the

exhibition of the painting *Sunset Over the Adriatic* (*Et le soleil s'endormit sur l'Adriatique*) at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris in 1910 (Figure 7). Although signed "J. R. Boronali," the work was produced almost entirely by a donkey named Lolo (Milan, 2020; Gerspacher, 2022). Lolo lived at the café *Le Lapin Agile*, located in the Montmartre neighborhood of Paris. On a certain day, two of the establishment's regulars—the writer Roland Dorgelès and the illustrator André Warnod—tied brushes to his tail, and the painting—marked by brushstrokes in shades of yellow, orange, red, and blue—was produced by the animal's tail energetic movements.

Figure 7. *Sunset Over the Adriatic* (*Et le soleil s'endormit sur l'Adriatique*), 1910 Painting by Lolo the Donkey, Roland Dorgelès and André Warnod, signed "J. R. Boronali" Source: https://www.jacquesleroux.fr/blog-culturel/laviergeduchancelierrolinjlr-hgph9 (accessed May 29, 2026).

Lolo's painting never entered the canon of art history and is today remembered mostly as a prank attributed to Dorgelès, who was close to artistic movements sometimes regarded as precursors of Dadaism, such as Fumism (Grojnowski & Sarrazin, 2011). Nevertheless, as Kevin Buist ([n.d.]) suggestively observes, "Lolo the Donkey could have provided a framework for the twentieth century avant-garde that would have been just as provocative and fruitful as [Marcel] Duchamp's urinal, focused not on the artist's ability to declare common objects to be art, but instead on the universality of the creative impulse among all creatures." Although Buist's counterfactual deserves fuller engagement than I can offer here, in what follows I will discuss other forms of reception and function of paintings made by animals, beyond those of criticizing aspects of modern art or simply entertaining humans.

The practice of painting by animals can serve, for instance, as a form of therapy that helps reduce the stress and boredom afflicting living beings kept in captivity, as in the case of the chimpanzee-painter Jimmy (1992-2019), who lived at the Niterói Zoo, located in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, and became widely known

in the early 2010s (Rogar, 2010). In the case of the paintings by Metro Meteor (2003-2018)—a racehorse who was forced to leave the track after developing a degenerative knee condition—the proceeds from the sales were used to fund experimental medical treatments and ultimately benefited institutions caring for other ailing horses.

The sale of paintings can also assist in the preservation of entire animal groups, as in the case of the elephant-painters kept in sanctuaries in Thailand. These sanctuaries were originally established in the late twentieth century, when the use of elephants in the logging industry was banned in the country and all domesticated elephants were left without work (Morris, 2009; Despret, 2016, pp. 1-6). As there was no means of returning them to the wild, the sanctuaries were created to shelter them; there, the elephants could also be exhibited to visitors for a small fee, which in turn helped sustain the sanctuaries. It was in order to enhance the appeal of these sanctuaries that performances staged by the elephants emerged, such as their live painting sessions. Part of this pictorial output began to be commercialized, including through online retailers such as the Elephant Art Gallery,[7] whose proceeds are directed toward supporting the conservation of both elephants and rhinoceroses.

These modes of commercialization point to a broader phenomenon: the fact that, since the mid-twentieth century, paintings created by animals have gained popularity among collectors and art enthusiasts, resulting in their co-optation, at a global level, by the institutionalized art field. In 1957, for instance, the paintings of Congo were exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Highly celebrated artists such as Pablo Picasso and Joan Mir ó acquired works by the primate; and, confronted with Congo's paintings—whose style the art critic Waldemar Januszczak (2005) described as "lyrical abstract expressionism"—the Surrealist painter Salvador Dal í is said to have remarked, with irony: "the hand of the chimpanzee is quasihuman; the hand of Jackson Pollock is totally animal!" (Daley, 2019).

Since then, further exhibitions and auctions have been held, where paintings made by animals have reached significant valuations. For example, in 2005, a collection of three tempera paintings by Congo was auctioned at Bonhams in London and sold for over 25,000 dollars (Dead Chimp's Art Sells Big, 2005). As "art" made by non-human agents became a commercial niche within the art field, ethical and legal questions also began to surface. This is particularly the case regarding the definition of legal frameworks concerning whether copyright protection can and/or should be extended to works created by animals in captivity - a question that has been the subject of a growing body of literature (Johnson, 2008; Gauthreaux, 2011; Keele, 2018).

If we adopt an institutional theory of art (Dickie, 1969), the paintings discussed above would already be irrefutably "art," by virtue of their relationships with gallerists, markets, and legitimizing discourses. Nevertheless, the widespread recognition of this status on the part of art historians remains incipient. A common argument against the acceptance of works of this kind as genuine art, advanced by scholars such as Horst Waldemar Janson (1959) and Thierry Lenain (1997), is that animals do not paint "spontaneously," but are conditioned to do so, in different ways and to different degrees, by their interaction with humans and with a technological apparatus—brushes, paints, canvases, and so forth—created by the latter. This is, in large measure, an equally irrefutable argument. Broadly speaking, the autonomy of animals in the act of painting is indeed limited. They are assisted and guided in this by their caregivers, who make canvases, brushes, and paints available to them; in almost all cases, for instance, it is the brush already loaded with a paint color chosen by a human that is placed in the animal's mouth, paw, or trunk. Without contact with humans, therefore, any of the animals referred to in this section would likely never have begun to paint.

[7] Available at: https://www.elephantartgallery.com (accessed: May 29, 2026).

Even so, this argument does not close the discussion on the autonomy of animals and/or the authorship of paintings. On the one hand, there are historical records of primates that appear to have spontaneously developed behaviors analogous to drawing (Huxley, 1942),[8] and certain species—such as bowerbirds, which I will return to in the following section—at times seem to adorn their constructions with painted markings. On the other hand, the question can, and indeed must, be examined from a different angle.

Let us take, as a case study, the elephant-painters of Thailand. Some paintings produced by these pachyderms are particularly striking, as they are figurative and mimetic in character, representing the elephants themselves, trees, flowers, and so forth, and are signed by the animals. This might lead us to believe that the elephants have developed some form of symbolic thought—but this is not quite the case. In fact, the elephants' paintings are the result of lengthy training, which generally enables a given animal to produce only one specific pictorial composition, and—most significantly—are executed in accordance with the instructions of a human trainer. Desmond Morris himself was disappointed upon watching the performance of the elephants kept at the Nong Nooch Tropical Botanical Garden, located in the Thai province of Chonburi. With each brushstroke made by an elephant, Morris reports, the animal's *mahout*[9] pulled its ear: upward or downward, to produce vertical lines; sideways, to produce horizontal lines; toward the canvas, to produce dots. Morris thus concluded that, "very sadly, the design the elephant is making is not hers but his [i.e., the *mahout*'s]. There is no elephantine invention, no creativity, just slavish copying" (Morris, 2009).

Engaging polemically with Morris on elephant painting, the philosopher of science and psychologist Vinciane Despret (2016, pp. 1-6) proposed a markedly different appraisal of these animals' performance, one I would like to cite and endorse. Referring to the elephant-painters she was able to observe at the Mae Taeng Elephant Park, near the city of Chiang Mai, Despret holds that there is an authentic enchantment in their performances before the public. This enchantment derives from factors such as the animal's careful attentiveness, evident in each mark made by the brush held in its trunk—at once assertive and reserved, as though the animal were becoming one with its painting; but the enchantment derives, above all, from the graceful attunement between animals and people working together, an attunement fully recognized by the audience, which applauds at the end of the performance. What Despret encountered was what she terms an *agencement*[10]—an intentional composition emerging from heterogeneous relational networks rather than from any single agent. The elephants' paintings are thus the product not of animals or humans considered in isolation, but of a complex assemblage: "sanctuaries, trainers, amazed tourists who take photos and circulate them on the Web or buy their works of art to bring back home, nongovernmental organizations who sell these works to help care for the elephants, the elephants who found themselves unemployed following the law that prohibited them from transporting lumber" (Despret, 2016, p. 5)

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[8] In 1942, the British biologist Julian Huxley observed a gorilla named Meng, kept by the Zoological Society at Regent's Park in London, tracing the outline of its own shadow—projected onto the wall of its enclosure by an electric light source—with its index finger. In the same year, "a man named J. Leonard Bowen wrote back to Huxley with further anecdotal evidence of a proclivity for shadow-tracing in nonhuman primates, sharing that he had seen groups of 'large long-tailed monkeys' in Matheran, India, outlining their hands in the dust using twigs and also examining one another's tracings" (Smith, 2023, p. 62).

[9] A *mahout*—the term used by Morris in his article—is the traditional South and Southeast Asian designation for a person who works with, rides, and tends to an elephant, typically maintaining a lifelong bond with a single animal.

[10] Despret's use of the French term *agencement* serves to foreground a pre-existing relationship that gives rise to agency and aligns closely with the thinking of the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998), for whom art is a system of actions intended to change the world, rather than to encode symbolic propositions about it.

What Despret's analysis highlights is not so much the artistic character of the elephants' paintings as the incoherence of a definition of art (such as Janson's or Lenain's) grounded in a mythologized human access to total self-awareness, autonomy, and control over one's actions (Smith, 2023, p. 73). We can indeed affirm that the works discussed in this section are not the product of a single individual, whether animal or human, but of shared authorship. Yet this must be recognized, simultaneously, for all human artistic production: for example, every *Homo sapiens* who paints today does so, with greater or lesser skill or inventiveness, within a socially established tradition.

A radical version of this idea is posited in theories of human creativity such as that of Roland Barthes, whose claims about literary authorship have been extended to the visual arts. Barthes asserts: "the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original" or that "the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture" (Barthes, 1967)—observations that apply with equal force to the painter, the sculptor, and the visual artist more broadly. In view of these considerations, "to *choose* to categorically deny the possibility of nonhuman primate [and other animals] graphics being art is not only prejudicial, but also dissatisfying. [...] What art could be, or could mean, when at least the potential for nonhuman art is acknowledged is far richer" (Smith, 2023, p. 77, emphasis in the original). It is precisely this potential that I will continue to pursue in the following section.

Animals and Autonomous "Artistic" Agencies

If the modes of "art" made by animals in partnership with humans are restricted almost entirely to painting, the variety of those produced without a deliberate interspecies relation is far greater. The manufacture and use of tools, for instance, has been documented across a wide range of animal species. I would like to return here to the example of New Caledonian crows, cited at the beginning of this paper: this bird species carefully selects a twig, strips it of unwanted leaves with its beak, and shapes the wood into a hook, which it then uses to extract insects from crevices in trees (Hansell, 2005, pp. 127-130). It is worth noting that "the crow is a perfectionist: if it makes an error [in the manufacture of the tool], it will scrap the whole thing and start over" (Parshley, 2023, p. 46).

Other animals manufacture tools that are in every aspect equivalent to those that illustrate textbooks of art history. I am referring to stone implements—blades, axes, spear points, and so forth—which typically figure, as opening images, in texts that aim to narrate the history of human art from its earliest origins (e.g., Gilardoni, 1948, n.p., fig. 1; Summers, 2003, pp. 64ff., figs. 8 to 11; Bell, 2007, pp. 9-11, figs. 1 and 2; Stokstad & Cothren, 2018, p. 4, fig. 1-4). We know that non-human species such as wild capuchin monkeys (*Sapajus libidinosus*) also manufacture similar objects (Figure 8). Applying techniques of archaeological excavation, dating, and analytical procedures at a site occupied for millennia by capuchin monkeys in the Serra da Capivara National Park, in Brazil, the biologist and primatologist Tiago Falótico and his team (2019) identified stone tools made by these monkeys dating between 2,400 and 3,000 years ago. These researchers further observed that, after this period, the way in which the monkeys processed their food changed between approximately 2,400 and 300 years ago, and again between approximately 100 years ago and the present day. The findings of Falótico and his team are significant for being perhaps the first to document the existence of long-term variations in tool use by a non-human species.[11]

[11] Julian Bell (2007, p. 9) admits that the flint axe he presents as Figure 1 of his book may have been produced by a "'hominin' or human-like ape." However, to maintain the focus of the argument, I will not address here the manufacture of tools by other now-extinct hominids—such as *Homo ergaster* or *Homo heidelbergensis*—which would lie at the root of typologies of objects subsequently used by *Homo sapiens* (Tattersall, 2000).

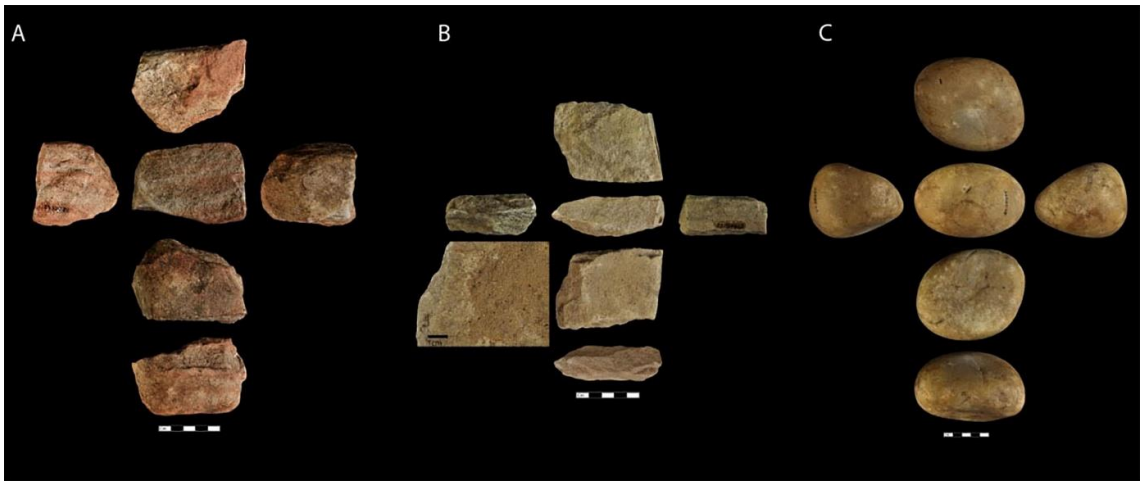

Figure 8. Examples of anvils made by capuchin monkeys, excavated at the Caju BPF2 archaeological site: (A) Anvil (#221825) from Phase I; (B) Anvil (#221870) from Phase III; (C) Anvil (#222153) from Phase III. Source: Falótico et al., 2019, supplementary figure 9.

In cases such as this, the idea of an "art history" of animals can be understood in a literal sense: it would designate the transformations, datable with relative precision, of a typology of objects produced by the capuchin monkeys. The way in which such transformations unfold approximates the concept—proposed by George Kubler in his book *The Shape of Time*—of the "series," i.e., a sequence of objects or events connected through time, representing a continuity of solutions to specific problems (Kubler, 2008). The applicability of this canonical art-historical model to a non-human species is itself significant, indicating that the discipline's analytical tools may be extended, in principle, beyond the human.

If until now I have used the term "art" in quotation marks and with caution when referring to the material production of animals, it is worth noting that various other authors demonstrate no similar reserve when referring to the dwellings and constructions that animals build. Indeed, the field of so-called "animal architecture" is presumably the oldest and most developed of those related to my discussion, counting on a number of substantial studies that go back at least to the nineteenth century. From the early 1830s, for instance, date the books of the naturalist James Rennie on the architecture of insects (Rennie, 1830) and of birds (Rennie, 1831). In the twenty-first century, the investigations of Mike H. Hansell stand out, and he has published works in which the expression "animal architecture" appears already in the title (Hansell, 2005; Hansell, 2007). Hansell discusses the constructions of the most varied animals—from invertebrates to primates—analyzing their behavioral and anatomical equipment. It is also significant that Hansell holds, at the University of Glasgow, the position of "Emeritus Professor of Animal Architecture." All these factors indicate that at least one modality of "art" made by animals—architecture—is widely and literally recognized as such by the academic community.

To conclude this section, I would like to deepen the discussion of two types of construction made by animals that stand out for their striking decorative beauty. The first example consists of the intricate geometric structures drawn on, and with, the sand at the bottom of the sea by certain pufferfish (*Torquigener* sp., Tetraodontidae) (Kawase, Okata, & Ito, 2013). These structures, excavated and shaped by the fins of the fish, recall mandalas or precisely symmetrical circles, and can reach up to two meters in diameter (Figure 9). They comprise intricate patterns of lines and grooves; and, at times, the pufferfish also add small pieces of shell or other elements to increase the decorative complexity of their structures. These constructions form part of the species' mating

behavior and are made primarily by male pufferfish to attract the attention of females. In addition, the depressions and grooves in the sand contribute to protecting the eggs from sea currents and predators, providing a safer environment for the development of the pufferfish offspring. The structure thus functions simultaneously as both a marker perceptible from afar across the vast seabed and as a kind of nest.

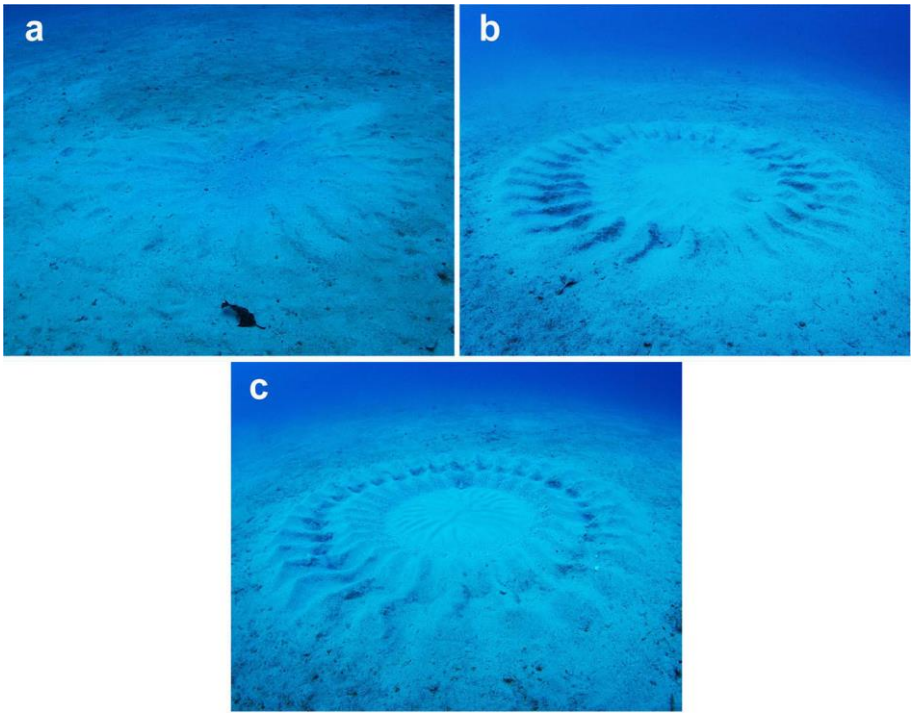

Figure 9. Stages in the construction of a circular structure made by a male pufferfish: (a) initial stage; (b) intermediate stage; (c) final stage. Source: Kawase, Okata, & Ito, 2013, p. 3.

My second example is that of the previously mentioned bowers constructed by bowerbirds. These are a canonical type of artifact within the literature on animal "art"—very probably the kind that has most captured the attention of, and been most extensively discussed by, researchers from different fields. Here, I would like both to list part of the literature on these birds and their bowers (Gombrich, 1979, pp. 5-7; Diamond, 1986; Hansell, 2007, pp. 216-251; Despret, 2016, pp. 117-122; Amstutz, 2021; Smith, 2023, p. 78ff.) and, above all, to synthesize the main scientific findings regarding the forms and functions of the latter.

Like the structures of pufferfish, the bowers of bowerbirds form part of mating behaviors. Essentially, the bowers serve as architectural backdrops, or stages, for the male's courtship performances, as well as for the animals' copulation. The form of these constructions varies among the different species of bowerbirds, as well as among distinct populations of the same species, though some typologies stand out: "'avenues,' which consist of parallel rows of sticks forming an archway […]; 'maypoles,' or central, spire-like constructions, […]; and hut-like structures" (Smith, 2023, p. 79). In addition to building and maintaining the primary structure that is the bower, bowerbirds collect and arrange around it items that function as decoration: these are fruits, leaves, flowers, and so forth, selected and arranged above all in accordance with their colors; birds living near human dwellings also incorporate human-made items, in particular pieces of colored plastic (Figure 10). Some animals even paint their bowers, producing "paint" from chewed plant matter, charcoal, and saliva, and applying it to the walls of the construction with their beaks (Bravery, Nicholls, & Goldizen, 2006).

If male bowerbirds act as the architects, builders, and curators of their bowers, females play above all the role of art critics within these animals' "art field": prior to mating, a female typically visits several bowers, returns to only a few, observes the courtship performances of the males, and, finally, chooses one of them. Groups of females of different ages have been observed visiting certain bowers together, which may suggest that there is a formation of taste being transmitted across different generations of the birds.

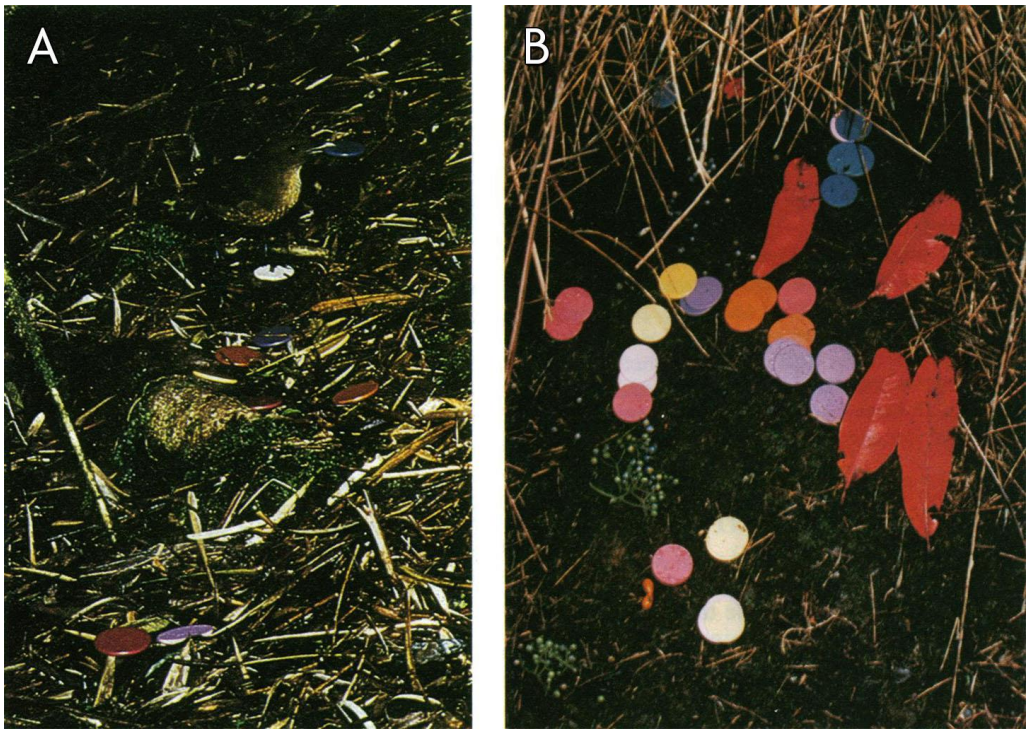

Figure 10. (A) A bowerbird with a blue poker chip in its beak; (B) entrance to a bower, decorated with fruits, red leaves, and poker chips, grouped by color. Source: Diamond, 1986, p. 3045.

The complexity and sophistication of the examples of animal material culture that I have presented in this section encourage me to reiterate the proposal that they—and others not mentioned here—be considered forms of "art" by the discipline of art history. Indeed, if stone artifacts made by *Homo sapiens* figure in textbooks of the discipline, there appears to be no logical reason why analogous artifacts made by monkeys should not receive the same treatment. In my view, beyond the fact that the material production of animals remains little known to art historians, the principal reason for such selectivity has to do with the anthropocentric roots of the modes of narration currently hegemonic in the discipline.

Final Remarks

As anticipated at the beginning of this article, I would like to close my discussion by outlining some of the political implications that I see at play in the act of recognizing animals as producers of "art." In the first place, this gesture is significant because it demands visibility and legitimacy for the material production of non-human species. Given the elevated status that the category of art occupies in contemporary human societies, this shift in perspective may help to foster more respectful treatment of animals. To consider the existence of an "art" made by animals can contribute to the horizontalization of relations between humans and other species. It would be possible, consequently, to redirect our attention away from any ontologically hierarchized "Great Chain of Being,"

and toward a better appreciation of the complex entanglements of human and non-human agencies, of which I have presented some examples in the previous sections.

In the second place, although we will likely never come to fully understand the meanings behind animal "art," we can nonetheless consider animal artifacts in their communicative dimensions, which opens up possibilities for more meaningful interspecies cooperation. Studying animal "art" can thus provide insights into the cognitive abilities, emotions, and social structures of diverse species, creating more solid foundations for the formulation of animal rights. It can also help us better understand the habitats and behaviors of animal species, as well as the threats faced by them and by their ecosystems, all factors that are crucial to the conservation efforts that humans must undertake.

Finally, by recognizing the "artistic" agency of animals, I suggest that the power relations indicated by hegemonic historiographical discourses can be reconfigured. That said, I do not advocate that we resort to strategies such as the collecting and exhibition of artifacts made by non-human species—a move that would presumably only reproduce, in a new domain, the primitivist dynamics that have characterized the reception, in North Atlantic contexts, of the arts of other parts of the world (Wood, 2018). Rather, I place my hopes in certain kinds of educational actions, such as the contextualized and respectful reference to such artifacts in art history textbooks and courses, which can help sharpen the attention and sensitivity of those who engage with the discipline. In the final analysis, I believe that the exploration of how human agency resonates in non-human species, and the cultivation of creative entanglements that I have attempted in this paper, can disrupt customary taxonomic divisions and expand the horizons of art-historical inquiry.

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