



primatoscopy-01

testing yourself amongst the animals

Yanik Potvin – April 30 2025

• clay • anthropology • organism+environment • comparative primatology • performativity • theory of mind • umwelt • posthumanism
• systems thinking • cognition • artifact • ceramics • lines • intra-actions • phylogenesis • fusiform face area • onto-epistemic object
• constructivism

I lead an art-research project at the crossroads of art and North American anthropology, where clay, a medium for creative practices, also becomes an object of knowledge. This material can be used to foster questions and considerations about our perceptual frameworks, our ways of learning, our sensory knowledge, and our relationships with other living beings, as in the research presented here, with macaques.

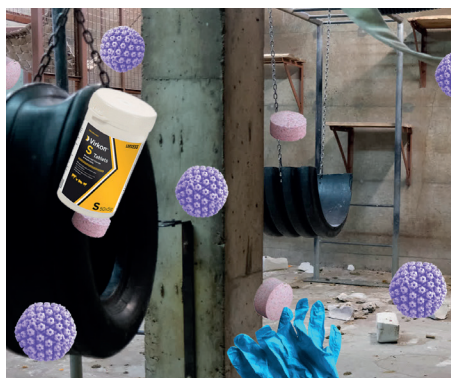
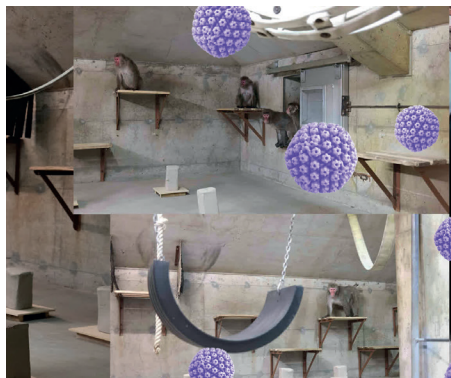
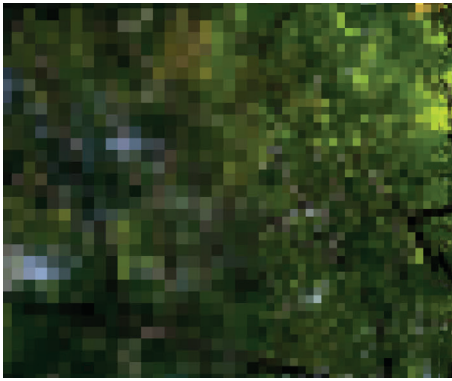
The art-research project *Primatoscopy-01* is subdivided into four distinct phases, which began with the search for comparative elements between related perceptual environments. The experiments begin with a system in which blocks of clay are scattered in enclosures at equal distances from each other and far from any equipment used in captivity conditions. This arrangement aims to delimit certain characteristics of nonhuman primates (physical strength, hierarchization, grasping, movement, etc.), but also to maximize the relationship between individuals and clay.

The initial phase, although decisive, proved disappointing, leading to a complete realignment of my expectations: Japanese macaques (*Macaca fuscata*) carry the herpes B virus (*Herpesvirus simiae*), which hinders access to artifacts after they've been handled. The virus has become a constraint of the experimental protocol, as it limits my involvement in the enclosures after each phase, requires the use of *Virkon*® clay (a virucide, bactericide, and fungicide), and forces me to isolate the artifacts until their firing. As an archaeologist, I methodically recorded the state of the enclosures and attempted to reconstruct the activities based on the material traces, seeking to make sense of these behavioral artifacts. The results looked disastrous straight away: clay was scattered among the food and excrement; there were few marks in the clay and the blocks had hardly been handled. The primates seemed disturbed by these physical "intrusions" in their enclosure.

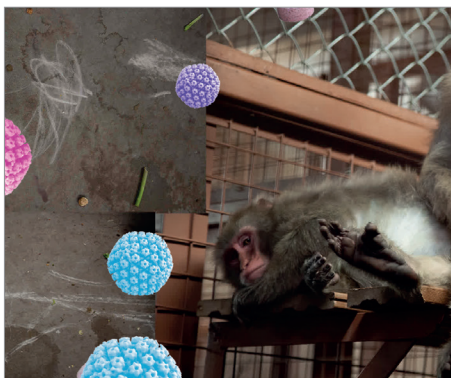
The later phases (2 to 4) were characterized by a diversification of stimuli by introducing more "enticing" clay forms in the enclosures. The use of traditional forms, mainly *Edo*- and *Heian*-influenced vases and teabowls, as food containers, was particularly effective in tempting the macaques to handle them. A more significant understanding of behavioral patterns only emerged at the end of phase 2, revealing a separation of primate activities according to the functional divisions of their enclosures: captive macaques do not play where they eat.

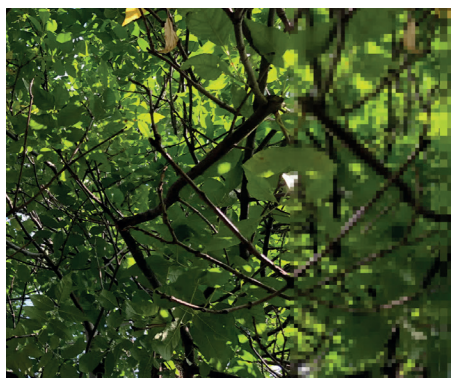
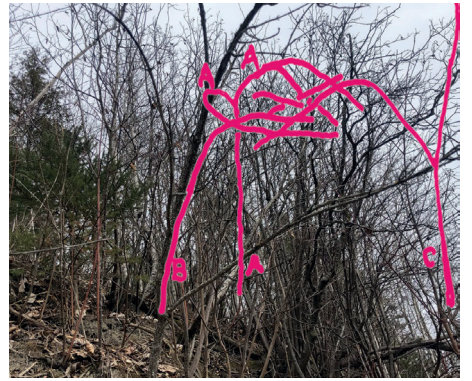
Analysis of the evidence has revealed a recurring pattern: the primates tended to break up the clay once it was dry, using its materiality to draw lines on the ground. The multitude of tangled lines was astonishing, because they were constant and repetitive. It seemed to be the main interest suggested to them by the clay's malleability. I have divided the lines into two categories: the lines of transportation (linear, simple, and intermittent) and the lines of persistence (localized, superimposed, and demonstrating a back-and-forth movement).

The persistence lines are compared with nesting diagrams drawn by primatologists, evoking links between cognition, environment, and cultural construction. These relationships are first evident through the fusiform gyrus, a cerebral structure shared by all primates, which ensures the recognition of the contours of the environment and faces, while opening the way to alternative analogies with ancient writing systems. These reveal the continuity between the macrocosm in which we evolve and the microcosm of our inner representations, accepting our animal condition as well as the role of the imagination in the performativity of human worlds and their impact on all living things.



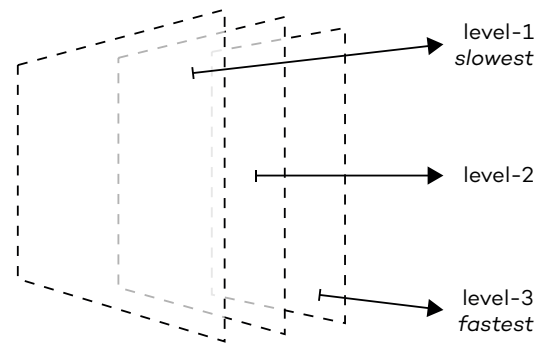






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