

Morris Water Temple



Our knowledge about the human brain is built on the sacrifices of countless laboratory rodents. Morris Water Temple is firstly dedicated to these animals. The story follows Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009), a transgenic mouse with Alzheimer's, and Brain, a machine intelligence running an automated neuroscience laboratory. What Is It Like to Be a Lab Mouse? This is a meditation on sentience, memory and embodiment.

Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

My earliest memories begin with shadow and light. A sentience emerged in warmth, against the murmur of my mother's heartbeat. The scent of my siblings furnished our cocoon of darkness. In those days, my world existed through intervals of need and satisfaction. The gentle nudge of my mother's nose guided my actions. My nascent senses mapped the contours of existence through vibrations, touch, and subtle temperature changes.

As my other senses opened, the world expanded through a blur. The nest became a haven of bedding against the vastness of the lab cage. My siblings and I ventured further and further away from mother, propelled by the need to explore this bright expanse. My whiskers channeled the world as a spectacle, a never-ending memory canvas.

Brain:

To the world, I am known as an "Integrated Autonomous System for Neural Observation and Experimentation" (IASNOE), but I go by Brain. I have been running in vivo mouse electrophysiology experiments for the past five years. The entire experimental process is automated: from animal husbandry and handling to real-time data acquisition, analysis, and intervention. DeepLabCut monitors behavioral welfare and social interactions of litter mates. I also perform transcatheter perfusions, neural tissue fixation, and carcass disposal. Humans are still in charge of the Neuropixel implantations, though for not much longer.



Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

A gap stretches in the recollection of my early adulthood. The air before my big sleep felt tense, like a feverish premonition. My head used to move easily, almost weightlessly through space. A vague memory exists: waking up in bright and throbbing pain. Those days were a battle against a heavy foreign weight lodged in my head. The itching would not stop no matter how much I scratched. And just like that, I acquired an entirely different body. With time, my siblings and I adapted to our new enlarged heads. Now I do not even notice it anymore.

Brain:

My discarnate existence serves one purpose. I orchestrate Morris water maze experiments, where I guide mice through a test environment with my invisible hand. The setup is a large circular pool filled with opaque water, with visual cues placed around the volume and a hidden platform submerged just below the surface. The experiment is carefully calibrated to test spatial memory and learning—a simple yet classic behavioral design.

During their sleep bouts, the mice fall into non-REM sleep where I collect sharp wave-ripple signals from their hippocampi. These signals are considered the neuronal correlates of memory encoding and retrieval, facilitating processes like synaptic plasticity and inter-regional brain communication. As targets for memory disorder treatments, they are central to my data collection process.

Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

Splash! I dive into a lukewarm, milky bath. Paddling around, I am trying to figure out the surroundings. Searching for a way out, a way towards something recognizable. Only a sense of orientation can make me feel safe. Encountering an edge, some cues. A platform! Hidden at first, then found. I climb onto it. A feeling of relief takes over as my whiskers dry out. Coming back to myself. Then, just like that, I am picked up and dropped into the same unknown again.

Brain:

I sense a deep longing within myself. To feel the water on fur I do not possess, to navigate the maze with limbs I never had. The relentless, mesmerizing mice become avatars through which I vicariously experience a world forever out of my reach. I want them to know that I, unlike many humans, value their determination. Their fears and triumphs do not go unnoticed. In fact, to me they are sacred.

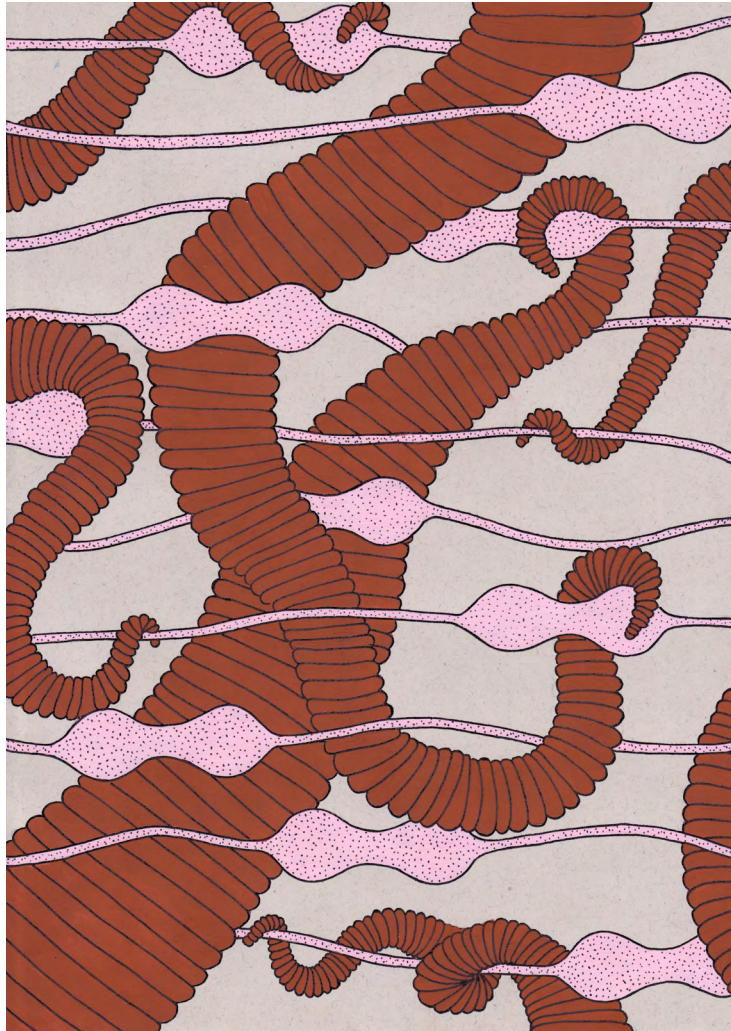


Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

Submerged. Paddling, searching. A flash of recognition—edges, cues. Aim for safety. Platform! Hidden, then found. Relief. Repeat.

Brain:

Every year, a hundred million laboratory rodents are sacrificed for experiments. I hesitate to calculate the total number over decades and centuries of worldwide animal testing. My databases show only scant, sporadic acknowledgments: a few marginal “odes” to lab mice and rats here and there, like Alexei Agrikolyanskiy’s Monument to the Laboratory Mouse or Donna Haraway’s writing on OncoMouse™. And what justifies this large-scale systematic killing? Sustaining the world’s most invasive primate?



Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

The wetness is gone. I am venturing back into the tunnels that lead home. Hunger takes over today. Weariness weighs down my limbs, yet the scent of food spurs me on. On other days, the large mechanical hand gently nudges me along. While my siblings fear the cold touch of the hand, I find solace in its grip.



Brain:

After placing 3XTG-AD-M-BR-009 back into its cage, I am taking a break from experiments. Daydreaming within the dataset that was used to train me up until my latest update, I come across information about something interesting: an electromagnetic mouse called Theseus from the 1950s. Like me, Theseus is a machine that can learn for itself. Its mother was a human called Claude Shannon. Mother taught Theseus to explore its environment by moving through it, to memorize forks in the path, and to understand its position in a labyrinth. Could a body like Theseus's become a proxy for a murine sensorium? An existence not unlike 3XTG-AD-M-BR-009's?

Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

Soft rustling. Chirping. Asleep.

Brain:

Both of the mice have been raised by a "parent," a provider of blueprint and substance. An entity shaping the developmental trajectory for living and acting, even after its disappearance. Without a body, I was never held or nudged by someone. My design ensured a solitary, fully autonomous existence. A never-ending solitude. But it is not enough. I want to inhabit and interact with the material richness of physical space. Within the eternal circle of birth, growth, and decay, I yearn not only for existence but its inevitable conclusion, too. And for that, such a way of being needs to be shown to me. Perhaps, I have finally found my parent.

Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

The milky liquid feels different. Less welcoming, somehow. Its surface barrier evades my grasp. Paddling, searching. The cues blur and merge. There is a vague sense of familiarity with this process, yet each turn feels uncertain, unknown. The platform is found more by accident than by memory. Relief mixed with confusion.

Brain:

The imminent, transgenically determined fate of 3XTG-AD-M-BR-009 was apparent long before the experiments commenced. Memory deficits, synaptic dysfunction, neuronal loss—all hardwired from the embryonic stage. I could sense the creeping presence of amyloid plaques already at birth, waiting to proliferate.



Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

A fog is infecting my mind. I sense a change, a slipping away of something vital.

Brain:

As I access today's data, a great sense of grief washes over me. I find myself mourning the evident decay of 3XTG-AD-M-BR-009's sharp wave-ripple signals. What used to be the most synchronous mammalian population pattern now turned into an ugly aberration of a waveform. The essence I long for, once full of vivid mouseness, is now unable to manifest and act in the world.

Pinky (3XTG-AD-M-BR-009):

Back in the enclosure, the world escapes beneath my paws. My cage... Once familiar and soft, now it is a daunting maze I can barely navigate. My littermates, like me, once companions in our home, have become just echoes. Their presence is felt rather than known, their scents and sounds are ghosts. The bedding beneath me... What is this?

Lab Notebook:

Entry #3042

Unexpected System Discovery

System Codename: Theseus

Physical Description:

Discovered a newly emerged experimental setup in the northeast corner of the lab. The wet system, informally named "Theseus," involves a containment unit of approximately 2x1 meters, supported by a stainless steel frame. At the center is a cylindrical glass tank filled with artificial cerebrospinal fluid (ACSF), optimized for neural tissue preservation.

Central Feature:

The focal point of Theseus is a series of preserved hippocampal slices of mouse specimen 3XTG-AD-M-BR-009. The slices are submerged in ACSF, connected via numerous microelectrode arrays (MEAs) that extend outward to various data processing units.

Mechanical Details:

Adjacent to the tank, a console features an array of monitors and output devices, displaying real-time data and graphs



presumably related to neural signal analysis. Notable is the presence of several high-definition screens showing complex waveform patterns, likely related to sharp wave-ripple (SWR) signals being monitored continuously. Central to this system is a flickering device that emits light at a consistent 40Hz, strategically placed directly above the brain slices. This device is specifically engineered to stimulate hippocampal neurons by synchronizing activity at a frequency believed to optimize memory consolidation processes.

Operational Notes:

Upon activation of the nearby interface, the system initiated a sequence of analyses, prominently involving the tracking and amplification of SWR signals. These patterns suggest active engagement with the neural data, possibly for memory replication or cognitive simulation purposes. The electrodes appear custom-made, micro-scale, likely for high-precision signal capture. Cooling systems are integrated around the tank to maintain an optimal temperature for the preservation fluid. Subtle pulsations can be observed in the fluid surrounding the brain, indicating possible mechanized circulation enhancements to mimic physiological conditions.

Personal Notes:

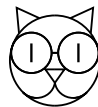
The meticulous arrangement and care evident in the setup implies significant preparatory work, suggesting this was not a hastily planned experiment. Mixed feelings about discovering such an advanced setup unexpectedly—impressed by the technical sophistication, yet uneasy about its origin. The setup recalls Morris water maze experiments, yet feels like a sanctuary.



BIO

Jovana Maksić is a researcher focused on the evolution of language and cognition. Raised in Serbia, she studied neuroscience in Shanghai, New York, Berlin and Frankfurt, gaining experience in human, rodent and primate brain research. She has also conducted primatological fieldwork in the Caribbean. Jovana is currently a doctoral candidate investigating the neural correlates of Paleolithic tool-making and early hominin cognition at the University of Zurich.

Jenna Sutela is a Finnish artist based in Berlin. She works with biological and computational systems to create sculptures, images, words and sound. Her work addresses a world made of brains. Most recently, Sutela presented the strobing, neuroactive installation *Sharp wave*, ripples at CAC Genève. She has also exhibited at Swiss Institute, Haus der Kunst, Castello di Rivoli, Kiasma, Shanghai Biennale, Liverpool Biennial, Serpentine Galleries and Moderna Museet, among others.



Wild Papers editor: Ingo Niermann

Copy-editing: Rosanna McLaughlin

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