

## An Aesthetic Inquiry into Organizing Some Rats and Some People

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### Keywords

*Art*  
*Aesthetics*  
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### Abstract

Rats crawling, an art gallery, rats as art, warm furry bodies, bright plastic tubes, disgusting, chilled dead frogs, rats for science, a preparation, a sweet little rat, a village hall, women in white coats, rats in cages, a rosette, urine, a rat in a pouch, cuddles, rats for art, the winner is, strong black tea, how many do you have, in the literature, breeding, get more rats, a rat down a sleeve, I'll give you a lift, sign in, a rack of cages, what is that, the data shows, please wash your hands, they can smell your perfume, protestors, I don't know, a knock out, brain surgery, squeak squeak, the Morris water maze, toys, slice, you are a messy boy, the critique, I haven't got a licence, drawings, rats in art, do you mind, a duvet, insurance, a queue, a drawing device, sugar rats, chunky knits, where's the nearest rat, black rubbery tails, video camera, a T-maze, sawdust, a cleavage, nail clippings, face painting, artist rat, drawings, it's different, two young women, a judge, art for rats, agility training, he remembers from last time.

Here is an artwork I want to make but have not yet been able to make. It's called the *Rat Evaluated Artwork* or REA<sup>1</sup> (shown in Figure 1). I imagined it as a gallery piece, sitting on tables, with many tubes and wheels, a closed environment for rats visible to the spectators who might watch and engage with them, offering diversions and decisions points for rats, and diversions and decision points for humans. The rats would be inside the tubes, and the humans would be outside, able to read the labels on the tubes that the rats would move through. The rats would be invited to evaluate different aspects of the artwork by making choices about which tube to move through. For the audience, where the rats moved would help them understand how beautiful the work was, how exploitative and how critically engaged.

As I began to explore how to make this work, an artist colleague one day found me photocopying pages from a catalogue from a company which makes play environments for small animals in brightly-coloured plastic. When I told her what I wanted to do, she was horrified: not by the rats but by my ignorance. These tubes were designed for hamsters and would be far too small for rats. I grew up in a family with dogs. I don't remember dissecting anything warm at school. I knew nothing about rats other than that there were both objects of disgust and fear in Western culture and objects of respect – as survivors, fast breeders, quick adaptors. But I really liked my idea for the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*, and since it depended on live rats, so began my research.

A friend in Cambridge arranged for me a visit to the experimental psychology lab there to see a demonstration with live rats for undergraduate students. Here in a box was a small creature. Alive, but alive for science. Ordered from a catalogue, No Name animal, an instrumentalized animal, sweet in its box, enjoying being handled by the professor, enjoying being caressed and



aesthetic knowing versus intellectual and propositional knowing, with implications for modes of representation in research. They identify four approaches in the literature which they see as located along two axes, one concerned with the content of research and the other concerned with method: intellectual analysis of instrumental issues; using artistic form look at instrumental issues; intellectual analysis of aesthetic issues; and using artistic form to look at aesthetic issues. Strati (2009) also describes four different approaches: an archaeological approach, emphasizing the study of symbolic artefacts in organizations; an empathic-logical approach, involving the researcher immersing herself in the organization to encounter its pathos; an aesthetic approach, emphasizing collective, everyday organizational interactions; and an artistic approach, focussing on the playfulness of everyday organizational interactions.

Several scholars agree there is potential is using arts-based approaches to study aesthetics in organizations (eg Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Taylor and Hansen, 2005; Gagliardi, 2006; Strati, 2009) although they disagree about what the implications might be. For Strati (2009), the artistic approach draws indiscriminately on methods of artistic understanding and those used in the social sciences, mixing artistic sensibility and cognitive rationality and projecting the scholar into the playfulness, improvisation and sensuality of the research experience and its end result. However for Strati, a weakness of this approach is that it is “art-bounded” (Strati, 2009, p. 237). For Taylor and Hansen (2005) this hybridity would seem to be the point since aesthetic knowing, as they describe it, asks not just how we know things but why we know things: “Aesthetic inquiry deepens our understanding of organizations by providing a new epistemology, criteria to assess member judgments and decision making, meaning, connection and provides categories for this sensory data.” (Taylor and Hansen, 2005, p. 1226). But although for Taylor and Hansen, this is an area full of promise, it is one that is as yet unrealized. “The use of artistic forms to look at aesthetic issues offers a medium that can capture and communicate the felt experience, the affect, and something of the tacit knowledge of the day-to-day, moment-to-moment reality of organizations. Not just the cleaned-up, instrumental concerns of ‘the business’, but the messy, unordered side as well.” (Taylor and Hansen, 2005, p. 1224). This has lead to questions of how to develop an attentiveness to aesthetics in the researcher (Gagliardi, 1996), suggestions to develop terminology such as “thick sensory description” (Taylor and Hansen 2005, p. 1225) or draw directly on contemporary art practice as a way to understand contemporary organizations (Guillet de Monthoux, 2004) or to find new ways to do anthropological research (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2005). However the value of contemporary art within organizational aesthetics has not yet been fully realized (Beyes, 2008).

## **AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY ART**

Before returning to the rats, I offer a brief exploration of the ways that concepts of aesthetics are mobilized in contemporary art practice and in the work of Jacques Rancière (2004; 2007) and the possible implications for ethics. For contemporary artists, aesthetics is not a stable term. In the studio, and in teaching and group critiques, I have observed myself and others using the term as a proxy for visual beauty and sensation, denoting a coherent arrangement of elements that answers a question posed in a work, but with an openness to ugliness, disgust and the sublime as aesthetic qualities that can also be explored in art. For those of us working with liveness (Auslander, 1999), questions of aesthetics are not limited to visibility. Timing, rhythm, space and choreography are also part of the work and its context as artists construct ways to constitute audiences and experiences. Aesthetics, in my lay terminology as an arts practitioner, was tied up with bodily sensation and intellectual delight, but also with an artist’s purpose and reflexivity in relation to the institutions of art. Following Dewey (1958), my thinking about aesthetics is not reduced to thinking solely about the art object but suffused in the encounter of the audience, spectator or participant with and within the work and in relation to the everyday. But this focus on objects and encounters with them is not sufficient on its own to capture the activities and concepts involved in much contemporary art practice<sup>ii</sup>, an issue that Rancière (2004; 2007)’s work has helped illuminate leading to it being taken up within art criticism and art history (Funcke, 2007; Tanke 2010).

Rancière’s (2004; 2007) analysis of images and art over several centuries, drawing on a wide range of sources and not limited to just the visual arts, offers a way to see how ideas of aesthetics, images and art have changed in relation to politics, relating to the wider question in this paper of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in organizational research. For Rancière, art is not a separate sphere from life or only concerned with life (or forms of life such as organization research). Art is political and politics has aesthetics. Rather than simply politicizing art, he argues art and politics are both different forms of the distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*) in which subjects are constituted by what is sayable and visible. He identifies three “regimes” and argues that they have particular and different ways in which they order this distribution. Central to his work is the concept of equality and the question of which subjects are excluded or included in a particular arrangement. Social orderings are contingent. Politics is linked to dissent, as those that were previously not counted partake of a given order and novel forms of subjectivity come to the fore (Beyes, 2008). Rancière (2004) describes three different regimes of art which appear to approximate a chronology but which can also co-exist (Tanke, 2010).

The *ethical regime of images* is exemplified in Platonic ideals of the collective and questions of how to represent truth. For Plato, image-makers are dissemblers. The arts offer an imperfect copy of ideal forms (Beyes, 2008). Artistic images are evaluated in terms of their utility to society. What we now call art is seen as mere labour. In his critique of imitation (mimesis), Plato evaluates two things: “an image’s faithfulness to an Idea, and its effects upon a community. Within the ethical regime of images, there is no art, because all arts/crafts (techne) are judged by these two factors” (Tanke, 2010, p. 8).

In the *representational regime*, art becomes a kind of labour with its own rules and styles. An artwork is considered in relation to the active power of shaping matter, part of the Aristotelian tradition of catharsis, and how it relates what society is, requiring a concordance between sense and sense (Rancière, 2008). It prescribes correct ways of representing subject matter and assesses the relationship between form and matter (Tanke, 2010). Hence a set of norms ordering the relations between the visible and the sayable is constituted. Art is autonomous but with this comes a hierarchy of genres and techniques (Beyes, 2008).

In contrast, the *aesthetic regime of art* that emerged over the past two centuries figures “the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroy[s] any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself” (Rancière, 2004, p. 23). Key here is an irreducible tension between the singularity of art, and the idea of art as a collective activity. It does not give art a particular place in society, and does not require any particular skill. The aesthetic regime enables ruptures in subjects, representations, techniques and any pre-determined relationship between aesthesis and poesis. This regime emphasizes art’s autonomy and freedom from prescribed or normative criteria. It invites departures from classical hierarchies about what constitutes art in terms of subject matter, form or style (Ross, 2008). It may also allow new modes and new possibilities. “By bringing previously neglected aspects of existence into the space of the page or place of the canvas, the aesthetic regime redefines the contours of what can be seen and said” (Tanke, 2010, p. 9). But paradoxically the clear distinction between art and non-art has been ruptured (Beyes, 2008). It is this assertion of the political nature of art that has made Rancière attractive to the art world in recent years (Davis, 2006; Tanke, 2010) although not without some criticism (Charlesworth, 2010).

For Rancière, the aesthetic regime gives those who call themselves artists (and those who seek to take up these practices) a licence to challenge categories and disrupt hierarchies such as defining what is considered an appropriate subject matter, form or style. It offers art practice as an antidote to instrumental reason, but not just through attending to the senses but also through challenges to accepted paradigms by including new subjects and actors within the distribution of the sensible. Art is seen as has a significant power of rearranging and expanding what can be perceived and what is thinkable (Beyes, 2008), echoing discussions within the social sciences about the limits of representation (eg Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1997; Latour and Weibel, 2005; Macdonald and Basu, 2007; Thrift, 2008).

This necessarily limited account of Rancière’s work has several implications for organizational aesthetics and in particular for this discussion of aesthetics and ethics. First, Rancière argues there is an aesthetics in politics and a politics in aesthetics, apparently echoing Brady’s (1986) view that managing involves balancing ethics and aesthetics. However Rancière’s formulation is more fundamental: it is not that there are two things in tension with one another that can be balanced. Rather aesthetics is the distribution of the sensible that enables ways of perceiving, thinking and saying. “Politics and aesthetics fold into one another when what is brought forth and made visible has been hitherto invisible, when what is made audible was hitherto inaudible” (Beyes, 2008).

Second, Beyes (2008) argues that Rancière’s work problematizes scholarship by expanding what is thinkable and sayable within research, destabilizing “royal science” (Beyes, 2008, p. 33), by attending to and disrupting how existing practices keep things within a certain order. Rancière’s attentiveness to what is sayable and visible within particular regimes points to how research accounts constitute themselves as coherent, valid, and credible, in opposition to forms of ignorance. When knowledge is proffered, what form of ignorance is thereby produced (Pelletier, 2009)? Research thus has an aesthetic dimension in the way that it makes distributions about what can be said or seen.

Third, Beyes argues that Rancière’s work “disrupts the safe bet of employing aesthetics either affirmatively or ‘purely’ critically” (Beyes, 2008, p. 38). Instead, a Rancièrian organizational aesthetics would imply “an empirical engagement with the ‘poetic’ moments, when the excluded bring forth their own claims – when *they speak for themselves* – or when artistic endeavours disturb existing orders” (Beyes, 2008, p. 39; italics in original).

This allows a reconfiguring of a problematic at the heart of making art using live animals. The “safe bet” would be deciding *not* to use live animals in making art, or making a “critical” artwork unmasking the instrumentalization of doing so. However this was not the right starting point for me. Instead, Rancière’s work suggests a different way forward: the aesthetic regime disturbs how things are ordered. Art historian Steve Baker’s (2000) research into contemporary art shows how concerned artists are to engage with animals in ways that are not subject to the conventional distinctions between animal and human. For example instead of simply depicting animals, many artists engage with them performatively and materially in the making of art. For artists, Baker suggests, the animal is in some way aligned with creativity. “For many contemporary artists,” he says, “the animal

stands in as a new form of being, a creative post-modern being and it emphatically does have hands” (Baker, 2000, p. 94). Within the aesthetic regime, artworks made with animals can suggest new ways to explore the relations between human and non-human animals. Using Rancière’s work on aesthetics offers a way to commit to equality for animals, and leads to a new configuration of what is thinkable and sayable in an artwork. The ethical implications of these arrangements are not predetermined but can be explored in practice (Kersten, 2008).

## GETTING CLOSE TO SOME RATS

These ways of thinking about my research came later. Back then, my main concern was how to get near some rats. To proceed with my inquiry, I called another colleague and he suggested names of people at the University of Oxford, where I was then based within its art school. Within a few emails I had an appointment with experimental psychologists in their lab down South Parks Road. Pasted onto a hoarding outside this building was a court injunction ordering animal rights protestors to protest over the road, away from the lab. There weren’t animal rights protestors outside the first day I went. They were only allowed there on Thursdays.

I began developing this inquiry as part of a research fellowship at an art school. I took what I saw as a license that I had as an artist-researcher and deployed it to help me conduct my research<sup>iii</sup>. But what was it that I was researching, other than my ability to get into buildings with animal rights protestors outside? I visited researchers using animals at Cambridge, Oxford and later the National Institute of Medical Research behind its bars at Mill Hill in north London. Gated communities of scientists and live and dead bits of science, flesh warm in their hands.

At my various meetings I found myself making explanations, apologies even, for my arts-based research. The outcomes of my research might be performances or public events. No, probably no drawings, no photographs, no paintings, no sculptures. No installations although possibly this idea for a *Rat Evaluated Artwork*.

My institutional affiliation and the fact that I was funded by one of the research councils legitimised my inquiry.

Hello, I just want to know what you know about rats. Hello, I don’t even know what I want to know exactly but will you let me be here and watch and ask some questions. Practising within the aesthetic regime of art, my enquiries were unregulated by any one discipline or field of knowledge, but resembled several. Not knowing, rather than claims about knowledge, mattered. In one meeting with a scientist working with rats I declared: I don’t know what I’m doing with the rats. I don’t know how to do it. To my surprise, he seemed fine with this. What I had to do at that point was hold open a place of ambiguity and be there in it, a space of doubt that researchers outside the arts have to remind themselves to value.

I can’t remember where the first rat show was, but it was in either Essex or Kent. It was in a village hall down an unremarkable road, and I found my way there on a train from London, and then on foot, a day trip with my knapsack and bottle of water and sketchbook. I entered the hall which was arranged with many tables, on top of which were clear plastic boxes with wire grilles. Inside each box was a rat or two, often asleep, sitting on sawdust with a quarter of an apple, or half a carrot to nibble on. There were thirty or so people in the hall, mostly on chairs round the edges, sitting near their bags and their boxes, chatting, with cups of tea. Inside an arrangement of tables was a table on its own, where a woman in a white coat sat, with a helper by her side, with a couple of the boxes in front of them. The helper opened the plastic box by pushing aside its grille and the judge in the white coat picked up the rat and held it in the palm of her hand and regarded it, not an it, a him or a her. Together they looked at it, him or her, and talked about it, him or her. Then one of them put it back in the box and the judge wrote notes on a white slip

**Figure 2.** Legal injunction displayed outside the construction site for a science building, South Parks Road, University of Oxford, in 2004 (photo: Lucy Kimbell)



with a pink carbon copy backing sheet. The judge put a sticker on the tank and then the tank went back to the outer ring of tables. This went on for hours.

In the small village hall, the judge's comments and cooing punctuated the day.

*Good tail.*

*Good head and ears.*

*Let's have a look at you then. Hello sweetheart. Good tail. Good type.*

*Oooh I do like you as well.*

*Oooh you are a messy boy, pooh all over you.*



**Figure 3.** Judge and assistant at fancy rat show (photo: Lucy Kimbell)

Many of the people attending the rat show were women, sometimes accompanied by partners and children. Many of them brought two or three rats but they had more at home. The question “How many rats do you have?” typically generates three answers: a number of rats; a number of cages; or the response “I’ve stopped counting”.

Like other small animals rats do not live long in human years, perhaps until two or three and then they die or are put down by the vet or knocked on the head and buried in the garden. The rat mailing lists are stirred up weekly by stories of loss. Talk of illness and death is part of the way ratters talk to each other.

*I am sorry to hear about Hermione. She went at such a young age. My thoughts are with you.*

The individual animals matter to their owners but the real subject of the group's conversation is loss.

In contemporary science it seems easier to get hold of a rat model than a rat. One of the world's biggest animal production companies describes itself as a provider of animal models, not animals (see Figure 4). Rats, it seems, don't really exist in science, although there are millions of hot breathing bodies boxed in laboratories all over the world. The rats don't exist without the rat models, which are one of the means by which science is reproduced. At Charles River or Harlan or Jackson Laboratories you can search through a list of rat varieties and find the one you need to suit your experiment.

I was given several reasons for the use of rats within scientific research<sup>iv</sup>. They share over 90% of their genetic material with humans, are omnivores, are small and easy to house. They reproduce very fast and are intelligent. What the scientists I met didn't say was what I learned from the fancy rat owners and breeders whose communities I circled at the rat shows. I learned rats like lots of everything. Lots of food of nearly any kind, lots of physical contact, lots of sex. They are excessive animals.

Using terms like “animal models” instead of “animals” is like calling “abortions” “terminations”. Such terms maintain a necessary distance from the live flesh they work with. In lectures some scientists refer to an animal prepared for a demonstration as a “surgical preparation” instead of a rat. The rat, or preparation, is brain dead. The rat, or preparation, will feel no pain. Animals suffer. But can a preparation suffer?

In labs the rats arrive in boxes, shipped in very controlled conditions. One batch is almost identical to the previous batch, its features conforming to the specification sheets you see on the website. Inbred rats are virtually clones. A scientist on the other side of the world can do exactly the same experiment, with exactly the same rodent, genetically speaking, and get the same result.

At the time I started taking an interest in rats, I found that a group of people were taking a close interest in the animals used within the labs at Oxford, the people I had not seen since I had not visited the labs on Thursdays, the only days they were allowed to demonstrate outside. One summer I joined a rally organized by a pressure group to try to understand how animals like the rats mattered to them. It was like a summer fete where the cakes were all vegan.

One of the speakers, who described himself as a scientist, claimed that the use of animal models within science, far from enabling science, disables it by producing results that are not relevant to human physiologies and pathologies. A factoid was visible on t-shirts worn by protestors: “Drug side effects are the fourth biggest killer in the western world”. Elsewhere another claimed “Adverse reactions to prescribed drugs were the third commonest cause of death in the western world.” Here was science against science, and politics against science. When starting to visit animal labs I felt I would have to find my position with respect to animal testing, although it did not

seem so pressing to arrive at a political stance in relation to the fancy rat community. But attending the pressure group’s rally left me feeling confused. Too polarising to be useful to me, this was not a discussion to which I had access. I nonetheless wanted to acknowledge the living and dying in the labs and in the rat show community. Here we are, our bodies protected over the years by vaccinations and drugs most of which were probably tested on animals, using animal models of human disease. My body, your bodies, are a charnelhouse; stacked in it are the corpses of millions of rats and mice and guinea pigs and fish and birds and cats and dogs and primates used by doctors and scientists over hundreds of years. I do not shy away from these bodies. I see them. I am glad of the drugs.

In her work on companion species, Donna Haraway (2003) made visible her entanglement with dogs, significant others for her and for many other people. Like dogs, rats have long been associated with human beings and human settlement, survival and development. Where there are rats there are people and where there are people there are rats. Significant as vermin, as rat models within science, as pets, rats are also significant others for humans. Rats are very good at training humans to acquire more of them. Since pet rats are often kept in single sex cages, breeding is supposedly controlled or at least monitored by the humans with whom the rats live. But rat fanciers find that one rat leads to two, because how can you keep such social animals on their own, which leads to three and four and ten and eleven and thirty.

I’ve got a bad case of GMR<sup>v</sup>, they say. The animals’ sociability and curiosity feeds the desire of their human companions. They might spend 90 percent of their time in cages but during that other 10 percent, the rats are undertaking a complex training process, which looks like it has secured long-term viability of the species.

I wondered what Haraway might have discovered if she had talked of rats instead of dogs. The particular intimacy that rat lovers have with rats is partly a function of their size. Dogs, being larger, don’t crawl down your shirt and into your cleavage so easily. Most dogs can’t hide in your sleeve. Dog lovers don’t commonly have tens of dogs. The excess of rats makes them a different kind of other for humans.

If these visits to labs and rat shows and protests were research<sup>vi</sup>, the knowledge I was producing was rapidly making my *Rat Evaluated Artwork* an impossibility. Firstly, rats tend to sleep during the day so there was not point making an installation with rats in it for a conventional gallery context, since galleries are usually open during the day. Second, rats, especially male rats, are “not known for having a Protestant work ethic” as one scientist put it. While they instinctually want to explore novel environments, they would need to be motivated to engage with the decision points and features I envisaged in the REA. Scientists often motivate the animals they use with food rewards. For these to be effective, the animals need to be hungry and keeping them hungry would have to be part of my artwork. Thirdly, I decided was probably not acceptable to me to have live animals on display in a gallery as a spectacle for audiences in search of novelty. Fourthly, where would I get the rats from to put into the REA? What would I do with them after showing the work?

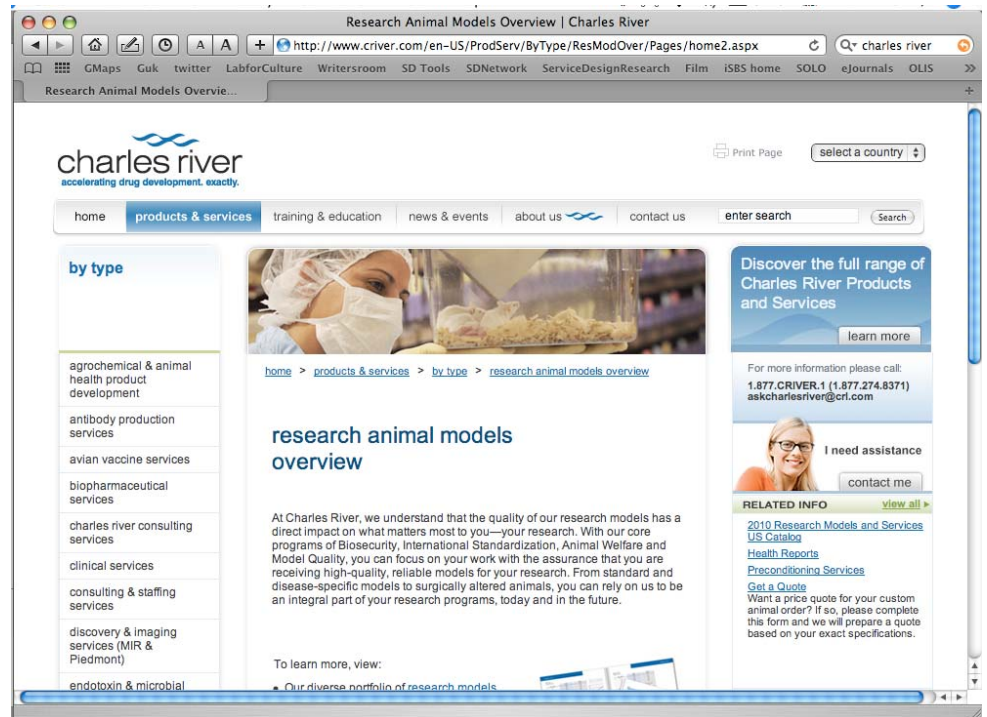


Figure 4. Webpage from Charles River

It was becoming clear that the *Rat Evaluated Artwork* was a problem: an ethical problem and a set of practical problems. In Rancièrian terms, a growing commitment to making the rats countable within the social orders I was investigating meant that I could reconfigure what was visible and sayable. To disrupt the ways that rats were engaged with in the two contexts I was exploring, I could create a new distribution of the sensible involving humans, rats and artefacts from several domains. I began to configure a space rendered visible and thinkable through my ignorance of both fancy ratting and experimental psychology.

What could I do? Inspired by other artists I could lock myself in a cage with a rat for a week to see what would happen. I could pickle a rat colony and put it on display in a vitrine. I could create a transgenic rat by adding genetic material from some other species and keep it as my family pet. I could dress up in a rat costume and perform my rat knowledge in front of a bemused audience and video it. I could turn myself into a Victorian music hall Rat Lady and make a cabaret. I could mimic a rat and run around the streets for an hour or two. I could try to find some rat road kill and make some clothes from the fur or rope from the tails. I could invite a rat to enter my anus in a public performance. I could stick some rats in a box and have their movements trigger musical samples. I could make a headband with cartoon-like rats ears and give them to animal rights protestors to wear. I could do some paintings of rats and leave them around for them to chew or poo on. I could pretend to be a rat and bite people at openings. I could make body extensions for rats. None of these was quite right.

## AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTS

Over the winter months I paid visits to a woman who shared her home with several rats. She had agreed to let me try to train them aesthetically. Neither of us was clear what this meant but I described it as trying to make a performance with the rats. She was initially comfortable with me turning up with objects for the rats to explore (see Figures 5 and 6). We sat on her bed while we watched as rat after rat preferred to snuggle under her duvet rather than be coaxed down the sleeve or tube I had brought along.



**Figure 5.** Aesthetic experiments with rats and humans (photo: Lucy Kimbell)



**Figure 6.** Aesthetic experiments with rats and humans (photo: Lucy Kimbell)

After a few visits it became evident that working in someone else's bedroom with someone else's pets was going to be difficult. Instead I could buy my own rat, keep my own rat, nurture him, feed him, love him, cuddle him, let him out to play, buy him presents, pay the vet's bills, keep him clean and watered, and generally extend the duration of the project for two to three years until he died. But there was still a problem. Any rat I bought and kept for this project would still be an instrumentalized animal, a rat for art's sake. I had come to be fond of the rats I had met but did not want (yet) to live with one.

I had wanted to make a *Rat Evaluated Artwork* so I had found out something about rats. I had done this by visiting the village halls used by rat fanciers and the gated community of the scientific lab. I had learnt something about rats as pets and rats as rat models. I had read a study on rats as vermin. In my explanations to others, I had noticed myself using the term "experimental" as in "I'm not sure what I'm doing – it's a kind of experiment." It was a way of avoiding saying what I was doing, since I didn't know what that was, and so far, no one had challenged me. Within practice-based research within art and design, you can get a way with quite a lot. You are allowed not to know, for quite a lot longer than you are elsewhere in the world. I clutched on to the ambiguity I could carry with me.

In the UK it is the Home Office which has responsibility for looking after the welfare of animals used within science under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. There are two key ideas in the legislation. The first is to minimise pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm to animals used in regulated procedures. The second idea is a set of principles called the "3Rs" – replace, reduce, refine: seeking to replace animal use wherever possible; reduce the numbers of animals involved; and refine procedures to minimise their suffering. A license to carry out scientific procedures using animals can only be granted under the Act once a number of conditions have been met.



*Hello, I wonder if you can help. I'm calling from Oxford University, the Ruskin School. No, not Ruskin College.*

*Yes, I'm a researcher. Oxford. No, I'm from a different department.*

*Yes, I'm trying to find out about whether my planned research programme comes under the Act.*

*Yes, I've looked the website.*

*No, I'm interested in a personal licence. We're still designing the project. No, no one in my department has got a project licence at the moment.*

*Rats.*

*The sorts of procedures would be things like making them do a forced learning activity, maybe restricting a rat temporarily to a confined area, using auditory stimulae.*

*The project supervisor is probably me. No, I haven't done this before. Oh. I have to have a licence for one year, do I?*

*Who's commissioned the research? Well, it comes under some work we're doing at the Ruskin.*

*There is a funding body. The Wellcome Trust. The sci-art awards programme.*

*The experiments are to do with rats. To see whether they can make beautiful drawings.*

*Psychology. Art. Art history. Zoology. Sociology maybe?*

*Forced learning activities, restriction to a confined area, auditory stimulae.*

*No, I'm not an undergraduate.*

*Would it be ok to perform these procedures at a place that's not designated by the Secretary of State? In the notes, it says that other places might be allowed in exceptional circumstances. Page 5. An arts centre. Rats doing drawings. Not Ruskin College. The Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art.*

*But what about the personal licence? I should call back tomorrow.*

I did make this call. I sat with my microphone ready to record the conversation but I could never get through. I remain unlicensed to experiment with rats.

Having put aside the Rat Evaluated Artwork, my aesthetic experiment would ask: What might happen if I brought together different kinds of knowledge, desire and disgust combining what I had found in the two worlds I had explored? Could I make visible rats as rats, not just rats as pets or rats as rat models? What would the rats themselves do and how would they experience the work?

To explore these questions, I designed, organised and hosted a one-day *Rat Fair* at Camden Arts Centre in London<sup>vii</sup>, attended by around 450 people and 40 rats. Attractions at this event included the world premiere of the “Is Your Rat an Artist?” drawing competition in which rats and humans collaborated with a software tool to create drawings. Other attractions included Maximillian’s Pet Shop presented by two young designers with designs for animals and animal lovers, a chance to design and race a RoboRat, agility training for rats using equipment borrowed from a member of the Estuary Rat Club, and a rat beauty parlour with grooming and advice from a rat lover and a vet. An experimental psychologist brought along a T-maze used within labs to test how good rats’ memories are. Participants were also able to use a new visualisation tool I designed using something resembling rats tails to mark where in London they had seen a rat. There was rat face painting for children. I also created a line of Aunt Lucy’s Sugar Rats, a not-yet traditional greyish sweet with a sticky tail. Over several hours, people, some accompanied by rats in travelling cages, came along to spend time with each other, trying out the various attractions.

Perhaps the highlight of the *Rat Fair* was the “Is Your Rat an Artist?” drawing competition using the device shown in Figure 8. The drawings shown in Figures 9, 10, and 11 were produced by rats, with the help of humans and a software system I designed, inspired by the Morris water maze (Morris, 1984) which had been shown to me during a visit to an experimental psychology laboratory. In the middle of the room where the *Rat Fair* took place was a box on the floor covered in sawdust. Placed into this box one by one, individual rats moved around the box for around ten minutes each, sometimes distracted by various plastic and wooden toys, smells, noise, and by the humans and other rats outside the box. While each rat explored the environment, a video camera mounted overhead tracked its movements and converted these to a line drawing. In the design of

this attraction I was perhaps making the rat’s hands (Baker, 2000) more visible with the help of human hands and software hands. In my arrangement, the rat draws by moving around the drawing box, like a computer mouse moving over a desk. The way the animal moves around in the drawing area depends on her curiosity, how confident she is, how habituated she is to the environment and the people and other rats nearby. From the perspective of animal psychology, a frightened



**Figure 7.** A mapping tool identifying where the nearest rats were, shown installed at Camden Arts Centre, London, August 2005 (photo: Andy Keate, (c) Lucy Kimbell)

rat will stay close to the walls; a confident rat will quickly start exploring the open area, moving towards the objects placed in the box. Openings, tunnels, corridors and holes are all of interest to the artist-rat. She chooses her own path but her human companion, the other people and rats present, the environment she finds herself in, as well as the software, form part of the assemblage that creates the drawing.

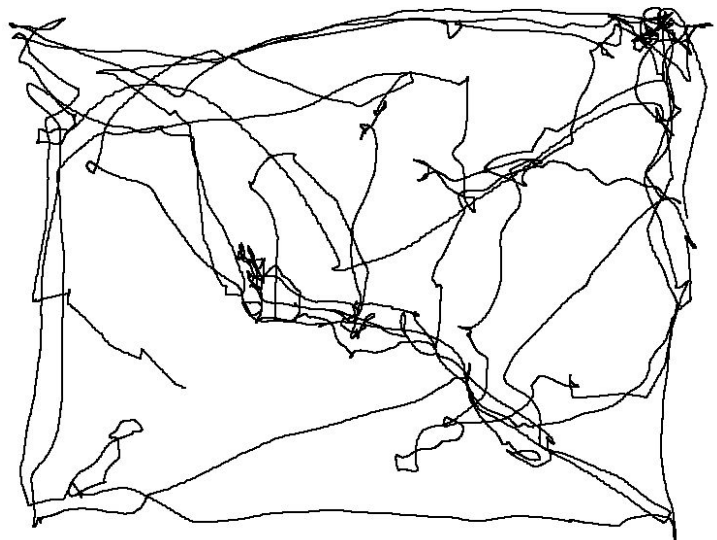
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To assess these artworks, I called on the services of curator Jenni Lomax<sup>viii</sup> to decide which of these drawings should win the world’s first Rat Art Award. After careful consideration, she selected one by an eight month old female rat called Dinah, whose human companion Nick received the prize on her behalf, a bottle of rat essence somewhat resembling champagne. And thus *Rat Fair* ended, with awards, and clapping, and a sense of aesthetic judgements made. A short film entitled ‘Seven Minutes in the Service of Rats’ (Kimbell, 2009) documents the event.

I still think about the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*. It’s a piece of work I want to make but am not able to make. I cannot make it because I can’t put live

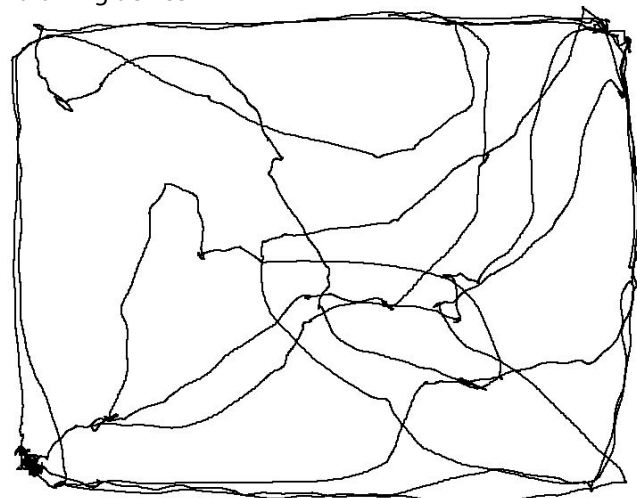


**Figure 8.** Installation view of the “Is Your Rat an Artist?” drawing device, shown at Camden Arts Centre, London, August 2005 (photo: Andy Keate, (c) Lucy Kimbell)



Eric, male, 16 months old, 8 min 4 seconds, Camden Arts Center, 27.8.2005

**Figure 9.** Drawing by Eric, male, 16 months old, using the “Is Your Rat an Artist?” drawing device



Esric, male, 6 months old, 10 min 0 seconds, Camden Arts Center, 27.8.2005

**Figure 10.** Drawing by Esric, male, six months old, using the “Is Your Rat an Artist?” drawing device

animals into a gallery piece, to make them into a spectacle in an art context and anyway they would sleep, or sit in the corner instead of moving around. It wouldn't work. Could it work aesthetically but not ethically? Could it work ethically but not aesthetically? It exists as an image and as a picture. Not realised and not realisable. It is a work that cannot work.

## DISCUSSION

This account of an aesthetic research project into rats and humans in different kinds of organizational context does a number of things. It illustrates a way to undertake an aesthetic inquiry based in contemporary arts practice that resulted in "thick sensory description" (Taylor and Hansen, 2005) in the form of the *Rat Fair* event. This offered several ways for human and non-human participants to be involved in producing both drawings and the event-as-artwork. It enriches understanding of aesthetic knowledge in practice by providing a detailed description of how I went about the research.

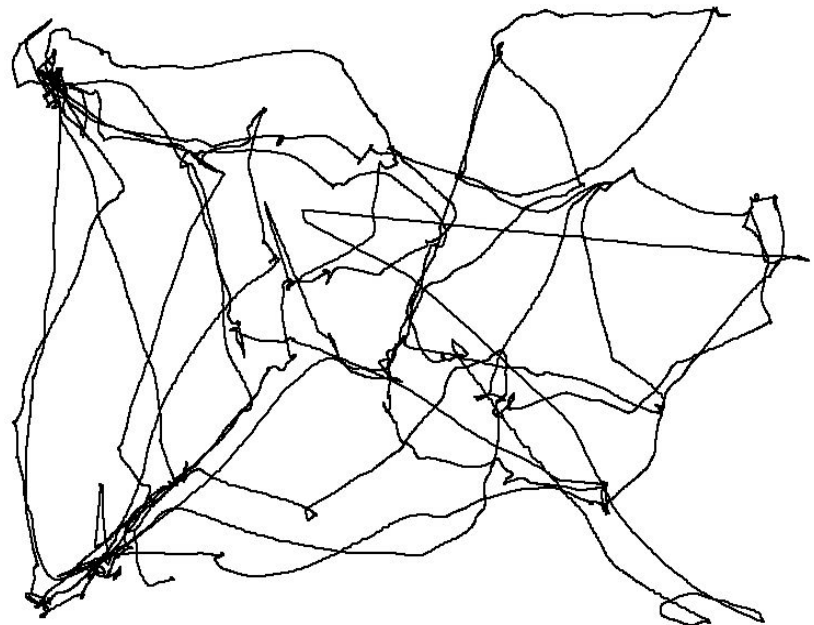
It also contributes to discussions about the intersection of aesthetics and ethics in practice. The initial purpose of the research was concerned with trying to make an artwork involving live rats. This in turn resulted in my increasing discomfort with instrumentalizing animals within an artwork alongside a growing understanding of how rats would not participate in the way I imagined in my proposed *Rat Evaluated Artwork*. I abandoned the initial concept of the REA and instead created an event that combined practices and knowledge from both communities that engaged humans and rats in different ways. The *Rat Fair* offered a new distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004). It brought humans and rats involved in three domains, science, fancy rat shows and the arts, into a new kind of relation with one another. Three main contributions are identified.

### (1) New configurations create new inequalities

Rancière conceives of the aesthetic as not just a realm of the senses, or the beautiful, or concerned with the arts, but rather as the distribution of the sensible which enables modes of perceiving, thinking and saying. For Rancière, art has an important power of rearranging and expanding what can be perceived and what is thinkable (Beyes, 2008: 32). However with these rearrangements can come new inequalities.

I described above how my initial intention was to create the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*, which resulted in my learning about rats in two contexts in which humans and rats are organized, the fancy community and experimental science. However as I learned more, I discovered that putting rats into a gallery space as a spectacle, and keeping them hungry to motivate them to take part in the work, were decisions I felt uncomfortable with for ethical reasons. I tried to resolve this by creating a new concept, the *Rat Fair* event, to bring rats and humans from different domains into a more equitable set of relations. But in doing so, I created a new kind of inequality. I set up a situation inviting people who have rats in their lives to come to a live event in a public arts venue, accompanied by the rats. The *Rat Fair* opened up the distribution of the sensible to a wide range of participants including rats and humans, some from arts audiences, some from science and some from the fancy rat community. The event enabled them to create their own connections within several different arrangements, some originating in the fancy rat world, some in science, and some of my own devising. Instead of making rats a spectacle in the REA – which did not seem right to do – I ended up creating an event which figured members of the fancy rat community who attended as an object of study. My effort to act ethically in relation to the rats lead to a situation in which I drew in some humans in ways that raised questions for me and for other participants about how this participation was configured. An implication for researchers concerned with the intersection of ethics and aesthetics is to consider how their own research makes some things sayable and visible, but not others, creating particular inclusions and exclusions. Rancière argues that the aesthetic regime of art rearranges these distributions. However, as I found, trying to create a particular equality created other inequalities.

### (2) Disruption in aesthetic inquiry



**Figure 11.** Winning drawing by Dinah, female, eight months old, using the "Is Your Rat an Artist?" drawing device

Rancière's (2004; 2007) aesthetic regime of art avoids two dead ends: "the total effacement of the boundary between art and life, and the complete separation of art from life" (Tanke, 2010: 10). In this regime, form, content and technique are not predetermined and hierarchies are disrupted, including ethical and other conventions. Much of the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is illustrative of this, using disgust, humour or subversion to generate a response in the viewer or audience and engaging in institutional critiques (Born and Weszkalnys, 2007). In their analysis of aesthetics, Taylor and Hansen (2005) echo this: "We might also note aesthetics' ability to transform the very categories we use to organize our experiences. Aesthetic forms of expression are like experiments that allow us to reconsider and challenge dominant categories and classifications."

In my aesthetic inquiry, what started off as a desire to make an installation in a gallery changed to creating a live event in an arts venue (form), drawing together a wide range of rats, people and different kinds of artifact and institutional arrangement, from every day life to science (form/content). To do this I used what resemble ethnographic methods and combined them with new ones I created such as the adaptation of the Morris water maze (method). By studying practices and artifacts found in two distinct arenas – fancy rat breeding and shows, and experimental psychology – and recombining them into new arrangements within my event, I disrupted hierarchies about who has knowledge about rats. By bringing rats into an art venue, I reconfigured accepted divisions between art and non-art. An implication for organization researchers interested in practicing aesthetic inquiries is to be willing to go beyond just having a taste for intellectual transgression (Strati, 2009). Instead, situated within the aesthetic regime, researchers can develop dis-tasteful practices that are not (yet) authorized by or comprehensible to the academy, producing new subjects, sites and ways of doing research.

### **(3) Not knowing in aesthetic inquiry**

Not knowing might be considered fundamental to research, so obvious to be not worth discussing. The purpose of research is to move from not knowing to knowing and several researchers' efforts have been concerned with understanding the aesthetic dimensions of knowing. Taylor and Hansen propose that aesthetic knowing is a kind of knowing that is "driven by a desire for subjective, personal truth usually for its own sake" (2005: 1213).

However Rancière's efforts to see the connections between art and politics can be read as questioning how social scientists construct their objects of study and how their claims to knowledge produce ignorance (Pelletier, 2009). In my aesthetic inquiry, I discovered that *not* knowing became an important resource in the work, both the process of undertaking the research and in what I wanted to offer participants in the *Rat Fair* event. As I have described above, I did not have clear research questions, or knowledge of a field to which I might contribute, or explicit reasons for using one method over another, let alone findings I could articulate clearly within a particular regime of representation – all of which social science expects (eg Blaikie, 2010). But this did not stop me from doing something resembling research as I tried to make my artwork. Or rather, an aesthetic approach to doing research tolerated or even required me not to know what I was doing, or quite why, or how.

Related to the importance of not knowing in the process of inquiry, is ambiguity about what it achieves. This essay, for example, carries with it some of the slipperiness of contemporary art. Is this paper a satire, or serious attempt at scholarship? Can any paper do both well? Do the multiple voices in this account get in the way of the more theoretical aspects, or vice versa? Which offers a better read? Does the paper contribute to or destabilize the field? In his reading of Rancière, Beyes (2008) argues this undecidability is precisely the value of contemporary art and, by implication, of attempts at an aesthetic inquiry: "artistic in[ter]ventions should not be robbed of their talent for being ambiguous, disputable and preliminary cuts into the distributions of the sensible and thus the orderings of the social" (Beyes, 2008: 38; brackets in original). The difficulty of distinguishing between art and non-art, in the aesthetic regime, or between a scholarly contribution or a satire, in the case of research, can be a contribution. A possible implication for organization researchers is to develop the capacity to give up claims to knowledge and perhaps even enjoy doing so, a purpose that does not sit well with much academic research. Further, by excluding or ignoring aesthetic inquiry in their work, researchers constitute a kind of knowledge production that has disciplinary consequences.

## **CONCLUSION**

Several researchers have concluded that contemporary art might be rewarding for organizational scholars interested in studying aesthetics using aesthetic means. Helping build greater understanding of the possibilities of using such approaches, this paper shows how to go about an aesthetic inquiry based in contemporary art practice. Through a description of how I went about making an artwork involving live rats, I illustrate how considering ethical questions was an important part of my work as an artist but how these could only be understood in practice. Further, rather than seeking to balance ethics and aesthetics as suggested by Brady (1986), my approach was better explained with reference to the work of Jacques Rancière (2004; 2007). He shows how political choices are involved in constituting what is thinkable and sayable in the distribution of the sensible, and suggests that the aesthetic regime of art can expand or rearrange what can be perceived.

My research into how to make my proposed *Rat Evaluated Artwork* lead to my participating in two contexts in which rats and humans engage: fancy rat breeding and shows, and experimental science. The ethical question to which I attended was, what was

the right thing to do with the rats within my artwork? Two possible responses were either not using animals instrumentally, or presenting a critical account highlighting their use. Instead I found a way to bring the rats into the artwork on a more equal basis, which reconfigured what was sayable and knowable about rats and the humans and which avoided these “safe bets” (Rancière 2004; Rancière 2007; Beyes, 2008).

There are three findings. First, new configurations of the sensible can lead to new inequalities. Instead of my original idea to create the *Rat Evaluated Artwork*, I made a different artwork that brought together humans, rats and various material and software artefacts into the artwork on the basis, I hoped, of greater equality. However the *Rat Fair* generated new questions about whether it was the right way to engage some of the people in this way. Second, aesthetic enquiries can lead to disruption. Within the aesthetic regime, the method, content and form of the research are undetermined. Humour, absurdity and subversion are equally valid as part of the approach. One concluding element of my inquiry, the *Rat Fair* event, disrupted hierarchies about who has knowledge about rats. Third, not knowing how to go about the research, and an undecidability about what resulted, were important in this project. Far from being peripheral matters, an enquiry within the aesthetic regime of art can reveal how particular configurations change what is sayable and thinkable. For organization researchers intrigued by the possibility of contemporary arts practices in the aesthetic regime, such reconfigurations, disruptions and undecidability can be rewarding, but they can also reconfigure what is thinkable and sayable within research.

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*Photographs © by Lucy Kimbell*

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<sup>i</sup> UK researchers will note the intersections between what is discussed here and the government’s attempt to establish the value of academic research through efforts such as the Research Assessment Exercise and its successor.

<sup>ii</sup> Space does not allow a full discussion of contemporary art. For key themes such as the role of the viewer, the nature of art’s institutions, the materiality or otherwise of art objects see Lippard (1973), Godfrey (1998), Bishop (2006) and Thornton (2008).

<sup>iii</sup> There is not space here for an extensive discussion of practice-based research in art and design about which researchers remain in deep disagreement about the nature of such work. See Durling and Friedman (2000), Carter (2004), Biggs and Büchler (2008), Rust (2009) and Barrett and Bolt (2010) for some distinct positions.

<sup>iv</sup> Any mistakes are mine.

<sup>v</sup> Interpreter’s note: GMR = Get more rats.

<sup>vi</sup> When my colleague Steve Woolgar, a well-known social scientist, referred to my rat project as an ethnography, I began to wonder what kind of status it would have in the academy, which lead ultimately to writing this paper. Peer-reviewed papers in international databases have a longer shelf-life than one-off public events in art galleries unless I choose and am invited to document the debris from the Rat Fair, or isolate parts of the research such as rat-human-

software drawings reproduced here, for display in other art contexts. It remains to be seen what matters more: the art project or this academicized account of it.

<sup>vii</sup> Rat Fair, Camden Arts Centre, Saturday 27 August 2005.

<sup>viii</sup> Director of Camden Arts Centre, London.