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## Regarding the Pain of Rats

### Kim Jones's Rat Piece

#### Martin Harries

Since the 1970s, Kim Jones, an artist who works in sculpture, drawing, and mixed media, has also performed as Mudman. Mudman's performances vary, and have included long walks on set routes through Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, as well as less peripatetic events confined to galleries. Jones's most notorious performance remains *Rat Piece*, from 1976. Available evidence suggests that *Rat Piece* was a slow, deliberate, even meditative performance. Over about half an hour or so, Jones—lean, muscular, face hidden under a pair of pantyhose—stripped, slathered himself with mud, donned the headpiece and wooden structure of Mudman, and, while walking through the performance space, read a reflexive statement about performing as

Mudman. He then pulled a tarp off a circular wire cage holding three live rats and some paper, sprayed the rats and paper with lighter fluid, and set the rats and paper on fire. The rats' deaths were gradual: Jones periodically fed the fire with more fluid. The panicked rats scampered up the edges of the cage, ran in circles, and screamed as they neared death. Jones briefly screamed, too. After the rats were dead, Jones slowly covered their remains with soil and stones from a few bags. He then draped the cage again with the tarp. Very deliberately, Jones removed the structure from his back, put on his pants, carefully put on his socks and boots and jacket, all without removing the mud from his body. He never removed the pantyhose covering his head.

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Figures 1–5. *Rat Piece*, Union Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles, 17 February 1976.

1. Kim Jones as Mudman.
2. Jones sprayed the live rats with lighter fluid.
3. The rats ran in circles.
4. Jones covered the rats' remains.
5. Jones removed the Mudman structure from his back and dressed. (Photos courtesy of Kim Jones/Pierogi 2000)

Jones performed *Rat Piece* only once, 30 years ago at the Union Gallery on the campus of California State University, Los Angeles, on 17 February 1976. Following the performance, the event became highly controversial. The more or less immediate consequences were two: CalState fired the gallery director, Frank Brown; and Jones, on a plea of no contest, was later convicted of cruelty to animals (and penalized with a small fine). Other consequences are harder to measure. In a 2005 interview, Jones reflects on the piece:

The one piece that I did which was directly related to the Vietnam War was when I burned the three male rats to death in '76. That was directly related to the fact that we used to burn rats to death in Vietnam. [...] When I did it I didn't realize was how upset people would be by it. I knew they would be upset. When I did it people just went nuts. I ended up going to court. People still get upset about it. I can understand that because I tortured the animals to

death, but it was important for me to have that experience as an art piece. Instead of just talking about killing something, or burning something, to actually have the audience that went to see this experience the smell of death and to actually have control in a certain way. They could have stopped me. (Jones 2005:14)

Three points here bear emphasis: First, *Rat Piece* remains one of the few works that Jones relates directly to his experience as a U.S. marine in Vietnam, where he served a tour from 1967 to 1968. Jones has consistently and convincingly objected to critical accounts that reduce all his work to a set of symptomatic responses to that experience; he does allow, however, that *Rat Piece* arises from it. Second, Jones insists that he wanted his audience to face the reality of torture and death within the context of an “art piece.” What it means to bound *Rat Piece* as an aesthetic object needs further thought, but Jones’s emphasis on *Rat Piece* as art and not, say, ritual, insists that a meaningful demarcation of the aesthetic framed the work. Third, Jones states simply that the audience “could have stopped me.” This possibility of an intervention on the part of the audience, as I shall argue below, seems to me to complicate the field of the aesthetic—perhaps to an extent that Jones’s audience was not yet ready to allow or to recognize.

Jones has been consistent on the question of intervention for 30 years. Damian Sharp recorded Jones’s comments from the time in an essay dated April 1976:

I wanted to see if they would stop me. It would not have stopped the performance it merely would have changed it and the performance would have seen [sic] total, that is, the artist and the audience would have been one as everyone would have been physically and emotionally involved. I would have struggled physically with them, but not for long, but I would’ve wanted to [see] it through to that point and then

establish the basis for the change and the new element, i.e. the audience... They said I was cruel, yet none of them tried to prevent it when they could’ve. (in Jones 1991:64)<sup>1</sup>

*Rat Piece* was at once repetition and experiment. The repetition: as Jones writes in an “Artist Statement” written in the year or so after the performance, in Vietnam he burned rats with fellow marines:

vietnam dong ha marine corps our camp covered with rats they crawled over us at night they got in our food we catch them in cages and burn them to death i remember the smell

some enjoyed watching the terrified ball of flame run

vietnam dong ha marine corps feel sorry for one and let it go my comrades attack me verbally (Jones [ca. 1977] 1991:7)

The experiment: Would the audience of *Rat Piece* show sympathy? Would it intervene?

It may have shown sympathy; it did not intervene. This unhumanitarian nonintervention is crucial to understanding *Rat Piece*. Not to intervene is what it is to be an audience: Audiences do not intervene, or when they do intervene, the members of this group become something other than an audience. Jones’s willingness to use the word “audience” for the group assembled in the gallery is itself remarkable, as is his insistence that the work was an “art piece.” But perhaps most intriguing in his two descriptions is the word “total,” which appears in the statement of 1976 and has fallen out of the interview from 2005. *Rat Piece* belongs to a moment when artists still dreamed of a total theatre—“total” not in the Wagnerian sense but as an expression of the desire to dissolve divides between performers and audience.<sup>2</sup> The performance belongs to this moment precisely to the extent that it demonstrated the domination of audience conventions even after a long history of attacks on these conventions.

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1. *Rat Piece*, self-published by the artist, includes a range of documents related to the performance, including an artist’s statement, press releases distributed beforehand, news accounts written afterwards, otherwise unpublished essays by Damian Sharp and others, letters written by critics and artists, and legal documents.
  2. Michael Kirby’s anthology (1969) remains an excellent survey of the idea of total theatre.

This is to say that it is only as art, only as a performance for an audience that does not intervene, that *Rat Piece* succeeds. Writing about Chris Burden's most famous performance, Frazer Ward has observed, "*Shoot* refused to exempt its audience from acquiescence in spectacular representations of violence" (2001:129). One of the implications of Ward's argument is suggestive for *Rat Piece*: The success of the performance relies on the failure of the audience, its failure to intervene. Had the audience interrupted to save the rats, it would have demonstrated an unusual power of sympathy—how often do we rescue rats? By asserting a morality putatively superior to that of the artist who killed the three rats, however, the audience might also have claimed the exemption from "acquiescence in spectacular representations of violence" that no U.S. audience could claim, in 1976 or since.

But what about these "three male rats"? Surely by 1976 an artgoing segment of the American public needed no lesson in its involvement in spectacle. Writing in the *Village Voice* some months after the performance, Annette Kuhn declared that "the whole mess seems an exercise in idiocy." She added an afterthought: "By the way, this rat-killing stuff is very old-fashioned. Rats and chickens died by the score in the mid-'60s, when war protesting was an acute and necessary concern of artists" (1976:97). Kuhn's aside at once admits to and shuts down the possibility of a relationship between Jones's work and the war in Vietnam. Its knowing air suggests that 1976 was simply too late for a performance such as *Rat Piece*; "this rat-killing stuff" is passé. Here, Kuhn dismisses Jones's work as insufficiently avantgarde, a belated protest against a finished war. Kuhn senses the importance of the war as context, and her dismissal of its relevance obliges me to articulate my sense of the relationship between *Rat Piece* and the war more clearly.

Nancy Princenthal offers an acute diagnosis of possible reasons for critical dismissals such as Kuhn's:

A year after United States withdrawal from Vietnam and nearly a decade after the height of antiwar activity, in which the symbolic display of dead animals,

and even their ritual slaughter, was not uncommon, Jones's stated concern to explore issues of sanctioned violence was given almost no credence at all. Self-incinerated Buddhist monks and napalmed civilians had vanished from the news; the New Age had arrived. (1991:22-23)

What Kuhn does not acknowledge is that *Rat Piece* was not only a scene of killing, but also a scene of pain and death, an enactment of as well as a meditation on violence. Princenthal's shorthand chronology suggests a critical function for Jones's extreme aesthetic practice. Charting a movement from mass-mediated experience of deaths in Vietnam to a mass-mediated evacuation of the same sphere that distributed those images, Princenthal's sense of the untimeliness of Jones's performance also casts light on the awkwardness of these rats. In two years, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) would draw a parallel between the sanctioned killing of animals in the Pennsylvania hills and the state-sanctioned violence in Vietnam, and this parallel allows one to see, again, how very odd Jones's rats are. Rats and napalmed civilians? The grotesque failure of this allegory is perhaps the point.

To regard the pain of rats is to go against most people's habits of thought when it comes to rats. But to say this is already to beg the question of what we think about when we think about pain. On this question, two now classic books, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* ([1975] 1990) and Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), confront each other in an unsettling way. The essential ethical point of Singer's book is that the capacity for suffering is "a prerequisite for having interests at all" ([1975] 1990:7). Animals, including rats, as Singer often points out, suffer, and they therefore have interests that humans should respect. (The role of rats in *Animal Liberation* is larger than I can trace here.) Singer applies neurobiological evidence in matter-of-fact ways to show that the brains of animals, while not as well equipped as those of humans to reason, to plan, to think ahead, to perform art, and so on, are actually quite well equipped to experience a wide array of pains ([1975]

1990). Singer has no doubt about animals' experience of pain; it is simply a fact, and a nasty one for those of us who eat meat.

The contrast with Scarry is remarkable. The essential ethical problem for Scarry is precisely our inability to know another's pain and our tendency to flee from intimations of this knowledge when it arrives to us. "To have pain is to have *certainty*," she writes, "to hear about pain is to have *doubt*" (1985:13). Scarry's first chapter focuses on torture, and there she argues that one of the political consequences of this doubt about pain is the invisibility of the pain of the victim of torture to the torturer (29). It may be that Scarry's point about the skepticism we have regarding the pain of others helps to explain why people can know what Singer knows and nevertheless continue to eat meat and otherwise enjoy what comes from the industrial slaughter of animals. This skepticism, which Scarry argues is extremely common when confronted with the pain of another person, is perhaps only more powerful when the body in pain is that of an animal—or, of course, when we tend to see not the body in pain but discrete pieces of this body that was once in pain on a dinner plate. If the problem of sympathy or simple recognition of the pain of another is as sharp as Scarry says it is (and a pathos about incommunicability may make *The Body in Pain* prone to exaggeration), then this failure of recognition is likely to be only more intense when it becomes a problem across species. "Few people," as Singer writes, "feel sympathy for rats" (30). Even for Singer, the rat is the limit case, the animal lower than which there is no animal. The abject rat, that is, offers Singer precisely a way to picture the mass extension of sympathy he desires from his reader.

It is a complicated distinction of *Rat Piece* that it provoked such sympathy. That is to say, *Rat Piece* made the pain of rats—usually killed out of sight—visible, even shareable, in a rare way. The question, then, was not whether these rats were experiencing pain, but why they were made to experience pain, and what the killing meant. To ask what this pain meant is to enter into the complicated movement between our habits of anthropomorphization and the capacity for recognizing animals as animals that Una Chaudhuri (2003) has

insisted critics of performance must consider. On the one hand, these rats were "forced to perform *us*—our fantasies and fears, our questions and quarrels, our hopes and horrors"; in particular, these rats were made to perform conflicts surrounding a war that was over only in the sense that the U.S. government had removed itself from the conflict. On the other hand, the rats' shrieks made palpable the "radical otherness" of these creatures (Chaudhuri 2003:648): This pain was not only the embodiment of the pain of other forgotten rats, burned without legal consequence in Vietnam, or of the anthropomorphized pain of other, human subjects. (What photograph comes to mind when one thinks of a "terrified ball of flame" running?)

On the grainy video of *Rat Piece* that survives as a fascinating and tantalizing record of performance, the moment when Jones screams in concert with the rats is especially powerful, even frightening. The brief and piercing scream contrasts with Jones's earlier reading, a paratactic collage of phrases: "it's religious it's art [...] an abstract cross a radio antenna [...]. Who was that masked man [...] R. Mutt came up to me [...] A star is born [...] people attacked me verbally others ignored me [...] I felt safe behind the mud [...]." This collage of imagined or real responses to Jones's work, pop-cultural and art-historical references, and memoirs of performance places the piece in a relatively accessible set of coordinates: the art/religion divide, the Lone Ranger, Duchamp. The scream is different, and all the more chilling because it is hard to know in what register to understand it. Is it a form of expression, the artist's mourning for the animals he has killed? Alternately, one might see this scream as analogous to Joseph Beuys's avowedly political advocacy for the rights of animals: "Yes, I speak for the hares that cannot speak for themselves" (1990:82). Beuys claimed to have formed the world's largest political party, to which all of the world's animals belonged (81). Just as Beuys's claim to speak for hares recalls Marx's famous formula for the "small-holding" peasants of France—"They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (1963:124)—so Beuys's new party of animals suggests an explosion of the world party of the proletariat into the animal

kingdom. The screams of *Rat Piece* signify differently, or, perhaps, refuse to signify. Jones's scream is precisely not a ventriloquizing of the rats, not speech on behalf of those creatures who "cannot speak for themselves"; not an act of representation in the political sense. As a matter of aesthetic representation, the man's scream straddles a divide, at once imitation of the harrowing noise of the rats and a sign of difference between rats and man.

This scream, then, embodies the doubled force of *Rat Piece*: It simultaneously insists on the suffering of these three, particular male rats and suggests a set of powerful and perhaps incompatible allegories—rats as U.S. soldiers, as Vietnamese civilians, as signifiers of a world of mediated suffering to which the witness does not know how to respond. The allegorical shuttling of *Rat Piece* moved between assigning a human meaning to the suffering of rats and insisting on the suffering of rats as the suffering of rats. These dying rats took on human qualities and became the sudden object of a usually absent human sympathy and even outrage: if *Rat Piece* humanized rats, perhaps it also ratified humans. This shuttling suggests that the success of *Rat Piece*—an audience made to care about rats—is also a kind of failure: "The New Age had arrived," and audiences no longer traced violent anthropomorphizations back to human bodies or back to Vietnam. Indeed, the sudden sympathy for rats is also legible as a refusal to recognize the allegorical force of the performance. If this moment of total theatre sought the dissolution of boundaries between performers and audience—the intervention of an audience that saw itself in those burning rats—the failure of *Rat Piece* to produce an audience willing to intervene marked limits at once of sympathy and of art.

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