

Collaboration with urban rats in Rat City

MAIJA LINTURI

UniArts Helsinki

maijalinturi@gmail.com

Introduction

Before the 2000s, the roles of live nonhuman animals in the performing arts were relatively limited. They were treated as objects of study or spectacle, anthropomorphized, reduced to material, or used to produce specific effects (Ullrich 2019; Fischer-Lichte 2008). With the so-called animal turn, this began to change: growing interest in human–animal relations, individual animals, and animal agency reached the performing arts and gave rise to a new genre, interspecies performance. At the same time, many artists working with nonhuman animals began to describe their works as “collaborations”. (Ullrich 2019).

In this essay, I discuss my own interspecies and site-specific performance *Rat City* (2023) taking place in Myllypuro district in Helsinki. *Rat City* was also the artistic component of my master’s thesis for the Live Art and Performance Studies program at the Uniarts Helsinki. The work began from an interest in whether artistic performance could be created with urban rats in a way that allowed them as much agency as possible. Alongside this, a more tentative question emerged: could the performance be done *in collaboration* with rats? Here, I focus on this underlying question, considering how the idea of collaboration shaped the performance process and reflecting whether the concept itself might need to be rethought to better account for nonhuman collaborators.

Interspecies performance and collaboration

Interspecies performance refers to works that involve real nonhuman actors in such a way that both human and nonhuman participants influence the final outcome (Ullrich 2019, 72). What distinguishes it from other animal performances, such as circus acts, is its ethico-political dimension (Cull Ó Maoilearca 2022; Ullrich 2019). Performance



philosopher Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca (2019, 2022) describes this as a shift from using animals for aesthetic purposes toward using performance to know animals differently and unsettle anthropocentric assumptions.

Interspecies collaboration is often discussed in relation to interspecies performance. Yet unlike the latter, it lacks a widely accepted theoretical framework in the arts. The term carries ethical connotations of shared goals and equality while leaving open questions such as how other species benefit or how their consent might be ensured. This vagueness has prompted warnings that careless claims of collaboration can mask exploitation and unequal power relations (Kirksey et al. 2014). Criticism is also shaped by the so-called “problem of other minds”: since we cannot know how other animals think, feel, or experience the world, collaboration with them appears inconceivable (Jevbratt 2009; Criado & Rosell 2017). While critique of easy claims of collaboration is well founded, the assumption that collaboration would be fundamentally impossible seems, to me, to call for reconsideration.

Media artist Lisa Jevbratt (2009, 1–2) suggests that by setting collaboration as a goal, the artist begins to explore the world *with* non-human animals rather than treating them as objects of study. Following this perspective, I decided to approach the rats in the process leading to *Rat City as if* we were collaborating, while trying to maintain a critical stance toward my own efforts. An additional challenge was that my “collaborator” was a wild species that, for good reason, tends to avoid humans. This raised the question of how collaboration might take place while respecting the rats’ need for distance and, more broadly, how collaboration itself should be understood.

Non-explicit communication

An early step in imagining interspecies collaboration in *Rat City* was psychologist Karolina Lukasik’s research project in two allotment gardens in Helsinki, which I had the opportunity to assist with. During the spring and summer of 2023, I participated in interviews with 22 gardeners exploring everyday human–animal interactions and conflicts. The interviews showed how gardeners and nonhuman animals continually renegotiate the use of the garden through space, objects, and actions (Lukasik et al. 2025). Some of the messages humans sent were intentional, such as flowers planted for pollinators or nets tied around tree seedlings, while others were not. Fallen apples on the ground or open composts were not meant as invitations to rats, yet they could easily be read as such. These misunderstandings often led to further negotiation: removing food sources, closing compost bins, or even changing garden rules.

After Lukasik's study, the working group and I began exploring the Myllypuro area, the future performance site, from the perspective of interspecies negotiation. We hypothesised that interpreting cross-species messages might reveal how humans and urban animals already communicate, share space, and perhaps even collaborate. Bin shelters proved especially revealing sites of this negotiation. As commensal animals feeding on human waste (O'Connor 2013, 7), rats may interpret waste concentrations as invitations. Human protective measures, however, may seek to refine or counter the message.

In one bin shelter later featured in the performance, this negotiation became particularly visible. A net had been installed at the top and bottom of the shelter to prevent small animals from entering. Yet magpies had learned to use gaps between the roof and the net to move in and out. Rats, in turn, had joined the negotiation by gnawing a hole in the rubber strip at the base of the door, creating their own passage. Magpies and rats thus responded to human deterrents with their own actions, and in the absence of a further human response, they ultimately gained access to the shelter.

Collaboration through protocols

Lisa Jevbratt further shaped my conception of interspecies collaboration by linking interspecies negotiation to a broader collaborative framework. To address the problem of other minds, Jevbratt (2009, 3-4) turns to forms of "intraspecies" collaboration that do not require direct communication, shared goals, or mutual awareness. One example is open-source software developed through shared protocols. Individual users act according to their own interests, yet a common protocol allows their actions to contribute to a shared outcome.

Applied to interspecies relations, protocols might formalise interaction between human and nonhuman animals into a set of rules or a performance score, or take the form of "protocological artifacts" that invite animals to engage (Jevbratt 2009). The bin shelter described earlier can be seen as such an artifact: humans and non-humans followed the protocol embedded in the shelter while also modifying it through their actions.

Next, I turn to Jevbratt's third model, the interference pattern, which proved most relevant for Rat City. It describes situations in which two or more different worlds—*umwelts*—overlap. Each *umwelt* can be understood as an individual pattern that, when superimposed, forms a new configuration: an interference pattern. In this model, the protocol is not pre-designed but emerges from that overlap (Jevbratt 2009, 7).

Interference pattern in Rat City

Rat City's most evident interference pattern appeared when I led the audience to a grassy area inhabited by a rat colony. I invited them to look more closely but reminded them to move carefully. After all, they were stepping into someone else's home.

At this point, three different worlds overlapped. The audience's world was shaped by personal attitudes toward rats as well as by the performance context; due to the transformative nature of performance, participants are often more open to new ideas than usual (Fischer-Lichte 2008). My own world included observations of human–rat negotiations, as well as a sense of responsibility toward the colony. The rats' world included at least sensory perceptions of us and prior experiences of humans moving near their burrows.

From this overlap emerged an interference pattern in which the audience perceived their surroundings differently and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. They walked cautiously and avoided loud conversation. Following Jevbratt's reasoning, this respectful conduct can be understood as a new protocol produced by the interference pattern.

We can only speculate about the rats' experience of the interference pattern, yet it may have influenced their behaviour, too. For about two months, I visited the site several times a week, alone and with others, without seeing a single rat. Then, two days before the premiere, I caught a brief glimpse of a small rat moving from one hole to another. Something similar happened again during the final performance, when a spectator saw a rat run into a burrow just as we stepped into the area. The rat appeared confident enough to leave their nest despite more than twenty people standing only a few metres away. Perhaps they were responding to a newly formed protocol in which certain human behaviours did not pose an immediate danger.

Conclusions

At the beginning of the process, I set collaboration with rats as a kind of utopian goal. From this perspective, I hesitate to call Rat City a genuine result of interspecies collaboration, even though there were moments when the worlds of rats and humans seemed to overlap. The performance was addressed to human audiences, and its form, dramaturgy, and aesthetics did little to take rats' preferences into account. One might ask, too, whether the rats benefited in any way from their participation. Moreover, the performance took place mainly at a historic rat site, a park built on top of an old landfill

where rats are no longer known to live. This decision respected the rats' need to remain invisible to humans, yet it also distanced the work from direct contact with them, and perhaps from interspecies collaboration itself.

The process also pointed to the risk of unequal power relations in interspecies collaboration. If, for example, the bold behaviour of the rat described earlier resulted from a form of collaboration, the ethics of my own actions also come into question: a rat that learns to trust humans may inadvertently attract pest control. The ethical reflection implicit in interspecies performance may sometimes favour respectful distance over contact. In contrast, the positive connotations of the word "collaboration" may suggest a closeness between species that can lead to unintended transgressions.

Even so, the goal of collaboration allowed new possibilities to emerge. It encouraged a more horizontal approach, attuning the human participants to the presence of non-human actors. Through the performance process and the concepts of non-explicit negotiation and protocol, I began to imagine forms of collaboration that do not depend on shared language, motives, or worlds. Such a shift in thinking may be especially important when working with non-human animals. As Cull (2015, 24) suggests in the context of interspecies performance, taking animals seriously as co-actors may require abandoning predetermined definitions of performance and allowing it to remain open to continual change and reconceptualization. Perhaps interspecies collaboration, too, calls for a similar shift in thinking if animals' needs are to matter.¹

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¹ *Note on the use of AI:* I used generative AI (ChatGPT) in the final phase of the manuscript to refine grammar. I did not use AI tools to generate any content or translations.

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