

No One Wants to Talk about Unicorns¹

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THE STRUCTURE OF URBAN ARTIFACTS Critique of Naive Functionalism

¹ This piece is informed by Gimlet Media, Episode 56, Zardulu podcast, released on February 25, 2016.

² See podcast transcript.

In the fall of last year, Eric Yearwood, a stand-up comedian and actor, was asked to perform for a film project. The plot goes something like this: Eric pretends to be asleep at a New York subway platform. He is carrying a phone. As he is asleep, a rat will crawl onto him. It will then access his phone, launch the camera option and then click the photo icon to capture a self-portrait. Later, Eric will leap up and act surprised.

Zardulu, the scriptwriter and producer, will be filming this entire event and the main goal of the project is to create 'viral content' when the film is later uploaded to the Internet. Eric grows curious about the project, but wonders where the rat will come from. In an interview with Gimlet Media, Eric described Zardulu's studio as a place where rats "would run [around a] maze[...], leap over little obstacles ... there was ... a little pool that they would swim across to retrieve certain things. And she had them trained in a way that was pretty amazing."² For Eric's video, they smear the 'Home' button with peanut butter, tricking one of Zardulu's rats into taking a picture. Eric then learns that this job is part of Zardulu's extensive body of work comprised of coordinated illusions and absurdities across New York City. More than simply relying on physical witnesses, some of Zardulu's works include editorials designed for the clickbait industry. In

Eric's testimony, he explains how her studio is filled with creations, such as a suit of human hair, made specifically for spreading fantastical tales across the world.

Eric accepted the opportunity without much hesitation. (He was compensated for his efforts, too.) A few days after the shooting, Zardulu submits the video to Connecticut TV posing as Don Richards. The video goes viral and today is commemorated as the magical phenomenon of 'Selfie Rat'. Soon after, different media platforms pick up the story and comments begin to pour in as analysts, eye-witnesses and professional de-bunkers alike, all have their say. This coupled with the older news of 'Pizza Rat', where a rat is filmed transporting a slice of pizza through New York's subway system, created a very small trend in our contemporary media where rats were portrayed as extra-terrestrial, hyper urbanized creatures.

Suddenly, a member of the public identifies Eric in the video as an actor and the hoax is exposed on the Internet. Also Pizza Rat's authenticity comes into question as another possible video manipulation and suddenly a discourse emerges about what is real and what is not. Eric promised to keep anonymity regarding this project, but after the hoax scandal he spoke out for Zardulu. Zardulu did the same by establishing a Twitter and

Facebook account. Here she described herself as a performance artist whose purpose is to reinvent the lost and undervalued practices of mythmaking. Both performers made possible the idea that many absurd things seen in New York's subway system could be Zardulu's hoaxes that perform along with the daily rhythms of the city. A few weeks later, another person reports two rats coordinating the transfer of a slice of pita bread up the subway stairs. Only if you spiral down the illusionary world of Zardulu can you begin to understand how effective it is. The emerging narrative is a small hysteria spreading across the world where people are negotiating the possibility that rats and their operations were coordinated by a mythic figure in a place like New York City. Achieving this in the age of algorithms is a success.

This exercise reveals our need – or thirst – for other worlds and other stories. Yet its main achievement is providing access to the possibility of other worlds. The terrain and ground being used in Zardulu's work is the city, where its matter and inhabitants are not only used as illustrations for our rationality, logic, lineage, structure, grids, history, memories, inheritances and values. Here the city is generated as a force field of combusive and imaginative processes.

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