

**RAT PACK**

by

Willard Thurston

Looking back at the innovations the modern art world has perpetrated, one realizes that even in a comparative backwater like Vancouver, the zeal remains undiminished. An early example.

A Vancouver artist cornered for himself an exclusive and intense notoriety by the announcement early in 1990 that he would publicly squash a rat, christened Sniffy, between two canvas lined cement blocks, the consequence of which would be the creation of a diptych when the canvas facings were pulled apart. Art for the great unwashed. The lambasting was planned entirely as a public event, even as the artist coyly wondered aloud (on CBC) what the public fuss was all about. We exterminate rats, don't we? he asked. The Yellow Pages were full of ads for exterminators. And Sniffy, we learned, was destined to be live snake food anyway (the rat came from a pet food store) — not, certainly, a sportsmanlike way of feeding the food chain, though sportsmanship may not be the artist's strong suit. The artist had also checked with a lawyer and his proposed spectacle was legal. The impartial weight of the law. A blunt instrument indeed. I remember thinking at the time that the undertaking could be a rather labour-intensive plea for the artist himself, on behalf of all unappreciated and slighted life forms: If you can't or won't kill off the real rats of this earth (in translation: middle-class stinkers who don't appreciate art) why single out a discrete, willing Pied Piper (in translation: a poor starving artist low on viable projects designed to upstage bourgeois vermin who won't liberally support middle-class derision)? It seems we re-define 'rat' with each generation.

Our day's 'rat pack' of white middle-class meddlers. But the lingering bloomer was the artist's lone serious, wistful comment: the rat, if freed, would not survive, being a farm bred rat, we were told. I recall Basil Fawlty on the subject: "Well he is a rat, isn't he; he's not about to be mugged by a gang of field mice.?" To patronize a homeless, destitute rat (coincidentally about to be macerated) is the kind of commiseration that maims with wonder. Yet, as the appointed hour approached, we learned that sensational publicity is not always an artistic coup. The artist pulverizer had his cement blocks stolen from the back of his apartment and was met, in the streets, by a pack of angry, unwavering, free ranging, un-extirpated philistines for whom he displayed not the slightest dalliance to learn 'what the fuss was all about.' In short, he turned tail and fled with great dispatch. I daresay a rat rarely moves as quickly. His poignant discovery of a rabid ravenous mass, whose humanity was not at that moment impeachable, was one of the indelible spectacles of the new age, and his pique as memorable as all artists who manage to antagonize the many-too-many boring sluggards (not after all a difficult job) and then demurely wonder what the fuss is all about.