Abstract: This essay examines a little-known but important installation entitled *Insure the Life of an Ant*, conceived by artist Mike Malloy and displayed at the O.K. Harris Gallery in New York in April of 1972. This provocative and idiosyncratic piece confronted gallery-goers, who became viewer–participants, with the option of killing or saving a live ant displayed like a sculpture on a pedestal, either by pushing a button or not. The artist made the piece, which can function almost like a psychology experiment, to engender a “moral dilemma”. I explore the particular role of affect in a participatory art installation, distinct from response to inanimate art. I investigate the roles of emotion and reason in dealing with the work; whether ratiocination can be considered an “anti-affect”; and how the tension between competing thoughts and feelings helped create a psychological drama. The essay looks at how an art space can operate as a zone of moral exceptionalism to encourage questionable actions. It also locates the piece in relation to the emergence of a more behaviorist art in the early 1970s, as discussed by critic Gregory Battcock, and the larger notion of postmodernism. Other contexts investigated include art and animal rights and issues of sentience and speciesism; social and military violence, including capital punishment and the Vietnam War; the 1961 Milgram experiment; Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil” as a Nazi war criminal defense; and other works of art involving maltreatment or violence toward both human and non-human animals, including those by Marina Abramović, Marco Evaristti, and Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz.  

Keywords: affect; Mike Malloy; animal rights; Gregory Battcock; behavior; installation art; participatory art; ethics and art; Stanley Milgram; Marco Evaristti

A little over a half-century ago, *Insure the Life of an Ant*, an idiosyncratic installation conceived by artist Mike Malloy, occupied Ivan Karp’s O.K. Harris Gallery, one of a handful of pioneering, cutting-edge art spaces that had sprung up at that time in the downtown neighborhood of Soho in New York City (Figure 1). On display in April of 1972, the piece confronted gallery-goers, who became viewer–participants, with the option of killing or saving a live ant displayed like a sculpture on a pedestal, either by pushing a button or not. Little-known today, the work engages with myriad issues. Among these is the ethics of using non-human animals in art, which also pits freedom of expression against censoring work that may inflict palpable harm on living beings. Because the installation involves making a choice, it implicates its participants in a behaviorist experiment. As a participatory piece, *Insure the Life of an Ant* encourages us to think about the nature of “affective art” that may require our own actions to apprehend it properly. On the one hand, it goes beyond pure visual stimuli to “move” the viewer, potentially producing a more viscerally psychological and phenomenological experience. On the other, it raises questions about the role that qualities such as reason, morality, and ethics might play in producing affect in art that encourages deeper thought and contemplation, how these more intellectual components operate in relation to emotion, and whether they might be thought of as “anti-affects”.

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Figure 1. Mike Malloy, *Insure the Life of an Ant*, mixed media installation (detail, artist with “Killing Chamber” in “Booth”), O.K. Harris Gallery, New York, 1972, courtesy of the artist and Marc Miller, Gallery 98.

*Insure the Life of an Ant* also embodies a twist on the concept of affect in art. Studies of affective art often examine how inanimate objects produce feelings within a viewer. In a piece incorporating something animate—a living ant—we must now consider how in this (and other works involving non-human animals), non-consenting and sentient creatures are “affected” by the artwork itself, in ways that could be harmful or life-ending. The field of “affective neuroscience” has shown that non-human animals may well experience emotions and feelings related to those of human animals. Nearly two-and-a-half centuries ago, Jeremy Bentham, the famous British philosopher, addressed this directly in his advocacy for animal rights: “The question is not ‘Can they [animals] reason?’ nor ‘Can they speak?’ but, ‘Can they suffer?’” In *Insure the Life of an Ant*, affect therefore can become distressingly intramural.

Before exploring *Insure the Life of an Ant* further, I want to consider succinctly the subject of affect. I take my lead from the call for papers for this themed issue of *Arts*—“Affective Art”—in which the guest editor, Renaissance art historian Marcia Hall, writes: “An affective work of art is one that moves our emotions in response to it”. She then names a string of what we might deem intense emotions, acknowledging, as we all would, that all art produces some type of response. That said, affect theories abound in a range of disciplines, including anthropology, art history, literary theory, philosophy, science (biology, neuroscience, physiology, etc.), the social sciences (psychology, etc.), and other fields. I will enlist concepts that seem pertinent, ultimately allowing this provocative artwork to guide and prompt analysis.

This essay pays particular attention to how eliciting emotions operates in a work that is defined less by the physical objects that comprise it and more by the situation it creates, the behavior it engenders, and how response is conditioned by its setting. Furthermore, Malloy’s piece tests the functioning of some typical affects, such as empathy and compassion, and introduces other elements that may reside more in the realm of morality and ethics, such as reason and logic. This emotional and rational admixture brings about a psychological quandary, or as Malloy put it, a “moral dilemma”, which is the ultimate intent of the piece. *Insure the Life of an Ant* constructs an event, one that centers on an
individual’s behavior and, as explained later, extends more broadly to certain historical and contemporaneous issues.

*Insure the Life of an Art* thus raises questions about what constitutes the more conventional “affects” in affective art and whether particular works might contain what could be considered “anti-affects”. The act of killing an ant, something we might do with mild regard in everyday life, say, to rid a kitchen of a bothersome pest, is transformed into a work of art that is supposed to prompt a “moral dilemma”, as just noted. Because the viewer/participant is thrust into an actual situation—not a depicted or represented one—of choosing to kill or not to kill a non-human animal, the piece would seem to pack a powerful emotional and psychological punch, that is, be effective affective art.

This situation, however, is tempered by its presentation in an art gallery, the proverbial “white cube”. This antiseptic space owes a formal and conceptual debt to the condition of the laboratory, potentially signaling a zone of artistic experimentation and vanguard progress in the arts, wedded, as well, to the emphasis on formalism as a key strain within modernist criticism. This ode to science is reinforced by the design and mechanics of Malloy’s installation, which can invoke the character and authority of a psychology experiment. We might surmise that this scientism encourages cool reason, which might then take the upper hand over a hot emotional response to such a work. Because we often tend to think of emotion as a salient driver in affective art, this appeal to rational thinking in *Insure the Life of an Ant* poses some queries. What role might ratiocination play in “affective art”? Is reason an “anti-effect” or possibly even an “affect” itself, as a clear-cut divide between reason and emotion is arguable? In addition, the struggle between head and heart is what likely produces the affective psychological predicament that is the point of this piece. As we shall see, in this installation defined by how human animals choose to treat non-human animals, the associated myth of scientific objectivity ironically has the potential to lead to unthinking decision-making and worrisome compliance.

Central to both the affect and ethics of this piece is how the autonomy, alterity, and exceptionalism of the art space color attendee response and behavior. The gallery environment can discourage reactions that are not principally aesthetic (using this term in a more traditional art historical fashion, recognizing that it is under continuous study and recalibration). Might it also function in this case to suppress more conventional moral responses to a nettlesome situation that is part of an artwork? While we might think of the promotion of dispassionate aesthetic intercourse and the minimizing of ethical considerations as “anti-affects”, there still remains the seminal, psychologically affecting conundrum of making a genuine life-or-death decision in a work of art. *Insure the Life of an Ant* is thus an installation where affect and the speculative notion of anti-affect overlap and perhaps vie, like the tug-of-war of its apparent problem: to execute a living creature or not.

How does *Insure the Life of an Ant* operate, and how might this help in understanding some of these issues? One enters the gallery where this installation occupies three principal spaces (Figure 2). On the far wall to the right of an opening leading from the first to the second space, a text instructs: “IF YOU PASS THROUGH THIS TURNSTILE, YOU MUST PAY 10¢ TO INSURE THE LIFE OF AN ANT”. It seems self-evident that works of art that carry instructions aspire to the condition of viewer participation, and the very title of the work proffers the tantalizing invitation to partake of an art project involving a living creature (also see note 51). In this spirit, this entry-wall sign lets us know that this artwork is properly experienced through a modest financial and perhaps a more substantial moral and ethical investment. This first room contains the stated turnstile and a stanchion to which is affixed a coin box and the sign: “DEPOSIT 10¢ HERE”. Stanchions are often used for queue control in places like museums, banks, theaters, clubs, and the like, so Malloy may be intermingling the art experience with realms such as finance, entertainment, and spectacle. The objects in room one at O.K. Harris—at the time one of the more sizable galleries in the city, which made Soho’s once-industrial spaces attractive to the art world—are all fairly basic. For example, there is no mechanism that connects the coin box to the turnstile, so entry is not blocked even if one does not drop the ostensibly required 10 cents into the slot.
Ropes attached to the turnstile and stanchions lead to an open doorway into a second space. There, a female attendant, whose white lab coat lends the space a clinical and scientific air, waits at a table until a participant arrives (Figures 3 and 4). Further instructions appear on the wall in this space: “ONLY ONE PERSON IS ADMITTED INTO THE BOOTH AT A TIME”, and “IF THE ROPE IS UP, PLEASE WAIT FOR THE ATTENDANT TO UNFASTEN IT”. These signs are placed near a roped-off and curtained entryway into a third space; the curtain can be drawn open and closed, permitting access to and concealment of the indicated booth area. The attendant monitors ingress and egress to ensure that the final action remains private.
Upon entering the “booth”, the viewer encounters yet another set of directives: “ATTENTION”, followed by “READ THIS CAREFULLY BEFORE OPERATING BLUE DEVICE” (Figure 5). This warning heightens a sense of authority, anxiety, and gravity, cautioning one not to take his or her actions too lightly. Referring back to the initial 10-cent entry fee, the final note reads: “You Have Insured The Life Of The Ant That Is Inside The Chamber On Top Of The Blue Device. You Must Choose Either: (1) Not To Kill The Ant; Or (2) To Kill The Ant, By Pressing The White Button Firmly Down. Please Leave the Booth After Making Your Decision. You Are Not The Ant’s Beneficiary. (Killing Agent Freon)”. The commands direct one to a button and a transparent plastic box containing a wire mesh cage housing an ant placed atop a conventional sculptural plinth, as if it were a work of art on display. Pressing the button releases the lethal gas that freezes the ant to death. By choosing not to activate the device, the ant is spared. After the deadly deed is done or not, one exits this zone. If the ant is gassed, the attendant removes the executed one, replacing it with a live specimen; if pardoned, the ant awaits its fate from ensuing entrants.

Figure 4. Insure the Life of an Ant, 1972 (detail room 2, attendant, participants, and entryway to room 3), courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5. Insure the Life of an Ant, 1972 (detail room 3, “Booth”, instructions and “Killing Chamber”), courtesy of the artist.
This final space and the elements that it contains carry multiple associations. One is of an execution or “killing chamber”, as Malloy himself called the structure incarcerating the ant. The use of freon gas links it to a “gas chamber”, perhaps to Nazi extermination methods but also to a once-common form of capital punishment in the United States (it still remains on the books in a few states, and just recently nitrogen gas, administered through a mask, was used in Alabama for a capital execution, a controversial method intended to substitute for the also controversial lethal chemical injection). Some prison executions allow for limited public viewing, and gas chambers might be fitted with windows for this purpose. Malloy partially mimics this situation because the ant’s fate in the clear container can be observed by the viewer. At the same time, this chamber is inside the “booth”, a cloistered and fraught place where you privately can become both judge and executioner (note that the term “in chambers” defines legal activity not in the general public view).

Interestingly, at precisely the time that the artist was working on Insure the Life of an Ant, the United States Supreme Court was hearing arguments that led to the abolition of the death penalty (reinstated several years later). Like a deliberating Supreme Court that makes “decisions”, you enter into deliberations with yourself to reach a decision in this final room. At the same time, this “booth” recalls a voting booth where we secretly make our candidate (and ballot proposal) selections. This setting seemed especially pertinent during an American presidential election year, in which a key issue was continuation of the Vietnam War. Moreover, because a president might appoint Supreme Court justices, were vacancies to arise, one’s vote could also impact capital punishment and perhaps other life-and-death issues. Thus, the lever you pulled in the voting booth could be interpreted as a choice to kill or not to kill (at home and abroad), akin to the capital choice in the booth of Insure the Life of an Ant. In sum, in this artwork, containing a “booth” housing a “killing chamber”, the private decision to inflict harm or not resonates with wider political, moral, and ethical positions.

In a pre-internet world, knowledge about and thus potential critical scrutiny of Insure the Life of an Ant were somewhat circumscribed. Coverage appeared mostly in art magazines in short reviews but not in the mainstream press. There is no evidence of widespread public outcry about the killing of a non-human animal as part of an art project. History and memory are slippery and subjective, and there are different personal recollections of what happened when the work was on display. One observer, a friend of Malloy’s who shared living space with him at this time, recalls that the show caused a buzz, “a mini-sensation”, as he put it, mentioning that the artist was “continually confronted with angry people and negative comments”. In my most recent correspondence with Michael Malloy, he states that while he does not doubt the authenticity of this remembered accounting, he personally does not recall much in the way of direct expressions of hostility, acknowledging that any intense reaction was likely limited to the “Soho artist crowd that we associated with”. As a result, I can only infer that public response was inflected by the lack of conventional visual reward of this installation and, more importantly, its involvement of gallery-goers within a challenging situation that might involve animal execution, which, in broader terms, could be placed within a lineage of avant-garde shock. Another art world friend of Malloy’s notes that the artist, in his subsequent work, turned to gentler situations, which might be understood as reactive or simply as the artist exploring another avenue in his participatory, conceptual, and behaviorist practice. One such later work, Malloy’s interactive 1975 Shelves, installed at Stefan Eins’ 3 Mercer Street storefront gallery, blended an eclectic range of objects, some collaged, and text, encouraging fantasy and imagination rather than the weighing of a moral choice. No matter what, there may well be a truism here regarding affect and art: one’s own production and reception to it affects its maker.

Published commentary about Insure the Life of an Ant was essentially positive, praising the work for its unique situational and behaviorist character. A critic in Art News noted its “didactic drama which could be taken seriously, lightly or not at all”, as if to suggest that the degree of moral or ethical heft of the installation was dependent on how individuals reacted to it. In Arts Magazine, Ellen Lubell incisively addressed several distinctive,
intertwined features of the work. She wrote: “Life and death decisions don’t occur for most, especially those decisions that can be made in private with absolutely no repercussions for the potential executor”. Choice and its possible consequences (or lack thereof) now were part of the art experience, while the private booth located in the ethical vacuum of the art space could mute conventional morality and hide debatably bad behavior. Exploring this vein further, she pointed to “the welcome singularity of a work which forces participation (by making non-action a choice)”, indicating that this type of engagement with an artwork still felt somewhat unusual in 1972. While visits to most displays of art generally involved some form of optical encounter, most did not construct situations in which activity or passivity had principled outcomes. “The personality of a confrontation of this nature in the ambience of an art gallery is an effective and thought-provoking surprise”, she concluded.19

Another trenchant and supportive analysis came from noted critic Gregory Battcock in a lengthier essay entitled “Toward an Art of Behavioral Control: from Pigeons to People”. First published in the August 1972 issue of the Italian journal Domus, with significant photo-documentation (Figure 6), it was reissued in the September–October number of Arts Magazine, with fewer reproductions and an expanded and altered text, which took into account other exhibitions that had occurred in the interim.20 The preponderance of the article deals with famous psychologist B.F. Skinner’s controversial behavioral theories, which Battcock eventually relates to developments in art, especially work engaged in situations and behaviors. Malloy’s piece occupied a key portion of Battcock’s art discussion, and Insure the Life of an Ant was the only artwork reproduced in either of the periodicals.

Figure 6. Gregory Battcock, “Toward an Art of Behavioral Control: from Pigeons to People,” page of photos of Insure the Life of an Ant, Domus 513, August 1972, p. 45, Archivio Domus—© Editoriale Domus S.p.A.
Other activities that the author cited included the Guerilla Art Action group in New York, and in the later version of the essay, the overall tenor of works appearing in the two most important international art exhibitions that overlapped in 1972: Documenta 5, held in Kassel, Germany, and the 36th Venice Biennale. He pronounced: “There are several indications that a behaviorist oriented art movement has begun”. For him, the Biennale expressed this trend especially well in its theme, “Work and Behavior”, with “artists advocating behaviorism over aesthetics”. Interestingly, both international fairs alluded to animals in ways emblematic of their differing approaches: representation in Documenta and presentation in the Biennale. For designs for Documenta 5, American artist Ed Ruscha, in his characteristic style, used the image of marching ants to spell out “5” for the show’s catalogue cover and “Documenta 5” for its poster (Figure 7). More directly, an artwork in the Biennale—*The Butterfly Project*—bred butterflies at multiple stages, but the intended release of thousands of these live animals from a mammoth sculptural “cocoon” in Piazza San Marco to coincide with the opening did not go according to plan (Figure 8).

![Figure 7. Ed Ruscha, “Documenta 5”, poster, 1972, courtesy Ed Ruscha Studio, ©Ed Ruscha.](image)

![Figure 8. Raphaël Opstaele, poster for *The Butterfly Project* by Mass Moving Project, 1972, “Center of the Biological Fight for Survival, Mass Moving Project 1972” and “Ten thousand Butterflies will be Released, June 8, 1972, Piazza San Marco”, folded offset poster, 36th Venice Biennale, copyright photo M HKA/clinckx.](image)
Battcock called *Insure the Life of an Art* a “pre-behaviorist” artwork, as its apparatus reminded him of a Skinnerian device that trained pigeons to play ping-pong. He located it amidst a growing development in which artists “move away from the area of traditional aesthetics and instead create works or ‘situations’ that cause man to observe, analyze, or criticize his behavior in one way or another”. Battcock seemed heartened by Malloy’s endeavor, as “most artists today are still engaged in aesthetic exercises that bear little relation to cultural reality”. In what might be considered a self-reference, Battcock wrote: “It follows that the mechanics of art criticism may have to abandon its assumption that art itself aspire to pleasure or something like it”. He extended this belief to the education of the artist: “If the artist is to be effective and useful”, he said, “instead of teaching him the fundamentals of color, draughtsmanship, design, and composition (prevailing goals that, clearly, have failed miserably anyway) he will have to be familiar with things such as sociology, urban planning, industrial design, and experimental psychology”.

Battcock points to a change in the art world that dovetails with what some began to identify as postmodernism, even though he does not use this term here, which itself lacks firm definition. In September of 1972, just a few months after *Insure the Life of an Ant* was on display, *Artforum*—which some consider the most important and influential contemporary arts magazine of that time—published a mix of essays for its landmark 10th anniversary issue. Seeming to underline Battcock’s sense of shifts in art production at that time, this number of *Artforum* tries to contend with this transitional moment and perhaps even a crisis in art criticism, history, and making (affecting the publication itself), especially in contradistinction to the more homogeneous dispassion that debatably characterized art and commentary of the 1960s.

I should add that Battcock argued that witnessing behaviorism in the art was fundamental, and he makes mention of an apparent audio alarm at O.K. Harris that signaled the killing of an ant. According to Malloy, however, the slight sound made by pressing the plunger would not have been audible throughout the gallery. He fashioned instead a situation meant to ensure the privacy of the decisive act, though the prescriptive nature of the installation allowed for the observation of the comportment of others while not in the “booth”. Malloy’s later installation, the aforementioned *Shelves*, better satisfies Battcock’s conditions, introduced with the instructions: “Before you enter decide whether you will be a PARTICIPANT or an OBSERVER”.

Malloy also explored fringe areas of the law in some of his art; in *Insure the Life of an Ant*, he was intrigued by how reading the signage, inserting the dime, and passing through the turnstile created a putative contractual arrangement between the participant, the piece (as well as the artist and gallery), and the ant. This contract might also be construed as establishing some sort of bond between the participant and the ant, giving the insect a more individualized identity, and thus increasing the role that empathy, as an affect, might play in the operation of the work.

The mention of a beneficiary was intentionally vague, open-ended, and even contradictory; it could seem solemn or silly. Bundled up with this may be a probe into the word “insure” and its connection to protection. An insurance policy is supposed to protect a party from loss, sealed here in the 10-cent payment to “insure” the ant’s life. If the ant were killed, however, there was no payout, as spelled out in the signage. (It would be odd if the executioner were rewarded as a beneficiary.) Only the artist seemed to benefit financially, albeit modestly, and over the run of the show the deposits yielded around 200 dollars. However, you could choose to “insure/protect” the ant another way: not depress the plunger and save the ant from death by you—for a length of time to be determined by the actions of subsequent participants. This situation reinforced a communal dimension to the piece first established as you wait in line with others and watch them enter and exit the booth that housed the killing chamber, distinct from the private and personal predicament that takes place within the booth itself.

Undoubtedly, this moment of choice is filled with competing factors affecting the attendee (allowing for cultural and temporal relativism, these conditions could be different).
Among the possible thoughts and feelings in contention: kill the ant because we have likely done it before and it seems no big deal because the tiny insect is low in the hierarchy of species, generally closer to pest than pet; this particular act of killing itself does not involve direct physical contact with the victim and is assumed to be quick and painless; the decision and consequent act might satisfy one’s curiosity (how does and how will this apparatus work) or produce a sense of power and control or even some form of thrill; in the privacy of the booth, no one will know whether we have chosen execution, so there are no extra-personal ramifications; and in the end, it is all part of an art project, anyway. Or spare the ant: even if it is an artistic enterprise, logic instructs us that there is no reason to exterminate a non-human animal for the sake of art; emotions, primarily empathy and compassion, and instincts, such as the desire to protect the vulnerable and voiceless, deter us from doing harm to a living creature that in this situation poses no threat and has no agency; and morality and ethics, in part informed by reason and emotion, tell us that it is wrong. Mulling over these ideas and feelings that help to determine one’s actions in the artwork make the affect of the piece ultimately a psychological drama.

Malloy reported that the famous artist Jasper Johns, who paid the fee and chose not to gas the insect, wanted to take the pardoned creature with him, to prevent that particular ant from eventually being killed at O.K. Harris. (Interestingly, the wording on the signage changes from “an ant” to “the ant” when it comes to the moment to freeze or free, as if personalizing the potential insect target.) Johns’ rogue response may spring from the contractual component of *Insure of the Life of Ant*, which interrogates art and property rights and viewer-artwork engagement. Could depositing the dime and thus insuring the ant possibly imply that the specific ant awaiting its fate when you entered the booth might then belong to you? As your property, could you then do with it what you wish, such as intervene in the artwork to protect your possession by liberating the ant, a fellow living creature that you could save from death by art?

This unintentional interpolation into *Insure the Life of an Ant* exposed a confounding behavioral kink in the work’s situational armor, which might also be perceived as akin to theft or vandalism of an artwork. In a behaviorist piece, defined by a contract with the artist and by the actions of its audience, might it be argued that ownership of an ant, and by extension, ownership of the art itself, is shared by artist and audience? This sense of joint proprietorship might well extend to shared moral complicity; both artist and participants (button-pushers or even abstainers, if they did not make any rescue efforts) bear responsibility for the animal mistreatment inherent in the project. We might also wonder if Johns’ demand was deadly serious, or else tongue-in-cheek; Malloy’s piece could oscillate between the grave and the light-hearted, as photos show attendees smiling before they entered the judgment booth. According to Malloy, some rowdy and exuberant young boys, part of school groups bussed in to partake in the show, saw it as fun-and-games; they so vigorously banged the button (constructed by a toy designer) that it needed to be replaced.

Archival documentation sheds further light on *Insure the Life of an Ant*. In a typewritten description of the work that Malloy calls “TURNSTILE-BOOTH SITUATION #1”, he mentions some elements that did not make it into the final piece: additional signage and taped lines on the floor and red and green flags meant for crowd management. (The money collected suggests over 2000 visitors, a considerable number for a show that was up for less than a month in this downtown gallery.) In a letter from January of 1972, Malloy writes about proposed elements of the exhibition. He mentions the need to hire an attendant, listing job requirements: “a distinctive-looking person . . ..to change the ants, live ones for dead ones [and] . . .operate traffic control”. He goes on: “he/she . . .should be made aware-warned of some possible hectic moments . . ., i.e., questions, Why is this called art?” Malloy thus anticipated some traffic and tumult at the gallery, that ants were likely to be killed, and that not everyone would accept this installation as art.

Questions about whether a project might qualify as art were not new to Malloy. In 1971, before coming to New York, he staged a work entitled *Conference of the Society of*
Cemetery Aestheticians, sponsored by the important Los Angeles Eugenia Butler Gallery. Held as a one-day event at the law office of her husband, Cemetery Piece, as Malloy called it, involved the sale of one-square-foot parcels of a graveyard plot purchased by the artist, which came with a deed, customary in a land purchase but also alluding here to certificates of authenticity that sometimes accompany works of art. As Malloy explained: “It was not advertised as an art show as such. Since it was held at a law office, it gave the show an air of officialdom that added to the mystery of the event”. Conference of the Society of Cemetery Aestheticians (note the intentional crossover “aesthete” term for mortuary and art practice) blended conceptual art, law, and real estate; Insure the Life of an Ant blended art exhibit, behavioral experiment, and insurance policy. Both pieces were participatory, confounding, and dealt with death.

“TURNSTILE-BOOTHSITUATION #1” offers further information about Insure the Life of an Ant. Malloy states that employing an attendant rather than playing that role himself was “for aesthetic reasons, not out of laziness”. It might also have been intended to promote the belief that this person was part of the science and lab community, not the art world. The artist had concerns about his physical presence at the gallery; he did hang out in the back offices to deal with any technical matters but had some unease: “I feel my presence in the Situations themselves might confuse some aspects of the piece with body sculpture or possible Gilbert and George performances”. He continued: “there is enough going on already that detracts from my aesthetic aim”.

These comments indicate that Insure the Life of an Ant was not a body performance piece, a term generally used to describe art characterized by activities involving the artist’s own body. Additionally, he applied the word “aesthetic” to describe what would achieve the goal of the piece. Unlike Battcock, who seemed to view the aesthetic as mainly the formal and visual elements in a work, as opposed to situational or behavioral activity (though he is not always consistent in discussing this ostensible dichotomy), Malloy recognized his essentially behaviorist, participatory, situational, installation event as the “aesthetic”, even though it might lack the primarily visual appeal of more traditional works of art. This is not to say that the installation had no formal elements: didactic signs, the coin box, components for circulation management (stanchion and rope), curtain, desk, attendant in a lab coat, and most importantly, the booth that reveals a live ant on a platform, alluding to the display of sculpture on a base. Yet curiously, Malloy wondered if all the trappings of Insure the Life of an Ant might compromise his intent (to me, these essentially “processional” elements heighten the drama and enhance the overall experience). In addition, he labeled these elements in the installation as “Situations”, emphasizing the behavioral over the visual. In this regard, the piece operates within a lineage and a milieu of interactive and performative art that can promote a more phenomenological and primal engagement. At that time, there were a range of developments—some categorizable as movements, others as approaches—such as Happenings, Fluxus, installations, performance, environments, land art, and aspects of conceptualism and even minimalism.

What strikes me as a compelling comparison to Insure the Life of an Ant is the famous 1961 research study conducted by Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram, even though Malloy said that it was not on his mind, and none of the literature on his show mentions it (Figure 9). The Milgram experiment, as it is commonly called, was designed to investigate obedience, in particular the behavior of “just following orders”, a legal defense tactic used by Nazi war criminals. Particular attention was paid to Adolph Eichmann, a major architect of the Holocaust, who had just gone on trial in Jerusalem.
The experiment involves three classifications of people: “teacher”, “learner”, and “experimenter”. The “learner” is supposed to memorize word patterns, and the “teacher” has been told by the “experimenter” (Milgram himself) that if the learner errs, he (the teacher) must administer electric shocks, which increase in intensity with each learner mistake. The experimenter and learner are part of the project, and no actual physical pain is involved; only the teacher, the real “subject” of this study, is unaware of the ruse. What seems shocking is how compliant the teachers often were, despite the fake agonizing moans and screams and the pleas to stop that came from the apparent learner (presumed to have a heart condition), who intentionally answered incorrectly. These outcomes seemed to confirm that in certain situations blind obedience could be facilitated.

Related to Milgram’s research is the work of Hannah Arendt, the respected Jewish German-American political theorist (Milgram was also Jewish). In her studies on Nazi atrocities, including those by Eichmann, she coined the term “banality of evil”, which arises when prevailing conditions normalize transgressive behavior. In this regard, Milgram and Malloy each created situations that worked to normalize questionable actions, whether in the name of science or in the name of art. Interestingly, both projects, in their engagement in psychological experimentation, mixed elements of science and art to influence the actions of the participants. For example, Milgram exploited the authority of scientific inquiry in the reputable institutional setting of a psychology research lab at an Ivy League university. But science itself was not enough; he used drama and deception (not uncommon in psychology studies), enlisting performance, more stuff of the art world, to achieve his goal. An established yet dishonest authority figure chides and pressures the resistant teacher/subject to continue to inflict pain on the impersonating learner/sufferer. (Meanwhile, Yale did a questionable job of taking into account the psychological trauma that those who were duped might experience, and the whole enterprise might be considered a form of entrapment.) Moreover, Milgram’s filming of the experiment reads not simply as an accounting of its operation but has some of the tension, drama, conflict, and horror of a psychological thriller. Malloy’s artwork—seemingly more transparent and forthright—usurps the authoritative aura of a psychology study and exploits the potential autonomous amorality of the art gallery to push people toward possibly disturbing actions. Furthermore, the white lab coat of the attendant in *Insure the Life of the Ant* (Milgram himself wore similar scientist attire), accompanying text that function as “orders”, and the use of gas as the killing agent all

![Figure 9. Photo of “Behavioral Study on Obedience” (“The Milgram Experiment”), Stanley Milgram at far right, 1963, Stanley Milgram Papers (MS 1406). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/12/archival_objects/2009214 (accessed 25 February 2024), published under fair use.](image-url)
taint and thus confuse neutral scientific experimentation via references to fascist coercion and brutality.

Ethical choice and its potential simulated or real violence are key ingredients in the Milgram and Malloy projects. Additionally, both situations scrutinize how reason can work in tandem with or in opposition to the power of affective emotions, such as empathy and compassion. Reason might lead us to conclude that we should act humanely, which is what our emotions might also be telling us. Or reason might convince us not to act sentimentally and do whatever the science study or art project demands, which might include “shocking” a learner or killing an ant. But this engagement in unsavory acts might also be perceived as a suspension of reason caused by obedience to these realms of authority. Certainly, the consequences at O.K. Harris seem less dire than those purported to occur in Milgram’s lab. If empathy is a factor, then a decider is more likely to identify with Milgram’s histrionic human sufferer than Malloy’s caged real ant. Still, there remains the cold fact that a non-human animal can be executed as part of a work of art, what might be thought of as an aestheticization of violence and suffering as art spectacle.

Malloy’s selection of an ant seems calculated. Matters of cost, size, portability, control, etc., no doubt played a role. As mentioned, the view of ants as a potential nuisance, accidentally or intentionally killed, and the perception of insects as on the lower rungs of the species ladder could seem to mitigate the portent of the optional act of execution (imagine if puppies were used). While ants might bug us, they can be pets, in the form of an ant farm that permits observing their busy lives. They are among the most common, abundant, and successful creatures on the planet. Ants are respected as highly intelligent, industrious, organized, collaborative, capable of complex construction, and able to bear many times their body weight. In particular, their industriousness might be viewed symbolically in terms of theories of labor, especially Marxist arguments about art production as a form of non-alienated labor. This is problematized here because the ant as part of the installation functions as a more conventional, interchangeable unit of production performing essentially a repetitive task, a form of capitalist labor. Later in the essay, in a consideration of speciesism, I indicate how the installation might treat broader issues of inequality, and the notion of the “worker ant” might well symbolize the subject of economic imbalance.

While animals of all types are elevated in horror films to levels of menace, ants have played this threatening role in movies such as *Them!* (1954) and *Empire of the Ants* (1977), based on a 1905 H. G. Wells story. Nuclear radiation is often the transmogrifier, combining fears of nuclear catastrophe and (communist) totalitarianism in the midst of the Cold War. As the title informs us, the “Them!” the ants, signify the threatening “other”. In *Empire of the Ants*, the creatures are capable of speech and work to control the minds of their now human slaves. And let us not forget the Marvel super-hero “Ant-Man” character, a member of the Avengers team, introduced in comics in 1962 and popularized more recently in the *Ant-Man* series of films starting in 2015. In these, ants and their characteristics are portrayed positively, as Dr. Henry “Hank” Pym, who becomes the “Ant-Man”, concocts a chemical that shrinks him in size to harness the strength, intelligence, and cooperativeness of ants in the fight for good against the forces of evil that want to acquire these powers, too, but use them nefariously.

In this journal issue devoted to “Affective Art”, I have made the concept of “affect” a key thread in this essay. But because the operation of affect in *Insure the Life of an Ant* is linked to potential animal abuse and violence in the arts, I would be remiss in not addressing these vexatious subjects, albeit briefly, though I do not presume to treat these problems comprehensively here. To me, one issue is clear and unequivocal. There is no reason to produce a work of art that is harmful to animals. While it has been argued that using live or once-live animals is the best or only way to transmit a viscerally and profoundly authentic message, artists should be clever and compassionate enough to find alternatives, and many have done so. True, animals may be harmed routinely in many aspects of life: scientific research, factory farms, sports, entertainment, the pet industry, personal pet care, pest control, and so forth. This provides even more reason to not allow
such callous practices to infiltrate the arts. (Full disclosure: while working on this essay, I have killed ants, other insects, and mice that have entered my living space.)

As we might assume, there are other participatory, behavioral artworks involving possible or actual harm to non-human animals made both before and after Malloy’s *Insure the Life of an Ant*. One subsequent piece, *Helena & El Pescador*, created by Chilean/Danish artist Marco Evaristti, first displayed in 2000 at the Trapholt Museum in Kolding, Denmark, offers an instructive comparison (Figures 10 and 11). While Malloy’s piece has remained under the art-historical radar, *Helena*, (the title often used for this piece), a work that potentially places non-human animals in danger, has achieved far greater notoriety for a variety of reasons: the internet, which did not exist when Malloy made his work, allowing information about and mobilization against the piece to spread more quickly and widely; increasing awareness and sensitivity about animal abuse in the intervening years, including the arts; and Evaristti’s greater fame as an international artist, known for a provocative and envelope-stretching career that continues today, as opposed to Malloy’s short-lived though certainly important moment as an artist. Moreover, its staging at a major Danish museum and its international travel further fueled controversy and ultimately generated more opportunity for world-wide impact than a one-month display at a downtown New York art gallery, even though O.K. Harris was considered a significant pioneering, cutting-edge art space.

Figure 10. Marco Evaristti, *Helena*, mixed media installation (detail, artist, and blender with goldfish), Kolding, Denmark, 2000, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11. *Helena*, 2000, mixed media installation (detail of blenders), courtesy of the artist.
In *Helena*, Moulinex blenders, each filled with water and a single goldfish, are placed in an orderly fashion for encounter in an art space (chic enough for display in a museum’s design department). Evaristti did not provide instructions that indicated that the purpose of the piece might be to kill the fish or not. Instead, the situation was left open, though the arrangement of goldfish in water in electrified blenders led some to assume that pushing the button and thus killing the creature might be an option. I should add that while most discussion of the work identifies the installation as simply *Helena* and focuses on the blenders and their ability to liquidize a non-human animal, the artwork is actually entitled *Helena & El Pescador*. It also includes a large photo of a blindfolded, semi-nude Evaristti in military garb, with derisive lipstick-scratched comments in German, and a missile fitted into a plastic container with ballistic-looking lipstick cases (Figure 12). According to the artist, this full title derives from “Helen” and the Trojan War, and “The Fisherman” reference comes from a 1779 Goethe poem, “Der Fischer” (“The Fisher” or “The Fisherman”). In *Helena & El Pescador*, the fish represent her beauty, and the blenders, the machinery of war. For Evaristti, a key component of the work is an exploration of the masculine and feminine through military and domestic references, as Goethe’s poem describes a fisherman lured by a mermaid into the sea.42

![Figure 12. Helena & El Pescador, mixed media, 2000, Trapholt Museum, Kolding, Denmark, photo of work from 2017 Trapholt exhibition, courtesy of the artist and the Trapholt Museum.](image)

In language recalling Malloy’s “moral dilemma” remark and the Milgram experiment itself, Evaristti, who acknowledges the influence of Milgram,43 called *Helena* a “social experiment” designed “to place people before a dilemma (my emphasis): to choose between life and death”.44 As mentioned, he provided no written imperative for the audience to engage directly with the installation; nonetheless he anticipated such interaction, predicting three outcomes: “The idiot [also identified as ‘the sadist’] who pushes the button; the voyeur who loves to watch; and the moralist, who will judge the action”.45 What he did not expect was that the moralist might become the interventionist, much like Johns’ expression in *Insure the Life of an Ant*. Invoking a local animal welfare act, those concerned with the safety of the goldfish convinced the local police to temporarily shut off power to the museum. Others sought to have the show closed or at least have the blenders deactivated, and some individuals rescued fish, only to have the blenders re-stocked. Pulverized fish were also replaced rather than keeping the chunky-to-smooth orange liquid results on display that would have revealed that at least someone had performed the deadly act. In a showing of *Helena* as part of a group exhibition in Austria in 2006, consisting only of the
blenders housing fish (each fish given a name!), an animal rights group rescued fish and demanded that “Stella”, who had been killed, have a proper burial, documenting their acts. Another unknown group broke into the space and smashed the piece (interestingly, this exhibition in Dornbirn was called “Destroyed Worlds”) (Figure 13). The decision was made not to clean up the destruction but rather to display the “iconoclasm”, with a label explaining the action.

Figure 13. Helena attacked/vandalized at “Destroyed Worlds” exhibition, Kunstraum Dornbirn, 2006, Dornbirn, Austria, courtesy of the artist.

Regarding the events at Trapholt specifically, charges of animal cruelty were filed, but the museum was acquitted because “experts” from Moulinex and veterinary medicine testified that death was instantaneous and that goldfish do not feel pain, a notion that science has proven false. Peter Meyer, then director of Trapholt, at first refused to deactivate the blenders, believing that doing so would compromise the artwork. He then agreed but declined to pay a fine for his initial non-compliance and was brought to trial. In his arrogant defense, substantiating the notion of art production and exhibition as exempt from conventional morality, he argued: “An artist has the right to create works which defy our concept of what is right and what is wrong”. Evaristti remarked: “people’s harsh reactions surprised me as we, in my opinion, are surrounded by problems that are so much more serious that we encounter every evening watching the news. It worries me that we are passive in front of these news and that my art piece created such a stir instead. If people find that my use of live goldfish in my art piece is unethical, I would invite them to have a closer look at themselves and the world we live in”.

*Insure the Life of an Art* was created at a time when animal rights consciousness was less acute. Though the highly adaptable ant can survive in all sorts of situations, its natural living condition is not in an enclosure on a truncated pyramid in an art gallery (and goldfish, too, do not belong in blenders, as in *Helena*). In an artwork, the ant lacks agency, which shifts instead to the artist and ultimately to the gallery-goer. Malloy sets the stage; the viewer–participants enact the drama. Like the venerable horse-to-water adage, you can lead a viewer to a “killing chamber”, but you cannot make him/her commit murder (and Malloy listed “To Not Kill The Ant” as the first option). As for empathy promoting affect in art, concern about harm to animals is often roused in proportion to cultural attitudes and zoological classifications of species: decide the value for yourself based on non-human animals that have been (ab)used in art: butterflies, cats, chickens, cows, dogs, fish, horses,
insects (including, of course, ants), lambs, oxen, pigs, and rats, to mention some (see note 39).

To address the growing incursion by artists into the messy territory of human and animal treatment in art, the College Art Association (CAA), a professional association of artists and art historians, established the “Task Force on the Use of Human and Animal Subjects in Art”, soliciting membership opinion and publishing its results in 2011. As part of its Standards and Guidelines, CAA posts on its website, “The Use of Animal Subjects in Art: Statement of Principles and Suggested Considerations”. Its primary resolution prescribes, “No work of art should, in the course of its creation, cause physical or psychological pain, suffering, or distress to an animal”.\textsuperscript{49} CAA respondents weighed in on these topics, including what types of animals might be employed, and as expected, the degree of protection or maltreatment varied according to a hierarchical view of the animal kingdom. These categorizations correlate with the animal liberation philosophy of Peter Singer, who condemns “speciesism”, the “prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species”.\textsuperscript{50} The term is intended to suggest a parallel with other “isms” such as racism, sexism, and classism. Just as humans create unequal power dynamics through classifications within their own species based on race, gender, class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, identity, economics, culture, geography, and so on, human animals also relegate non-human animals to lower status and create a further zoological stratification based on a host of factors (the animal kingdom has its own survivalist, food-chain hierarchy of predator and prey and parasite and host). As reported in a recent \textit{Washington Post} opinion piece about meat substitutes: “To want to prevent the suffering and death of one species but not another is merely a matter of having affinity for one and failing to imagine the experience of the other. It is a visceral but arbitrary reaction” (Venkataraman 2023).

It seems apposite in a discussion about works of art involving animal maltreatment that we briefly consider art that poses potential physical threat to humans, either through their problematic use as subjects in potentially dangerous encounters for the viewer, or in scenarios encompassing harm to the artists themselves. Of course, these are trickier situations because humans generally have the option of consent, a right not afforded to non-human animals, though human agency can be diminished in certain cases (see note 4). I also want to differentiate pieces involving potential or actual physical threats to human animals from works that the public might find disturbing or offensive. Jake Chapman, part of a British duo with his brother Dinos who produce provocative art, remarked about attempts to censor works at the infamous \textit{Sensation} exhibition: “I only think a work of art is dangerous if it falls on top of you and squashes you” (Jury et al. 1999).

As noted, issues in \textit{Insure the Life of an Ant} gain greater meaning if understood in relation to contemporaneous events such as capital punishment debates, the Vietnam War and associated war crimes stretching back to World War II, and a U.S. presidential election. These and other often related events—social justice marches and protests and the murder of protestors at Kent State and Jackson State Universities; civil rights unrest; the somewhat recent assassinations of Medgar Evers, President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy; a perception of rising crime and violence in the streets including urban riots following these assassinations; the ongoing Cold War; and alarm about environmental and ecological issues—provide historical contextualization for other examples of extreme art made around this time.

Art from this era incorporating possible human harm does not simply reflect or comment on brutality and anxiety but may well announce that if violence is to be done (to me and others), let me orchestrate and control it within an artistic framework. This seems especially pertinent to performance pieces involving the artist’s own body. In Vito Acconci’s \textit{Trademark} of 1970, the artist bites himself, as if his teeth were a “mark”-making artistic implement, his skin a surface to be imprinted, and the incised “mark”, his “signature style” (or “trademark”), mocking the venerable notion of the pain and suffering of the tortured artist. In much of his early work, Chris Burden tested physical limits and courted danger,
as if parodying the notion of the risk-taking artist (with a strong whiff of machismo), who is often ponderously and hagiographically elevated in art historical discourse. His infamous Shoot Piece of 1970 is a performance recorded on video in which the artist had himself shot in the arm by an apparent marksman who did more damage than the intended grazing. Though the ethical burden was presumably on Burden himself, questions arise about the obligation of spectators at the event to try to intervene, like Johns with one of Malloy’s ants and like “moralists” encountering Evaristi’s Helena.

Regarding participation and interventionism, which are more germane to the issues in Insure the Life of an Ant, Marina Abramović’s Rhythm 0, staged just two years after Malloy’s, was a six-hour-long performance piece, during which audience members could use an array of instruments, ranging from benign to lethal, on the artist’s body (Figure 14). As the event progressed, some participants became increasingly aggressive: stripping off some of her clothes, engaging in sexual acts, cutting her, and pointing a loaded gun at her. At some point, a group of visitors encircled Abramović for protection, as fights broke out among factions. The piece seems to hark back to Yoko Ono’s participatory Cut Piece, first performed in Japan in 1964 (and subsequently repeated, sometimes with variations), where the artist sat cross-legged on a stage and invited visitors to cut off pieces of her clothing. Ono perceived the performance as communal and giving, quite different from what occurred in Abramović’s Rhythm 0. Cut Piece, however, has been read in feminist terms (which Ono claims was not on her mind), as has Abramović’s. Certainly, both can be viewed as commentaries on how women’s bodies have been treated throughout history and represented in art, much like the work of several important feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s who used their own bodies in performances to deconstruct and wrest control of out-of-whack artistic and social practices.

Figure 14. Marina Abramović, Rhythm 0, performance, 6 h, Studio Morra Naples, 1974, courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives.
Of all the work from this period engaged with trauma, Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz’s participatory installation, punningly titled *Still Live* and staged in Berlin in 1974, may be the most provocative (Figure 15). As a work that might satisfy in the extreme theories related to “antagonistic relational aesthetics” (see note 4), *Still Live* boils down to a participant (after signing a waiver) sitting in an armchair in a living-room type setting of coffee table, lamp, and still-life paintings, at which is pointed a “gun mechanism box” triggered to detonate at a random moment within the next hundred years. These domestic accoutrements are surrounded by a host of vigilant elements—police or military barricades, warning signs, flashing light, barbed wire, sandbags, and so forth. Shut down swiftly as a violation of German firearms laws (most likely to avoid the appearance of outright censorship of a work of art), the piece raises questions, some related to the earlier mention of whether corporeally menacing work should be prohibited. Might it be “censored,” according to the “Chapman principle”, because it could tangibly harm the viewer? Or should it be allowed as the free will and expression of both artist and participant? An ostensibly rational being gives consent by signing a release that absolves the artist of responsibility and then chooses to sit in the hot seat, as the likelihood of injury or death is miniscule. Edward was the first to take the risk (apparently he became anxious whenever Nancy Reddin, his wife and co-maker, crossed the path of fire), and the show’s rapid closure meant that few had the opportunity to chance it.

![Figure 15. Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Still Live*, 1974, mixed media tableau, approximately 32 × 32 × 6.5 ft. (10 × 10 × 2 m.). © Estate of Nancy Reddin Kienholz. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Photograph by Ingeborg Lommatzsh.](image)

*Still Live* certainly can be placed in the tumultuous 1960s–1970s milieu described above, and like much of their work, its prescience is embodied in the ongoing debate about gun violence and gun control. The installation embeds the domestic within the militaristic, seeming to speak to a Cold War condition of surveillance and control. The “security” components relate to barriers, checkpoints, boundaries, and likely the Berlin Wall, pointing both to a divided Germany as a political and geographic fulcrum of the Cold War and to the country’s loaded history regarding violence. The scenario might also refer once more to capital punishment and Supreme Court debates (the Kienholzes addressed the themes of
capital punishment, the Supreme Court, Nazism, and the Cold War in several of their more
typical and less participatory assemblages, tableaux, and environments). Firing squads
remain a legal form of execution in parts of the world, including some American states, with
particular use militarily. Unable to find men to carry out an execution in Nevada in 1913,
authorities built a firing machine (the German press dubbed the Kienholzes’ piece a “Killing
Machine’). About Still Live, Ed Kienholz said: “My purpose is not death. Quite the contrary,
I would hope that this work may be able to invoke new and positive responses to the
wonders of life”. Thus the Kienholzes were willing to allow the possible (though highly
unlikely) death of a consenting adult to make an artwork with an apparently life-affirming
message. In a similar vein, Marco Evaristtti wondered why people were so outraged by his
art involving animal maltreatment while they were seemingly blase about larger world
problems, and Mike Malloy was willing to sacrifice ants to create art that produces a “moral
dilemma”, which might increase awareness and sensitivity to social problems. Still, are
there not any other, less potentially harmful ways to express presumably socially conscious
ideas in art, and if not, are these messages then worth the possible price to human animals
and the actual price paid by non-human animals?

Mike Malloy’s edgy Insure the Life of an Ant is a relational, situationist, behaviorist
installation that hit the art scene more than five decades ago at a watershed moment in
contemporary art, embodying elements that for some suggested a seismic shift in art-
making, display, and reception. Important yet neglected, this work produces a personal
“moral dilemma” for the viewer/participant and speaks to broader historical and social
issues. As a presentation rather than representation, it allows for consideration of how
affect operates beyond inanimate artworks. It also probes how difficult art can instigate
“affect” in peculiar ways: a non-human animal, a seminal element in the art, faced danger,
and a visitor to the show was put in the possible position of harming a living creature,
or if an effort were made to rescue the ant, paradoxically “vandalize” the piece. How
many works of art make genuine encounter with it so dependent on such charged and
consequential decisions and actions? What would you do?

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incisive commentary on the subject of the ethical treatment of animals in art.

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Notes

1 Gregory Battcock, whose writing about Insure the Life of an Ant I address later in the essay, called O.K. Harris “one of the most
prestigious and trend-setting galleries in New York”. See (Battcock 1972a, p. 45).

2 The dearth of literature on this piece is mildly surprising, especially its lack of mention in the major studies on animals in art.
After a flurry of coverage at the time of its exhibition, which I address later, it essentially dropped out of critical and scholarly
sight. I have discussed this piece at three conferences: as chair of a session, “Beyond Censorship: Art and Ethics”, at the College
Art Association annual conference in Los Angeles in 2012; in a paper “What would you do?: Mike Malloy’s Insure the Life of an
Ant”, for the Visual Culture session at the Popular/American Culture Association, in Washington, DC in 2013; and in a paper
“Art, Ethics, Censorship, and Animal Rights: The Role of Social Media”, for the “Networked Art Session”, part of a themed
conference—“The Work of Art in the Age of Networked Society”—at the International Conference on the Arts in Society, in
London, United Kingdom, in 2015. At the College Art session, art historian Jonathan Wallis mentions Insure the Life of an Ant
in his paper entitled, “Blending Art and Ethics: Marco Evaristtti’s Helena and the Killing Aesthetic”. I alerted Dr. Wallis to the Malloy
piece in my invitation to him to present. His paper developed into an excellent published essay: See (Wallis 2012). In addition,
the websites “98 Bowery: 1969–1989” and “Gallery 98”, curated by Marc Miller, who knew Malloy at the time, are good resources for information and documentation about the piece. See: (Miller 2015) and (Miller n.d.).

There is a fair amount of literature on animals and art, and my intention is not an in-depth examination of it here. Leading scholars include Giovanni Aloi and Steve Baker, and their writings are very much worth consulting. See, for example (Aloi 2012, 2018; Baker 2013). Other useful sources are: (Eisenman 2013; Zammit-Lucia 2014). Zammit-Lucia also participated in my 2012 CAA session (see note 2). In 2023, this journal, Arts, published a themed issue “Art and Animals and the Ethical Position”: see (Bartram 2023). There are, of course, many organizations working to protect animals, and some make mention of maltreatment in art. Also see note 6.

Malloy’s piece may intersect with the concept of “relational aesthetics”, a term coined well after this work was made. See (Bourriaud 1998). There have been subsequent and updated versions, including translations into English, the latest in 2023. Bourriaud defined relational aesthetics as: “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”. While Insure the Life of an Ant might not fit this definition precisely, it is somewhat in the spirit of what Kyle Chayka considers as relational aesthetics: “The posing of an artist-constructed social experiences (sic) as art making”. He goes on: “relational aesthetics projects tend to break with the traditional physical and social space of the art gallery and the sequestered artist studio or atelier”. See (Chayka 2011). Claire Bishop, whose scholarship addresses this term, clarifies that not all interactive art is classifiable as relational aesthetics, and Insure the Life of an Ant might be considered too prescriptive and not open-ended enough, though, as we shall see, the piece engendered some unexpected responses. Yet Bishop is particularly interested in art situations that antagonize, analyzing the work of several artists, including Santiago Sierra. Sierra’s troubling exploitation and abuse of human subjects as art in an art setting bear some relation to Malloy’s set-up of potential harm to non-human animals. In the Malloy work, however, the viewer has more clear-cut power to spare and possibly even aid the potential non-consenting victims. Sierra’s subjects are humans who give consent, but because of their social and economic status, their ability to consent has been compromised. His works also interrogate the issue of what is the responsibility of ethical viewers to intervene in what could be defined as cruel art practice. For more on problematically provocative relational art, see (Bishop 2004, 2023). Eunsong Kim, in a powerful essay, mercilessly excoriates Bishop and other scholars who support the value of Sierra’s controversial work. See (Kim 2015).

I do not intend to wade into the substantial literature on neuroscience, affect, and emotions, as it applies to human and non-human animals. An important and pioneering scholar on animal emotion was Estonian-American psychobiologist, Jaak Panksepp, who coined the term “affective neuroscience”. See, for example, (Panksepp 2011); also, (Panksepp 1998). Also see note 27.

(Bentham 1789, ch. 17, n. 222). As to the broader issue of animal rights, much has been written, especially from legal and philosophical perspectives. My essay makes no claim to a comprehensive review of this literature. In addition to Bentham and contemporary philosopher, Peter Singer, whom I mention later (see note 50), a recent book that has received attention is: (Nussbaum 2022). Also see: (Wacks 2024). Useful anthologies include: (Sunstein and Nussbaum 2004; Linze and Clarke 2005). Also see note 3.

The literature across disciplines is substantial. As for the visual arts, Jill Bennett has considered the subject in two books: (Bennett 2005, 2012). Two books by James Elkins are also useful: (Elkins 1998, 2001). A pioneering study in this area remains: (Freedberg 1989).

Telephone interview with the artist Michael Malloy by the author, Fall, 2011.

The bibliography on new and different ways of thinking about aesthetics is substantial. A few key works include (Bennett 2012; Elkins 2005; Rancière 2004).

Jonathan Wallis’ essay (see note 2) contains a first-rate discussion of the concept of the potential amorality of the art space.

Letter from Mike Malloy to Marc Miller and Carla [Dee Ellis], 20 January 1972. (Gallery 98 Archives). See (Miller 2015). Marc Miller, artist, art historian, museum curator, and owner of the websites “Gallery 98”, and “98 Bowery”, named after the address of the loft he then lived in, was friends with Malloy at the time. Miller provided Malloy with living space when Malloy first arrived in New York City (see note 2).

I am reminded of the remarks by the brilliant black comedian Dick Gregory about capital punishment in the United States. To have it affect the average citizen more viscerally, he “jokingly” suggested the following: run a wire from a prison electric chair to a random home so that an execution occurs when you turn something on in your house; you find out that you did the grisly deed when you later receive a check from the government for your service. Or save up all the executions for a given year until Christmas season (Christmas Eve preferably) and hook up all the electric chairs to the same switch that the president uses to light the national Christmas tree, bringing “joy to the world” and killing death row inmates at the same time. See (University of Chicago 1965).

E-mail correspondence between Michael Malloy and the author, March, 2024. In recent correspondence, Miller wondered if he might have overstated the drama surrounding the show. E-mail correspondence with Marc Miller, March, 2024.

E-mail correspondence between Alan Moore and the author, 2012. Alan Moore is an artist, art historian, curator, and art writer. See (Miller n.d.); also, (Heinemann 1975).
Belgian artist Raphaël Opstaele, with the group, Mass and Individual Moving, made the *The Butterfly Project* as one of that country’s entries to the Biennale. Nearly 25,000 larvae were first cultivated in France and about ten thousand pupae were flown to Venice shortly before the opening of the Biennale, housed and on display in a corner of Piazza San Marco. The butterflies never quite took to the air, and the “Movers” called it “a beautiful failure”. For more on the project see the entry from the recent exhibition, “Mass (and Individual) Moving”, held in late 2023 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp: “Ten thousand butterflies will be released (Tienduizend vlinders zullen worden vrijgelaten)” M HKA Ensembles. Dieci mila farfalle saranno liberate (Tienduizend vlinders zullen worden vrijgelaten) by Mass Moving, 1972; https://ensembles.org/items/dieci-mila-farfalle-saranno-liberare; also see: (Opstaele 1972). The most controversial work in the Venice fair was Gino De Dominicis’ *Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Motionless)*. This installation, which had appeared in earlier displays in a somewhat different form, became problematic because it now included a man with Down’s Syndrome seated in the corner of the room as one of its elements. This proved so vexatious that he was replaced with a young girl who did not have the syndrome. Eleonora Charans argues that the overall composition of the work has been misunderstood; her important essay reconstructs its true appearance as an installation juxtaposing a variety of living and fabricated components, including a dog skeleton. See (Charans 2016). Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, and Ali Subotnick, part of the Wrong Gallery of New York, re-staged the piece at the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2006, using a girl with Down’s Syndrome. Also see note 4. In 1975, De Dominicis had an exhibition entitled, “Exhibition for Animals Only”, which forbade humans from entering the gallery but had peepholes allowing for glimpses of the animals inside (goose, ox, donkey, hen, etc.).

**References**

20. (Battcock 1972a, 1972b).
21. (Battcock 1972a, p. 45). All quotations are taken from the *Arts Magazine* version. Curiously, when this essay later appeared in (Battcock 1977), he chose to use the earlier *Domus* version (pp. 43–56).
23. (Battcock 1972a, p. 45).
25. E-mail correspondence with the artist, March, 2024.
26. (Miller n.d.).
27. There is neuroscientific and psychobiological scholarship that argues that understanding the emotional and psychological conditions of animals can encourage animal welfare advocacy. See (Coria-Avila et al. 2022). Also see: (Freund et al. 2016). Also see notes 5 and 6.
29. (Miller 2015, n.d.)
30. The Eugenia Butler Gallery was an important space in Los Angeles, mounting landmark and cutting-edge conceptual shows, including work by Michael Asher, John Baldessari, James Lee Byars, Douglas Huebler, Ed Kienholz, Joseph Kosuth, Dieter Roth, Allen Ruppersberg, and Lawrence Weiner. Malloy’s *Cemetery Piece* is included in Lucy Lippard’s groundbreaking book: (Lippard 1973, pp. 242–43).
31. E-mail correspondence with the artist, 2024.
32. See note 29.
33. My intention is not to provide an authoritative list of participatory, situational, interactive, or behaviorist art in this essay. For mention of “relational aesthetics”, see note 4.
34. See (Milgram 2005). A compelling and disquieting documentary of the experiment can be found in Milgram’s 1962 film, *Obedience*. (Arendt 1963). This material first appeared as a series of essays in the *New Yorker* in 1963. These subjects are examined in many of Arendt’s prolific writings.
35. There is substantial literature on the controversial Milgram Experiment, and many have questioned its methods and ethics. After the initial experiment, it was repeated multiple times with variations that were often designed to neutralize certain factors felt to create bias. Though some iterations produced slightly different results, the takeaway remained that some subjects still seem willing to inflict apparent pain. Ethical concerns about the experiment helped to bring about changes in guidelines by the American Psychological Association for treatment of human subjects in studies. Later in the body of this essay, I discuss guidelines established by the College Art Association regarding treatment of human and non-human animals in art.
36. As one might imagine, other artists have used live ants in their art, most done later than Malloy’s. Worth mentioning is a group of works by Argentinian artist Luis Fernando Benedikt, which began in 1968 and continued up through 1972, when Malloy’s piece was on display. Benedikt employed groups of live ants more positively in habitats and labyrinths that he designed as works of art. Part of a series that a leading critic called “biological-physical-chemical experiences”, they involve live plants, animals, and humans, intended to counteract hierarchies among these organic worlds.
Myrmecologist E. O. Wilson, who helped develop the field of sociobiology, is the most famous writer about the life of ants. He won, with Bert Hölldobler, the Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for the popular and finely illustrated book: (Wilson and Hölldobler 1990).

I want to make clear that this refers to works of art that are harmful to actual animals. It can be argued that depictions of animals in art might portray them in ways that contribute to a climate of misunderstanding and mistreatment. While such work might promote a troubling mindset about animals, it is qualitatively different from art involving improper treatment of live or once-living non-human animals. In this regard, the most infamous abusive piece, created just five years after Malloy’s, is Tom Otterness’ killing of a dog as a filmed artwork called Shot Dog Film (1977), a far moral cry from Malloy’s invitation to voluntarily exterminate an insect. Closer in spirit to Insure the Life of an Ant is Rick Gibson’s 1986 Kill a Bug, a combination of street cart and baby stroller, which he wheeled along a popular street in the waterfront city of Plymouth, UK. The apparatus carried bugs in containers and a selection of insecticides, and he invited passers-by to “kill a bug”. Taking the moral and ethical art zone to the streets, Gibson offers an uncomfortable melange of somewhat opposing associations: pest control, the beginning of life associated with babies, and street carts purveying products. In the spirit of Milgram, Gibson also made the coin-operated Pain Dispenser in 1984, on which is written: “Hey! Give Yourself a Painful Shock for only 5P”. Known for controversy, Gibson planned to squash a rat between two canvases as performance art; the event was stopped by local authorities and the piece confiscated. Later Gibson was pursued by an angry crowd objecting to this project, as the affect of the piece came back to haunt its producer.

As mentioned, Insure the Life of an Ant may relate to contemporaneous death penalty debates. Evaristti has made several works addressing this theme, too. His FIVE2TWELVE of 2007 focuses on an American death row inmate, whom the artist visited in prison, where a nearby graveyard contained those previously executed, with grave markers bearing only numbers, not names. The inmate, Gene Hathorn, wrote poetry and made drawings, and Evaristti used these along with his own work in an animated film by Sara Koppel, scored by Kenneth Thordal, entitled Death Town, made in 2008. Evaristti also received permission from the prisoner to use his body after death as fish food (an animal appearing periodically in the artist’s oeuvre), as part of an exhibition where visitors would feed fish in a large aquarium. Hathorn’s sentence was reversed, and he is now serving a double life sentence instead. This death row visit also inspired Evaristti’s The Last Fashion (2008), a clothing line informed by his learning that death-row inmates were issued fresh attire for their executions. See: (Evaristti Studios 2008). Also, (Grom and Erritzøe 2013, pp. 116–33). I should add that much of Evaristti’s fascinating oeuvre, despite its sometimes outrageous character, interrogates difficult issues surrounding government, ecology, and, as seen, mortality. He also has put his own life in danger in his art, an idea I examine later in the essay in regard to risk-tasking artists.

Michael Malloy stopped producing art at some point in the mid-to-late 1970s. Malloy’s current career as owner of a high-end insurance company may suggest an ironic continuation of concepts that preoccupied him as an artist, though he recently described it as “two very different expressions of something at different times”. He is a leader and expert in his current field, authoring two books and producing over 100 videos on the subject. E-mail correspondence, 2024.

See: (Evaristti Studios 2000). At the 2000 Trapholt showing, these components of the piece were laid out in a manner that might not make clear their connection to each other. In subsequent displays at Trapholt in 2012, 2013 and 2017, the work was arranged a bit differently each time (see Figure 12, for one example). In each of the these later instances, however, the elements are clearly linked together in a more linear fashion. As well, Helena & El Pescador no longer has live fish in water. Instead, plastic versions of goldfish are suspended in silicon jelly. I am grateful to the staff at the Trapholt Museum, especially curator Katrine Stenum Poulsen, for clarifying issues about the installations.

Interview with Marco Evaristti by the author, Summer, 2017.

(Black 2009). Also see notes 5 and 50.

(Aloi 2008a, p. 2). Also see: (The Goldfish Thread 2008; Aloi 2008b).

See for example, (Black 2009). Also see notes 5 and 50.

(BBC News 2003).

(Frank and Readers 2008, p. 31). Eric Frank moderated the intriguing enterprise in which H-Animal Net, a website for Animal Studies Scholars, invited the community to pose questions for Evaristti. As Antennae editor Giovanni Aloi wrote in the introduction to this issue, the event “triggered one of the most heated threads the site has hosted to date”. (Aloi 2008a, p. 2).


(Singer 1975). There is hardly unanimity about the assertions of Singer, a controversial philosopher who popularized this term and whose positions on animal welfare are inconsistent. For example, Singer offers tepid justification of Evaristti’s Helena because he believes it instructively “raise(s) the question of the power we do have over animals”. (Boxer 2000). It is generally agreed that “speciesism” was coined by animal rights advocate Richard D. Ryder in a privately published pamphlet in 1970. See (Ryder 2010). See, as well, (Ryder and Singer 2015). Ryder supports the use of terms such as “sentientism” and “painism” (which he coined) to describe a range of feelings that organisms experience to argue for their moral standing. Also see note 6.

The image of damaged clothing revealing body skin might also refer to photos of Japanese victims of American atomic bombs during World War II. In 1971, Ono made a conceptualist work that apparently included animals, and its exact description...
remains imprecise. Called Museum of Modern [Flart, she advertised her putative one-woman show at MoMA, which included a self-made catalogue. She claimed to have released flies scented with her favorite perfume from the center of the galleries (though a “collaged” photo in her “catalogue” shows her and a large bottle of flies in the sculpture garden), inviting the public to join her in observing their flight or sniffing out their trails. Those who ventured to MoMA to see this exhibition found only traces: MoMA’s posting of her ad on a ticket window announcing—“THIS IS NOT HERE”—and a man (with a camera and sandwich board) outside the museum who asked questions and offered information about this fictive event. With partner John Lennon, Yoko made a film around this time (1970-1), entitled Fly, which shows a single fly and then a group of flies traversing a nude woman’s body, accompanied by a soundtrack that would appear on her 1971 album, “Fly”. Because instructions are central to Malloy’s work, it should be mentioned that instructions figure prominently in Ono’s career. As early as 1955 she made Lighting Piece, one of her “instruction pieces”, as she called them, consisting of a small typewritten card affixed to the wall, reading: “Light a match and watch till it goes out.”

The art career of Edward Kienholz spans from 1954 to 1994. Works created between 1972 and 1994 are considered jointly authored by him and his wife Nancy Reddin, who continued to produce pieces after Ed’s death in 1994 until her death in 2019. There are excellent writings on Edward Kienholz, especially in exhibition catalogues. One essay that treats Still Live in greater detail is: (Willeck 2008). Also see my own essay: (Silk 1997). The L. A. Louver Gallery has represented Edward and Nancy Kienholz since 1981 and has organized numerous solo exhibitions at the gallery in Venice Beach, CA and traveling exhibitions in collaboration with art museums throughout U.S., Europe, and Japan. Lauren Graber, head archivist and research specialist at L.A. Louver, was helpful with queries about the artists. Graber presented a paper at the College Art Association meetings in Chicago in February 2024: “Meditations on Gun Violence: Edward and Nancy Kienholz’s ‘Still Live’ Tableau and Drawings”. Still Live was exhibited at the Braunstein Gallery in San Francisco in 1982. People sat in the chair but there seems not to have been efforts to ban the work. Except for a few reports on local television, there was not as much coverage as one might expect. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyQLcsZwE4K (accessed on 25 March 2024).

(Kienholz 1975): n.p Just recently, a failed effort to execute a death-row inmate in Idaho by lethal injection has led to considering use of a firing squad.

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