Say cheese: Rats like taking selfies too

CNN — By Issy Ronald, CNN

Published 5:52 AM EST, Mon January 29, 2024

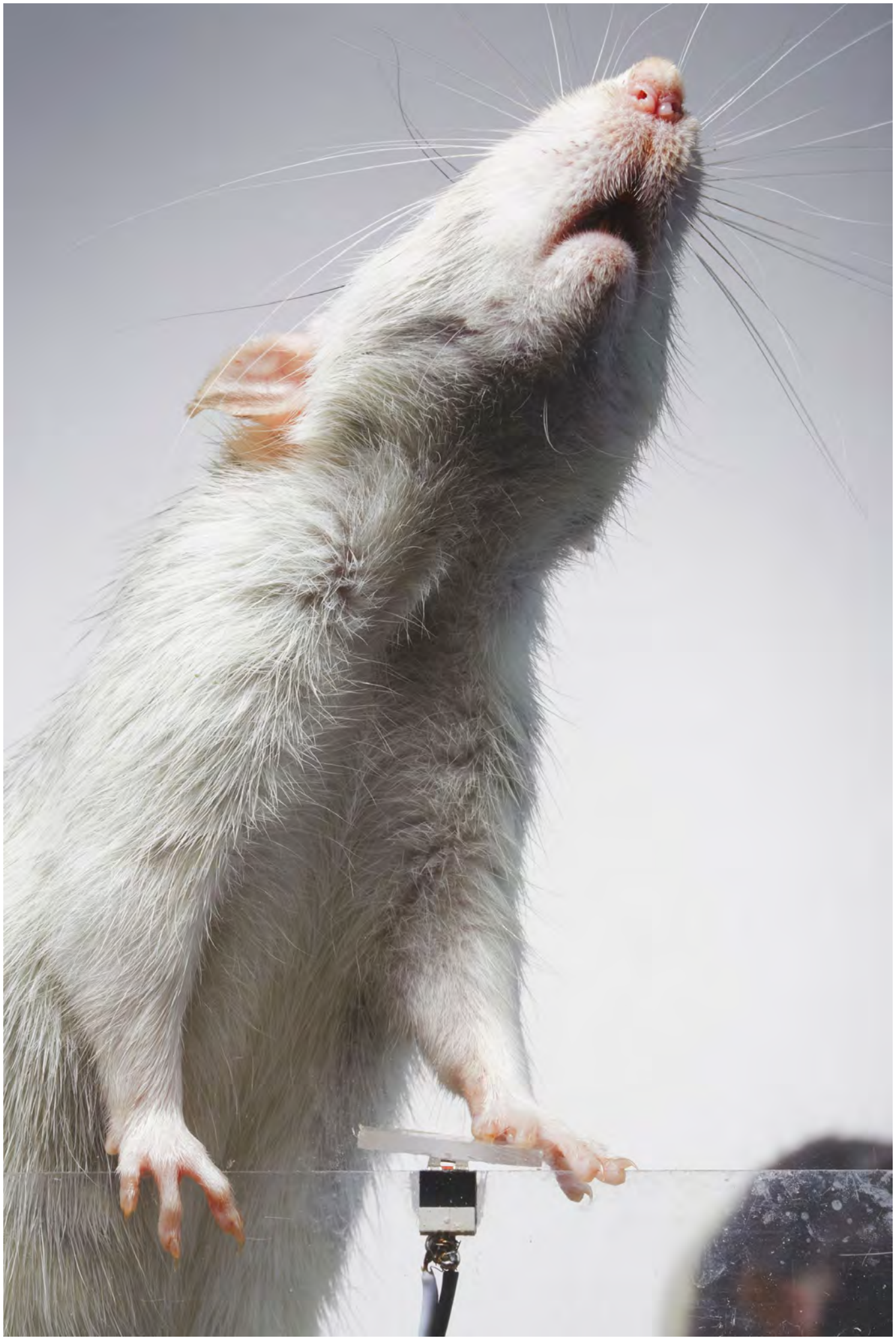
When two rats began taking their own photos with a camera attached to their cage, artist Augustin Lignier said he felt "super powerful."

As part of his graduate studies in 2021, Lignier bought two rats from a pet store in France where he lives, and built them an elaborate cage, he told CNN. Using a mechanism that gave the rodents sugar whenever they pressed a button, he trained them to take pictures of themselves — and, in the process, produced a commentary on the notions of pleasure, reward and the addictive behaviors induced by social media.

Intentionally mirroring funny animal photos and videos found across social media, the rats' self-portraits are "a nice way to attract the gaze," Lignier said, adding that they offered a "playful" way to explore topics like reduced attention spans and the impact of social media algorithms.

“When you have such a power, (even) when it it just with two small rats (not) billions of people, you feel like you can manipulate everything,” he added. “And this is a really weird feeling.”

Lignier based his cage design on the “Skinner Box,” a device invented by American psychologist B.F. Skinner to study animal behavior. The artist said he drew inspiration from scientific experiments, developed by Skinner during the 1950s, that trained animals to complete complex tasks.



As the two rats — which Lignier named Augustin and Arthur, after himself and his brother — began exploring their new environment, they would randomly touch the button that gave them sugar, Lignier said. Then, over the course of about a week, they began to understand the positive effect of pressing the button, associating it with the sugar hit.

Once they understood this, Lignier moved them to a normal cage — with the intention of making the animals forget about the sugar — before moving them back into the original cage. But, this time, the button didn't release sugar every time it was pressed.

Instead, the sugar release was randomized but because the rat's brain "associates pleasure to sugar and sugar to the button... they touch it," Lignier said, adding that the rats would sometimes press the button for sugar more than once a minute.

Their antics produced a series of selfies, some of which appeared as if they'd been shot against a clean, white background. Others were more "headshot" in style — a technique used to showcase faces close-up.

Giving randomized rewards in return for taking selfies mirrored the tactics used by social media companies and dating apps to keep users coming back, Lignier said.

"Every time they (the rats) push the button, they have dopamine in their brain and then it records the exact moment they were touching it," Lignier said. "I was fascinated by this."

After spending a few days taking selfies, the pet rats went to live with Lignier's mother in Arles, southern France, until they died and were buried in

her back garden.