Rhonda Lieberman
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CATS AND ART TOGETHER AT LAST AT WHITE COLUMNS proclaims the press release for “The Cat Show,” an exhibition curated by writer and artist Rhonda Lieberman and developed in partnership with New York’s Social Tees Animal Rescue. Here Lieberman discusses the origins of the project and the “Cats-in-Residence Program,” where cats will be offered for adoption in the gallery on June 14 and 15, and July 19 and 20. The show is on view at White Columns from June 14 to July 27, 2013.

BACK IN THE MID-’90S, I lived in a loft in Long Island City and started tending an outdoor cat colony in an empty lot on my street. I wasn’t even a cat person when I moved in, but L.I.C. had tons of street cats and they pulled me in. The cat party started at dusk when we arrived with the cans. It was my favorite art installation at the time! The cats evaded discourse. They didn’t buy some discursive, blathering response! Going to this Zen kitty garden cleared a lot of the mishigas in my head.

High-rises were about to go up on the lot, displacing the cats my neighbors and I had grown fond of. We placed some and approached some rescue groups—all overflowing with adoptable pets—and that’s when I got a crash course on the overextended rescue situation in NYC. These groups go to animal control to take the animals from death row. Bringing them more from the street was just adding to the overflow.

I thought it would be amazing to help the rescue groups by creating an un-depressing space where the public could meet the cats, a place where strays would be appreciated as the gorgeous creatures they are and not wretches in a cage-lined facility! For animal lovers, it’s very depressing to encounter the broken system that treats strays as throwaways. I thought the cat area itself was a great installation and this project would use the art context to actually facilitate adoption—as well as being an aesthetic, meditative space.
Around that time, at MoMA PS1, I went to James Turrell’s Meeting, a bench-lined room whose ceiling opens up to the sky. Nothing but presence—like the cat area. “This piece could only be improved by cats,” I said to myself. My original idea for the show was for it to be like Meeting—a place for pussies to meet the public—with stuff for the cats to use, because they like to climb, to scratch. No tableaux or tchotchkes—just interactive pieces where cats and people would hang out. In the show’s current form at White Columns, the cats do their “purrformance piece” in a kitty playground set within a salon-style kitty kunsthalle of cat-inspired—and sometimes cat-assisted—art and objets. Work by more than fifty artists and a zine with lots of personal pieces express our mysterious and intimate bond with cats through an array of sensibilities: the pieces are moving, sad, beautiful, comic.

Back in 1999(!), the artists and designers I approached got the project instantly. But finding a space that would host rescue kitties—and the funding—was a challenge. This project integrates art and animal rescue, so it kind of fell between the cracks, grant-wise. A space whose name I won’t mention agreed in 2003 to do it but kept dropping the ball when it came to development. That was an arduous and disappointing saga—so the project took a catnap there for a few years. But it was always a dream project of mine—one that had nearly happened. People would say, “What about that cat project?” Rather mortifying.

To my relief and gratitude, White Columns, the purrfect partner, stepped up and ended this purgatory. This is the right time for the project. There’s so much relational art—it was there in the ’90s, too, and part of my mental framework for the project. And the Internet Cat Video Film Fest at the Walker Art Center last summer was a big hit. I’ve always been passionate about animal rescue, and this was one way I thought I could use my “skills” to help more cats than I could on a one-by-one basis. Plus there’s something magical about hanging out with cats anywhere. They’re aesthetic and fun, so an art space is a perfect fit.

The point of this show is to use art as a lever to transvalue how we see and treat strays. I propose this as a prototype to show that this kind of thing is possible, hopefully on a sustainable basis at some point. The centerpiece is the cat habitat/kitty playground: an enclosure with a tubular cat tree designed by architects Freecell (John Hartmann and Lauren Crahan) and Gia Wolff. It will swerve around seven other interactive sculptures for the cats to use, and seating so people can visit. Michelle Handelman is doing on-site video documentation and installing a multichannel video of the cats in the space for when they are not “in residence.” Social Tees Animal Rescue, a partner for the project, is providing our ten cats-in-residence: Meowrina Abramovic, Bruce Meowman, Jeff Maine Coons, Claws Oldenburg, Alex Katz, and Frida Kahlico, among others. The purr-formers will have artist bios in the zine we are producing for the show, and most of all, we hope they’ll all gain purrmanent homes during the two two-day adoption events that open and close the show.

— As told to Lauren O’Neill-Butler