ARMS & CULTURE

The Return of the (Feline) Repressed
by Rhonda Lieberman and Lauren O’Neill-Butler

It is no accident that cats dominate the Internet. Their cute antics erupt on our screens with the persistence of repressed material rising to the surface—because they are repressed material: the feline precursors repressed by Official Art History.

Until now, our knee-jerk anthropocentrism has blinded us to something any kitten could see. An entire movement—Minimalism—was in fact actually made for cats.* Minimalist icons are in fact cat toys and litter boxes.

In his famous study of copycats, Harold Bloom caterwauling about the “anxiety of influence” that spurs artists to strongly misread (i.e. forget to credit) their influences, while they nevertheless betray them with all kinds of clues, tracking litter all over the place. With the Minimalists, we have discovered a feline influence so pervasive and so obvious; it is unbelievable that the Academy has never figured it out.

What follows is a much needed pedagogical intervention to demystify misreadings of Minimalism that have circulated—and even been funded—by respectable institutions. So much discourse has been generated—and how wrong everyone has been.

Some of our findings:

Donald Judd’s Litter Box, the initial red flag, strangely neglected by piles of scholarship. In Judd’s 1965 essay “Specific Objects” (specific objects for cats!), he meows about an art that is “neither painting nor sculpture.” He howled at “relational composition,” noting, “Objects are depersonalized, art should no longer express human emotion.” His subtext? Art should instead be a potty for pussy-cats!
Walter de Maria’s *New York Earth Room-sized Litter Box* (1977). This piece expanded Judd’s kitty commode outside the frame to engulf the viewer in an entire litter environment.

Sol LeWitt’s *Jungle Gyms for Cats*, a.k.a. his grids. Confirming our initial hunch, whistle-blower Dan Graham drops the dime in a *Flash Art* interview: “Sol LeWitt’s work is deeply about humor. He said his grids were jungle gyms for his cats.” The truest things are said in jest.

Robert Morris’s *Untitled (Pink Felt)* Cat Nest, 1970, felt pieces of various sizes (for cats), overall dimensions variable. Soft and mutable, rather than hard and fixed “primary structures” à la Judd, this work is technically “post-Minimalist” but still cat-friendly. In *Notes on Sculpture* (1966) Morris wrote: “Minimalism is not concerned with the work of art itself, but, rather, focuses on the conditions in which it is viewed by a spectator.” For example, is this a good place for a cat nap ...

Jackie Windsor, #1 *Rope Scratching Post*, 1976, hemp and wood. Windsor’s repetitive units allude to the balls of yarn kitty-cats love to play with and invite feline modes of reception (clawing and climbing).
Eva Hesse’s mid-1960s Atelier was a cat jungle. Here is Hesse’s studio assistant, with whom she often swatted around ideas for pieces.

Bruce Nauman’s *Mapping the Studio 1 (Fat Chance John Cage)*, 2001—litter box included. This piece features seven large projections of footage shot at night in the artist’s cluttered studio, a purr-formance piece that broke through a block shared by artist and cat. “What triggered this piece were the mice,” said Nauman, né “Meowman”:

“We had a big influx of field mice that summer in the house and in the studio ... They were so plentiful even the cat was getting bored with them ... I was sitting around the studio being frustrated because I didn’t have any new ideas, and I decided that you just have to work with what you’ve got. What I had was this cat and the mice, and I happened to have a video camera in the studio that had infrared capability. So I set it up and turned it on at night and let it run when I wasn’t there, just to see what I’d get ... I thought to myself why not make a map of the studio and its leftovers ...”

Containing a “wealth of unexpected incident” (mouse, moth) and a “keen sensitivity to negative space,” the piece expresses the absurdity of the artist’s and the cat’s lives.

Fred Sandback purred about “pedestrian space.” “My work is full of illusions, but they don’t refer to anything,” he said. Working in fuzzy yarn, the artist “wanted to focus the viewer’s awareness on the here and now, to avoid directing the imagination toward anything not immediately present.” Very amenable to kitties, especially ones with ADD.
Mike Kelley loathed Minimalism. No wonder he once performed as a janitor—he knew someone had to clean up the dirty litter box of art history.

*Thanks to hindsight provided by “The Cat Show,” at White Columns through July 27, which includes several revisionist pieces (Rob Pruitt’s Zen litter box, Jonathan Horowitz’s carpet-covered pedestal, Ryan McNama’s Judd-esque cat shelves, Sam Roeck’s modular cat-units) that restore the legacy of feline Minimalism—denatured by human institutions and fetishized by the art market—to its roots: the use of cats. For climbing, scratching, napping—you know, kitty things.

Rhonda Lieberman, a writer and artist, curated “The Cat Show.” Her Cats-in-Residence Program is a purr-formance piece featuring rescue kitties available for adoption in an irrepressibly feline-friendly installation. Last two days in residence: July 21–22.

Lauren O’Neill-Butler is a writer based in New York. Photo illustrations by Arthur Ou.