The Evening Interviews: Rhonda Lieberman

MARK YOUR FRICKEN CALENDARS: ON THE EVENING OF JUNE 13, “The Cat Show” opens at New York’s White Columns gallery. It’s a massive, feline-centric exhibition featuring over 50 artists—including Rita Ackermann, Nicola Tyson, Daniel Heidkamp, and Matthew Barney—as well as the ‘Cats-in-Residence’ program, for which adorably adoptable kittens will take over the actual exhibition space. (The project is sponsored by Social Tees Animal Rescue, a no-kill shelter.) We discussed this very important artistic milestone with the show’s curator, Rhonda Lieberman.

UNI & CHLOE: Rhonda, tell us a bit about what we can expect from “The Cat Show.”

RHONDA LIEBERMAN: The Cats-in-Residence Program, with rescue kittens available for adoption, is the raison-d’etre [it’s on June 14-15, and July 19-20.] They’ll do their purr-formance piece, like artists in residence, in a kitty playground we are installing in White Columns. Meowrina Abramovic will be present, as well as Bruce Meowman, Manx Ernst, Frida Kahlico, and Jaspuur Johns.

UNI & CHLOE: That’s some blue chip pussy! What gave you the idea to actually have cats in the exhibition space, ones that visitors can take home with them?

RHONDA LIEBERMAN: With so many homeless pets in the city, most of them destroyed simply because there is no room for them in the shelters, I became obsessed that an art space could be an inter-species hangout where people could appreciate strays and potentially rescue them. Art as animal rescue, not art about animal rescue. Inter-species relational art! It can save lives and reduce stress...Like a Zen kitty garden. Hanging out with kittens is a meditative and aesthetic experience. I thought an art installation could be the kind of groovy inter-species hangout where people could meet and fall in love with the strays. I was also inspired in the ‘90s by James Turrell’s Meeting at P.S. 1—a bench-lined room whose ceiling opens up to the sky. This piece could only be improved by cats, I said to myself.

UNI & CHLOE: Can you tell us a few specific artists who will take part?

RHONDA LIEBERMAN: Architects Gia Wolff and John Hartman and Lauren Graham of Freecell are designing the habitat: including a Zen litter box by Rob Pruitt; a carpet-covered pedestal by Jonathan Horowitz; a hanging feather sculpture for kittens to swat by Lucky de Bellevue; a maze scaled for his cat by Sam Roeck; and Gerhard Richter cat scratchers by Joe Scanlon. There will be a purrfect selection of cat art and artifacts (including several cat-assisted pieces) and an enormous collection of kitty toshchkes inherited and accumulated by writer T. Cole Rachel.

UNI & CHLOE: Is your own cat (Mary Catherine Gallagher, a.k.a. ‘The Talent’) artistic? How can cat owners create a home environment that is conducive to the arts?

RHONDA LIEBERMAN: MCG, aka the Talent, is more the literary type—she’s an accomplished cat-auteur of several titles: My Secret Yard Garden by MCG; My Furry Beauty by MCG; a quickie sequel to cash in on her success, Still Pretty by MCG; and The Journals that made her a cult favorite: The Tragic Life of MCG: The Tabby Years, where she comes out as a cutter from the stress caused by a tabby interloper in her household. You can read all about it in the ‘cat gossip’ column in the ‘zine we're producing for the show.
Alas, MCG’s visual work is totally punk. In one work, she created a custom cat-scratcher out of what was formerly a beautiful Knoll couch. The piece is entitled *Creative Destruction.* And it is very sad indeed. Her punk fashion sense is more amenable to me: she customized her collar by chewing up the tip. The rakish effect complements her furry beauty brilliantly and expresses her badass personailty. She also loves to give spider plants punk haircuts.

I think any home is already inspiring to artistic cats: there’s always stuff to customize! And stuff to scribble about in their cat-journals. The key is to channel kitty-creativity toward results we humans can enjoy rather than weep over (like the couch). I recommend lots of places for kittens to ‘retreat to’ and even to rest when needed: cardboard boxes are a classic winner.

**UNI & CHLOE:** Do you have a few personal favorite artworks that either feature cats or are somehow feline-inspired?

**RHONDA LIEBERMAN:** These aren’t pieces that I own, but I love Vincent Fecteau’s cat wall piece with all the kittens, and Richard Phillips’ cat paintings: they weren’t available to loan for the show. I love Karl Lagerfeld’s ongoing purrformance piece: coming out as a crazy cat lady. Le meow. Speaking of which, *Grey Gardens* (the original doc) is another important cat-lady oeuvre. Putting together the video program for the show, I am loving the “Kitty Meow” number from *Guys and Dolls*: feline-inspired fabulousness.

**UNI & CHLOE:** As far as contemporary sculpture goes, we can’t think of a more kitten-friendly piece than any of Donald Judd’s larger ‘stack’ pieces—so much cozy surface area to sit on! So many unique vantage points and hiding places.

**RHONDA LIEBERMAN:** Ryan McNamara’s piece in the show is in fact a Donald Judd-inspired stack of cat shelves! Judd clearly cries out for kittens. What a great question. Off the top of my head, my cats would love to scratch on Jackie Windsor’s big rope knot pieces; Frank Gehry’s corrugated cardboard furniture would be a hit with the feline community. Rudolf Stingel carpet pieces are great for cats. Kittens love climbing up fabric with their needle-sharp kitten claws, so any Christo piece would do! Tourists would schlep from all over to see *The Kitten Gates* or *The Kittens’ Reaching!* MCG loves to nest in bags—she’d love to take up in any soft Oldenburg piece that has an inviting pouch area. I bet she’d hop right inside his droopy canvas toilet, for example. This is something everyone should consider when viewing art: *What good is it for cats?*

**UNI & CHLOE:** Did you see Darren Bader’s cats-in-a-room piece at MoMA PS1 last year? From what we could tell, that shit was awesome—except he only had about 4 or 5 cats in the space at one time. It seems like White Columns will have a lot more…

**RHONDA LIEBERMAN:** I actually didn’t see that piece! I didn’t know about it until someone pointed it out to me recently. I did approach PS1 about this project sometime between 2000—2001. At White Columns we’ll have 10 cats-in-residence to start. Hopefully they’ll be adopted out and replaced by more residents at the two two-day adoption events that will open and close the show, June 14/15 and July 19/20.

**UNI & CHLOE:** We’ve been painting a little bit—nothing serious at the moment—and we were thinking about entering one of those web-based or low-residency MFA programs. Should we go to art school, or just try to make it on our own?

**RHONDA LIEBERMAN:** I’m not familiar with web-based or low-residency MFA programs, actually…

**UNI & CHLOE:** They’re for kittens with commitment issues. Or jobs.

**RHONDA LIEBERMAN:** I can only speak to art school in general. Many kittens are burdened with student loans, so your financial situation would be a factor here. That said, art school provides an instant audience and feedback. Some useful, some less so. You might luck out and get an amazing teacher, or fellow kittens who inspire you. Plus, it’s good to have public deadlines. Fear of embarrassing myself before others always concentrates the mind. Programs can be expensive so I’d keep working until I feel ‘serious’. Taking a class or two could help you sort out where you’re at before you commit to a program, if you decide to do that.

But if you feel like trying to make it on your own, why not give that a shot for a while? The experience will help you get more out of a program should you eventually decide to go.

*Note:* if you’re a socialite kitten, you’re set either way. To paraphrase a Yiddish expression: ‘If you have money, you are wise and good-looking and can paint well, too.’
UNI & CHLOE: How can savvy kittens combat the ever-growing presence and influence of big money in the art world?

RHONDA LIEBERMAN: Cats are natural enemies of the state, said William Burroughs. By their very presence they give the lie to a point of view that sees money as the arbiter of value. When big money treats animals like commodities and disposes of the ones who are inconvenient—that’s a problem. And we don’t like it. I guess every kitten has to ask him or herself are rich collectors the only people I’m trying to reach? If not, are there other ways for me to have a viable practice?

Also, don’t forget to get yourself spayed! Too many kittens give the market even more clout to try to get you to work cheap!

Mary Catherine Gallagher, a.k.a. The Talent

MARY CATHERINE GALLAGHER, A.K.A. THE TALENT, A.K.A. RHONDA LIEBERMAN'S CAT: I’ve always wanted to be an only cat but I had to deal with a tabby who stayed here 11 years. She was a terrible copycat. How do you cope with copycats? If another cat steals your shit, should you call it out for the record or just groom yourself nonchalantly and try to forget?

UNI: We tend to get a bit defensive when patrolling our creative borders.

CHLOE: Every now and then some human will think it’s a hilarious idea to anthropomorphize their kitten on the Internet, or to have their kitten on YouTube ruminating in French about existential malaise. It’s a sick ploy for traffic. And it’s always totally obvious that there’s a human back there, doing the puppeteering, as it were.

UNI: The best bet is to play it cool and answer any theft with a lighthearted dig. That’s what we tried to do when Riverhead books shamelessly borrowed our whole concept for a promotional e-mailer . .

MCG, THE TALENT: Do you guys collaborate? Or do you each have your own projects going on?

UNI: We work in tandem, more or less, but we do have individual pursuits. For instance, I’m in the midst of developing an iPhone app that parses Google Books results to identify any language in 19th, 20th, and 21st century fiction that is defamatory to kittens or to the larger concept of ‘the Feline.’

CHLOE: Don’t laugh—I’ve been working on a series of critical essays about contemporary hip-hop, building off conversations I’ve had with a few of the Bed-Stuy strays that are always hanging out in the backyard now. The piece I’m currently writing examines the nature of hyperbole and excess in Kendrick Lamar’s “Swimming Pools (Drank).” Think about it: The narrator, who clearly has an alcohol problem that he is bravely discussing in a very vulnerable manner, is approached by a satanic Bad Influence who mocks his relative abstinence (“why you babysitting, only two or three shots”) and then advises him to “turn it up a notch.” Now, in my kittenbrain, “turn[ing] it up a notch” would mean, perhaps, doing five or six shots. Maybe throwing some absinthe in there, or a Red Bull and vodka. But for the unnamed Bad Influence, the logical next step is to literally fill a swimming pool with alcoholic products and then to physically dive in. This is problematic for various reasons: The cost; the logistics of getting all that booze in the swimming pool; the sanitary concerns. I’m still working through these concepts. The essay’s working title is “Diving Bored: Kendrick Lamar and the Psycho-poetics of the Contemporary Party.” I’ve got my paws crossed that Semiotext(e) is interested.

MCG, THE TALENT: We kittens have taken over the internet. The art world is the next frontier. We’re off to a good start. How do we proceed?

UNI: There’s clearly a hunger for this sort of overlap between kittens and the art world. For instance, Scott works for the company that runs Artinfo.com, and every year it seems like their top story is about a cat who takes erotic photographs in Seattle, or a kitten who won the Turner Prize, or a Manx who choreographed a pussy ballet for Performa.
CHLOE: Things like “The Cat Show” at White Columns lay the groundwork for our eventual dominance. They play on the human's natural desire for things that are “cute,” and exploit the human's ignorance of the fact that “cute” can be plotting behind your back.

UNI: We noticed that Matthew Barney is participating in the exhibition. In a perfect world, we'd collaborate with Barney on an offshoot of the Cremaster series, one that explores the generative bio-ethics of the feline. I don't even know what the fuck that means, but it seems fruitful. He's also been doing a lot of work in Detroit, where the ratio of stray kittens to humans is now 10:1.

CHLOE: Matthew, call us. We'll tell Scott to stop trying to talk to Bjork at parties.

MCG, THE TALENT: The Internet: does it make us stupider or smarter? Discuss amongst yourselves, kittycats.

UNI: At first, personally speaking, it made us smarter. We even read newspaper from the U.K. But then we find ourselves clicking on the lowest common denominator, like slideshows of nip-slips on HuffPo.

CHLOE: Then again, the Internet is what makes dialogues like the one we're currently having possible.

UNI: Then again redux, it's also what has enabled Barack Obama to read all of our goddamn emails for the past 8 years. And we've sent some emails that would make Barack Obama blush.

CHLOE: Like most things...it's complicated.