

SYMBOLIC OBJECT: PRELIMINARY PROPOSAL v01
SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN VISUAL ARTS 4.397
GROUP A
11/13/04

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1) INTRO

Our strategy toward this project was to first give consideration to local community groups that are supportive of felines and for which there was a shared interest within our group. Cats are of particular interest because of the unique nature of their relationship with humans; cats are a domestic companion, but they maintain an autonomous nature of their own in the wild.

2) SELECTED COMMUNITY: MERRIMACK RIVER FELINE RESCUE SOCIETY

After looking at many community groups we have settled on working with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. The MRFS distinguishes itself through the extent to which their programs have been developed.

Programs include:

- *Adoption Program* – 2 adoption centers in Salisbury and Danvers. Homeless cats and kittens and special needs cats. Approximately 1,000 cats are adopted out each year by the MRFS.
- *Offsite Adoption Events* – hosted by partnering pet shops
- *Foster Homes* – 30 volunteer foster homes where cats and kittens can live until permanent housing is found for them. 300 cats are currently cared for by foster homes.
- *Barn Relocation Program* – a program for relocating feral cats into barns (run out of their Salisbury location); there are approximately 30-50 participating barns
- *Feral Program* – 30 dedicated volunteers for 12 feeding stations in the Newburyport waterfront and industrial park.
- *Danville Feral Cat Sanctuary* – sanctuary for feral cats and special needs cats with feline leukemia. Housing approximately 60 cats in indoor and outdoor environments
- *Trappers Network* - support network for volunteers that trap feral cats across the state.
- *Spay Neuter Program* - vets donate clinic and services to spay, neuter and vaccinate cats two times a month.
- *Friends of Animal Low Cost Spay Neuter Certificate* - discounts for low income people to get their cats spayed or neutered.
- *Volunteer Program*

The MRFS functions through donated time, funding and services. Funding for the organization is entirely derived from individual donations and grants provided for by partnering businesses. The shelter currently operates on 300,000 dollars annually. There are currently 5 salaried part time employees that operate the day to day matters. The majority of work hours are donated by various kinds of volunteers which include:

- helping with help care at all locations
- cat care
- adoption counseling
- foster homes
- feral cat trappers and feeders
- administrative help
- help with fundraising

3) FERAL CAT COLONIES

Of particular interest are the Feral Cat Programs offered by the shelter. The problems associate with feral cat colonies center on population control as opposed to an issues of abuse which are more typical of animal care. We will be focusing on aspects of how the feral cats structure their colonies and how this feeding program tries to work within this system.

We are interested in understanding better the feral cat colonies relative to the insertion of these programs initiative by MRFS including feeding stations, a sanctuary (Danville), barn relocation, spay/neuter efforts including trapping processes.

4) FERAL CAT FEEDING STATIONS

Feeding stations are provided by MRFS to numerous feral cat colonies within Massachusetts. These stations consist of an insulated space that can accommodate up to six cats that enter and exit the shelter at their own will. Volunteer “feeders” provide food twice a day to cats that use the shelter. Feral cats using the feeding stations are neutered or spayed through an adjacent volunteer program also provided by the MRFS. In this way, the feral cat colonies remain healthier than on their own accord and their population is controlled.



Figure 1 - Feral Cat Feeding Station

5) BENEFITING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

In researching the feral cat colonies, much needed documentation for the MRFS will be created to map cat colonies, feeding stations, and will potentially include high-level business processes. The extent of these documents will be limited due to the restrictive timeline of the project. The documentation will provide a basis for the design of an object that will benefit the local community:

- acknowledge efforts of volunteers
- promote the organization within the local community
- provide insight into the feral cat phenomena relative to administered human influence

6) COMMUNICATING WITHIN THE REALM OF ART

From the perspective of communicating with a larger community that includes art museums, this project will provide insight into the particularities of the feral cat phenomena relative to administered human influence. Of greatest interest is the intersection between these semi-autonomous cat colonies with programs established for their well-being that have been instituted by organizations and individuals. Beyond cats, we share a general interest similar to that of the Situationists in respect to studying and mapping outcomes resulting from the introduction of a foreign element into a previously established environment. Specifically, we are interested in the role that the “feeding stations” provided by MRFS play in the feral cat colonies.

7) DESIGNS UNDER CONSIDERATION

We are interested in designing objects in response to the feral cat feeding stations provided by MRFS. The structures produced by MRFS are distributed to cat colony areas where “feeder” volunteers bring food twice a day. One aspect of these designs and the materials used is their shared characteristics with human domestic structures. The shape of the structure and use of carpeting, pink foam insulation and wooden shingles all directly reflect a domesticity that raises questions about our relationship with these semi-autonomous feral cats. These feeding stations also have a symbolic value within the local community which associates the structures with feral population.

Several variations of the project are currently under consideration. Each variation has specific implications on the production processes and distribution. It should also be noted that no approach excludes any other, in other words it may be beneficial to combine these ideas into a multi-pronged approach...however this is unlikely due to time and resource limitations that currently apply to this project. Project designs currently under consideration include:

- I. Complete design (conceptual, structural, material...) of a **new feral cat feeding station** that will be distributed by MRFS to feral cat colonies. The structure will be presented in the context of an art museum alongside research materials, documentation and mapping.
- II. Appropriation of existing feral cat feeding station design for **miniature replicas** that will be distributed by MRFS to volunteers of donors. The multiples would be presented in the context of an art museum alongside an original full-scale feral cat feeding station, research materials, documentation and mapping.
- III. TOO EXPENSIVE, OUT OF SCOPE, BUT FUN: Institute GPS tracking of cats belonging to a specific colony and make data available to MRFS. Distribution of tracking devices would be handled during spay/neuter weekend program. Real-time cat locations relative to feeding stations will be projected in the context of an art museum alongside a full-scale replica of an existing feral cat feeding station, research materials, documentation and mapping. The projection of cat and shelter positions will be overlaid on an anonymous blank map to ensure the security of the animals.
- IV. TOO EXPENSIVE, OUT OF SCOPE, BUT FUN: Institute physical sensor on flaps of feral cat feeding stations. Transmit data (entries and exits) to internet gateway host. In an art museum, a replica of the feeding station is equipped with Ethernet connectivity and a robotic element that pushes or pulls the door flap when the cats enter or exit the real-world feeding station. This would be presented alongside research materials, documentation and mapping.

8) DELEGATED WORK (PRELIMINARY)

Different aspects of work will be delegated to individuals or groups of individuals based on familiarity with required processes. These assignments may change once the project develops.

- Coordination (Dan Adams)
- Research (All)
- Mapping (Dan Adams, Lilly Donohue, Katice Helinski, Nomita Sawhney, Naveem Mowlah)
- Documentation and diagramming (Oliver Lutz)
- Design & Prototyping (All)

9) TO DATE

Meeting 01 – Brainstormed.

Meeting 02 – Determined approach: looking at local organizations for content.
Preliminary selection of organizations

Site Visit 01 – Interviewed owner/manager of MRFS
Toured facility
Examined feral cat feeding station
Documentation: notes, video, photography

Meeting 03 – Determined focus/interest of project: feral cat population relative to human influence and interdependency between the two.
Determined that object will be derived from feral cat feeding stations.
Preliminary allocation of tasks.
Wrote "Preliminary Proposal v01"