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Hope For a Self-Operated Animal

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Hope For a Self-Operated Animal

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts of Bard College

by
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In the summer of 1963, fourteen cats were taken from the streets of Paris to be used in an experiment on space flight, by the *Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherches de Médecine Aéronautique* (CERMA). They were put through training by a team of scientists designed to desensitize them to the conditions of space flight. This included being spun in a cat-sized centrifuge and spending hours strapped into a framing device meant to keep them in a lying down position, all while listening to simulated rocket noises. The cats had electrodes implanted into their brains to monitor their neurological activities. It was important for them to be as calm as possible for the flight; the point of the experiment was to study any effects exiting the atmosphere and low gravity might have on an animal's body, so their vitals needed to be as normal as possible. A cat referred to as C341 was chosen on the day of the flight, because of her calm demeanor and light weight. She was shipped to a French test site in Algeria and sent up in a rocket at 8:09 am on October 18th. The flight lasted thirteen minutes, five of which she spent in weightlessness. She was retrieved, safe and unharmed, by helicopters soon after the rocket was ignited. Following the flight she was named *Félicette*, after Félix the Cat, and the press was quite charmed to report on the "French astro-cat". She was given her own stamp, with the quote "*Thank you for your participation in my success of 18 October 1963*".

I don't know what happened in the two months after she came back, but I'd like to think that she and the other cats were treated kindly. Maybe they were taken home by the scientists who, until the completion of the flight, were prohibited from displaying any affection towards the animals. That finally they were able to play and be pet and chase mice, as they might have done before they were elected to be astronauts. That they might have slept all day in the sun. Two months after the flight *Félicette* was euthanized so her brain could be dissected. Nothing notable was learned from the necropsy. An additional rocket was sent on October 24th, but it failed to launch and the cat was killed in the crash. Nine of the other cats were euthanized following the experiment. The only cat (to my knowledge, as the fates of the last two cats is unreported) that lived past the duration of the program was Scoubidou. She became sick after the electrode was inserted into her brain and was removed from the experiment early on.

I first encountered this story a few years ago. I can't remember how or why, but I found a picture of *Félicette* on Google Images. She was looking just past the camera. I wondered if there had been a person, out of frame, snapping their fingers to draw her attention, as I so often have, trying to photograph my cats at home. She was a black and white tuxedo, like Pip, my first cat and first word. Our names were different versions of the same Latin word, *felicitas*, meaning happiness. As I read more about her I learned she had been sent to space on my birthday thirty eight years before I was born. I don't believe in past lives, and if I had one I don't think it would be quite this obvious, but I felt a strong affinity towards her.

I was drawn to this story of an animal heralded as a face of scientific achievement, like Laika the Russian space dog, or Ham the American space chimp. In western pop culture, these animals are respected and humanized. They're depicted as astronauts, looking up towards the stars with pride. The fact that these are animals that cannot conceptualize space, or planets, who don't understand what it means to leave the atmosphere, seems to be ignored. I wondered what that would've felt like for *Félicette*, to leave the earth as a being that doesn't know what that means. I wanted to explore the five minutes she spent weightless, and how that felt for her. It was a moment where she was the only living thing outside of the whole world, where she saw everything. She has an undeniable tie with outer space, and I wanted that to be integrated in her narrative, but most of all I wanted to highlight her as a cat. A cat who

happened, one day, to go to space. I imagined what the story might have been through her eyes. The tracing paper I use clouds certain parts of the installation, reflecting the obscurity and unknowns of Félicette's story. Because so much of this narrative exists in an abstract sphere (the imagined perspective of a cat), I was attracted to forms that are transient and organic— things that felt like they existed in between a human and nonhuman space. The five minutes of weightlessness is seen in the hanging objects. I picked images that came to mind when I thought about my own cats, and the items they interact with in our home. What sort of things would they look for if they were shot out into space? Writing was another part of my process and helped me build structure. If I didn't know what I was doing, or felt what was at hand was escaping me, I would turn back to my writing. I sourced material from newspaper and video archives, images of space, items from antique shops, and from my own and my friends' rooms. The installation concludes with a chair to sit in and an animal to hold, an activity I, and I'm sure many viewers, have had the pleasure of experiencing. I hope Félicette, in her brief life, did as well.

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