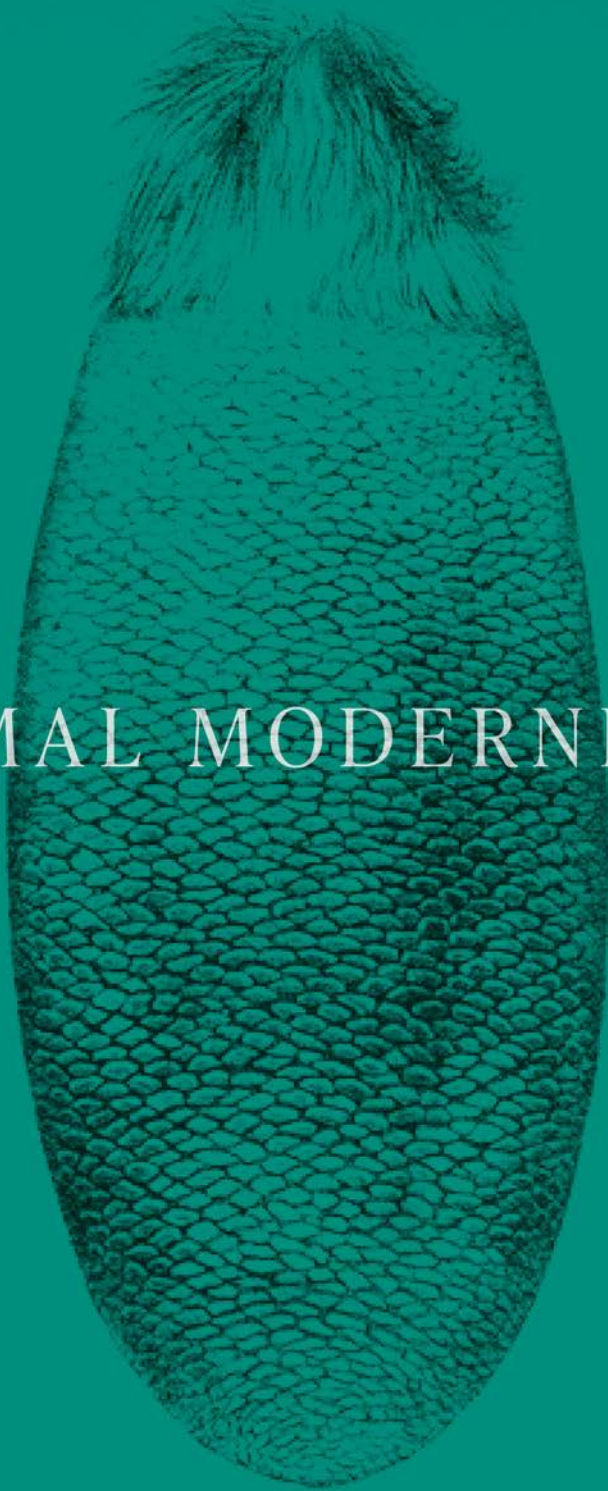


DANIEL HARKETT, KATIE HORNSTEIN (EDS)



ANIMAL MODERNITIES

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IMAGES, OBJECTS, HISTORIES

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Animal Modernities: Images, Objects, Histories

Edited by

DANIEL HARKETT
AND KATIE HORNSTEIN

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Chapter 8

Feline Creativity on the Eve of Modernity

Amy Freund and Michael Yonan

There is a rumbling in the artist's studio. A thud, the sound of canvas ripping, of mayhem as items crash to the floor. Chaos has interrupted the quietude that the artist has so carefully created around him. Is it the drums of battle, the inspiring paramour, or the dawning of a new age that disrupts his reverie? Is it the awareness of his mortality, self-doubt about his talents, fears that audiences will misunderstand his visions? No. It is none of these things.

It is a cat.

This is the story one could tell by looking at Louis-Léopold Boilly's *Trompe l'Œil with a cat* (fig. 8.1). The painting is both an object, an actual painting, and an image of objects, including a painting seen from its "nonpublic" side, the one not normally shared with audiences. It evokes the pictorial language of still life and trompe l'œil to create a witty joke, one particularly funny if imagined being seen in Boilly's actual studio. The cat has interrupted the artist's work, even destroyed it, to pursue what it wants and what, from its perspective, is much more important: the sardines hanging from a hook nearby. Boilly's cat interjects whimsy into this already humorous painting, but looking at it more carefully, it seems a highly suggestive joke. The artist's creation has been ruined, but the disruption of art that the cat generates has created a new work of art, layered and intriguing. Boilly's cat has redirected art through its pursuits: its single-minded hunger has changed what this painting could be and arguably made it better. The cat hunts alone (unless it's a lion), just as the artist must trust their individual vision. The cat emblemizes this process and demands to be seen as critical to the workings of the artist.



8.1 Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Trompe l'Œil with a Cat*, ca. 1800–1820. 85 x 96 cm. Private collection. Photo © Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.

But it is also possible to see more in Boilly's disruptive feline than just a metaphor. The sardines are painted with uncanny verism; they extend into the viewer's space, and by focusing the cat's attention on them, the artist recalls the legend of the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis and his painting of grapes. The story goes that Zeuxis's painted fruits were so lifelike and naturalistic that living birds flew around them, attempting to eat them. This story modeled a kind of artistic practice for artists across early modern Europe, valorizing the idea that great art improves on nature's foibles through the cultivation of artistic skill. Boilly reimagines and disrupts this legend by inserting a cat into the triangle between artist, nature, and art. Zeuxis fooled the birds with his illusionism and thus asserted his superiority to, and mastery of, nature. Boilly's cat's reaction to a presumably veristic painting is different than Zeuxis's birds. The cat violently breaks the illusion, either because it

is so convinced the painted space is real (the one on the recto of the canvas we see from the verso) that it “enters” it, or because it is so unconvinced by that painted space that it destroys it in pursuit of the “real” fish. Boilly imagines a cat that disrupts the artist’s first layer of masterful illusion but is “trapped” by the second layer (the fish). But Boilly’s illusion contains within itself its own undoing, in the person of a cat careless of the stuffy conventions and storied history of art. At the same time, the painting represents Boilly’s assertion of the coauthorship of art by human and animal.

Our goal for this essay is to talk about the cat in the picture, not just Boilly’s picture, but in European art from the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries, decades that underwent profound social change that created the conditions of modern life. If one takes the time to notice them—mimicking the stealthy patience of the ambush predator—cats appear with startling frequency in that period’s depictions of the artistic process, standing in for qualities that resonated with the artists who represented them.¹ Some of those qualities were linked to cats’ physical prowess and famous independence. Artists had long appreciated cats due to their sharp eyesight, and, as we have argued elsewhere, as metaphors of artistic liberty.² Cats also stood in for the seductive materiality of nature, both utterly familiar and utterly strange. Sometimes artists interpreted these feline connections to art in painfully literal ways, as in Raimondo Zaballi’s *Self-Portrait Painting a Cat*, from 1841, now in the Uffizi. In this vision of the artist at work, the paint on the artist’s palette transmutes into a confrontational orange and white tabby (fig. 8.2). The materiality of the animal is coupled here with another common rhetorical gambit: a direct identification between the cat and the artist.

This human fascination, and identification, with the beautiful, intermittently affectionate domestic cat has a long and distinguished intellectual history, from Michel de Montaigne’s musings on whether his cat was actually playing with him rather than the other way round, to the naked Jacques Derrida’s destabilizing confrontation with his own cat.³ We propose that these same philosophical debates about the human and the animal played out in the visual arts. In this respect we echo some of the claims made recently in Roni Grén’s study of animality in theories of modern art. Grén has proposed that the boundaries of animality, the way that animals were understood structurally in relation to humanity, affected the development of modernism, and that traces of

this dichotomy can be detected in European theories of art since the Enlightenment.⁴ Animals are the “other” with which modern art theory engaged in a complex game of definition and redefinition, with the human propensity for artmaking constantly reimagined against animals. The relationship between animal and human is inconsistent and constantly shifting, according to Grén, and since the history of modern art is also a history of the destabilizing of certainties and hierarchies, the discourses of modern art and of animals intersect in complex ways. That history runs parallel to the trajectory of cats as domesticated animals, and, as we will see, to their careers as participants in and avatars for modernist artistic creation.



8.2 Raimondo Zaballi, *Self-Portrait Painting a Cat*, 1841. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Derrida specifically evoked the question of feline subjectivity in “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” his meditation on the personhood of animals and the potential dissolution of the human-animal boundary. As a result of his now-famous nude confrontation with his cat, Derrida, meeting the cat’s gaze, experiences both embarrassment and a shock to his own self-knowledge: “Who am I therefore? Who is it that I am (following)? Whom should this be asked of if not of the other? And perhaps of the cat itself?” Derrida immediately insists that he is not

running a thought experiment or speaking in metaphors: “The cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, *a little cat*. It isn’t the *figure* of a cat. It doesn’t silently enter the room as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse myths and religions, literature and fables” (emphasis Derrida’s).⁵ The mutuality of Derrida’s relationship with his cat is an echo of the destabilizing but wildly creative partnership, embodied by Boilly’s painting, between modern artists and their feline interlocutors.

Donna Haraway, in her foundational book *When Species Meet* (2007), takes Derrida to task for not following through on his revelation about his cat’s realness. The philosopher, she argues, fails to be curious about what the cat does or thinks and neglects to consider how the cat might communicate with him outside of the human language in which Derrida delights. “Derrida the philosopher,” she points out, “had no idea how to practice this sort of curiosity that morning with his highly visual cat.”⁶ This insistence on the primacy of the word disappoints Haraway. But artists, like cats, are highly visual, and thus can escape the trap of the verbal, just as cats are known to escape enclosures that they find too limiting. There are limits to what a text-centered philosophical practice can elucidate, and in art, concepts about humanity and animality were articulated visually long before they were stated textually. Artists like Boilly, Francisco Goya, Friedrich Overbeck, and Gustave Courbet, working centuries before Derrida, recognized and identified with the cat in ways the philosopher did not. In a pre-Darwinian era, the embrace of this human-feline continuity by nineteenth-century painters is particularly striking. It is also surprisingly non-anthropocentric. The artists we analyze here, and many others in the same decades, project themselves into the mind of the animal in order to make art and think about artmaking. Cats enabled this identification because, simply put, cats are intelligent in ways that continually impress their human companions—and unlike other domesticated animals familiar to nineteenth-century artists and viewers, like the dog or the horse, cats are loathe to bend their minds and wills to human domination. So intelligent are cats that, in some moments, they seem to break down the human/animal dichotomy and attain a subjectivity as deep and nuanced as our own—if only they would let us in. What follows is therefore not an iconography of feline imagery, but rather a thinking through the presence of cats in images that are about making art.

It is in Goya that we find the beginning of an appropriation of feline power into self-consciously modern conceptions of artmaking, nowhere more than in his well-known etching *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, the central image of his print series *Los Caprichos* (fig. 8.3). Goya made *Los Caprichos* during a moment of transformation in the status of art. Reason, the basis of academic art and the grounding concept of Enlightenment conceptions of its social utility, had begun to give way to a view of creativity that embraced passion, individual emotion, and subjective fantasy.⁷ Goya's oeuvre documents and enacts this transformation: after his early career as a court artist influenced by international models, he turned in the 1790s to psychologically disturbing and politically charged subjects. The huge literature on this image has focused on the double meaning of *sueño*, as both dream and sleep.⁸ Does creativity come from the application of rational principles to the artistic endeavor, as the idea of a "dream of reason" might suggest? Or is it the "sleep of reason," reason's inactivity, that enables artistic ingenuity to reach its full power? It is precisely this duality that is at the core of Goya's image. Reason is both present and necessary, and must be banished and released, for new artistic visions to occur.



8.3 Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, plate 43 of *Los Caprichos*, 1799. Etching and aquatint. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo © HIP / Art Resource.

What has not received enough attention is how Goya transmits this theme through animals.⁹ Most descriptions of this print characterize the animals around him as if they were uniformly scary. A closer look, however, shows that Goya relies on subtle transpositions and connections among different species. Immediately above the central figure is a group of owls, which have a long history of being associated with the goddess Minerva as an emblem of wisdom. This pedigree dates from antiquity and was the common meaning associated with owls in European contexts.¹⁰ Goya's owls evoke this tradition, but they are anything but rational. They glare at him menacingly as one grabs his *porte-crayon*, seizing it from his control while he dozes. Around the owls are other flying creatures, some of which have transformed from owls into bats. Unlike owls, bats bore clear demonic associations, the blood-sucking, life-sapping villains of the animal world. While the two species are distinct, of course, Goya plays with how similar they appear in a moonless midnight reverie. A symbol of reason becomes an embodiment of terror, and exactly where one transforms into the other is imperceptible. The artist has less control over the powers of creation than a rational view of art permits. Goya's fascination with darkness and night recurs in his career, from the inky textures of his prints to the Black Paintings that occupied him later in life.

There is a third animal in Goya's scene: the cat. Actually, there are two. Next to the artist's chair rests an oversized feline who dominates the composition's lower right (fig. 8.4). Less prominent is a second cat who appears hunched immediately behind him. Of them, the larger cat



8.4 Detail. Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*.

has garnered the most attention. In an article from 1959, George Levine proposed that Goya intended this to be a lynx, an interpretation that is both ecologically and iconographically viable, as Spain is home to its own subspecies of this animal, the now critically endangered Iberian lynx. Levine further linked this image to representations of lynxes in the emblematic tradition, notably the 1765 edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, which includes one in a representation of *Fantasia* (fig. 8.5). The image shows Fantasy as a royal woman who receives a bouquet of strange, bizarre creatures from a person that the accompanying text describes as a slave (*schiaivo*). These represent the monstrous creations of the mind, and their conveyance through an enslaved individual suggests that the imagination robs the mind of its autonomy. The lynx appears here as a symbol of vision, an association derived from the acute eyesight that felids possess and the belief that the word lynx derived from the same Latin root as the word *lux*, meaning light or bright. The lynx is therefore a metaphor for the process of envisioning art. The artist is like a lynx in that fantasy enables him to see more, and see more acutely, than others.



8.5 Carlo Grandi, *Fantasia*, from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, 3rd edition, 1765. Engraving, 27 x 13 cm. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Goya changes this emblematic figure's meaning and inserts it into a new genealogy, however. Goya's big cat is likely not to be interpreted as a real lynx who wandered into the artist's studio. Its pose recalls that of any normal house cat. It is both lynx and housecat at once, a hybrid animal that exists in a space between the familiar and the terrifying. This fits Goya's larger theme, which is that imagination transforms how artists see the world. Pushing this association further are the cat's eyes. They look not at us, but through us, an effect that Goya creates by depicting them as exotropic, or turned outward. This is not the focused sharp vision we associate with a predatory gaze, but rather is a gaze askance with an unnerving effect. It perfectly fits Goya's visual manifesto of artistic creativity thrown into disorder through fantasy run amok.

Goya's second cat augments these ideas (fig. 8.6). It sits almost at the center of Goya's composition and returns our gaze with a steely focus, precisely the predacious stare that its lynx-like companion lacks. Its hue recalls the issues of light and dark that run through this image, with wide-ranging associations, including drawing attention to the ink that materializes this image in print.¹¹ It is certainly no accident that it is a black cat, since they bore ancient associations with witchcraft, evil, and sorcery. This cat mimics the appearance of the owls and bats around it.



8.6 Detail. Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*.

Goya positions this cat between rationality and monstrosity, combining elements of both into an inscrutable mix. This fits what we know of cats, and what Goya knew of cats too—while no textual evidence survives of Goya as a cat-lover, the visual evidence of his close observation of feline behavior is incontrovertible. Your cat is both a cute, fluffy companion who loves you and brings joy into your home, and simultaneously a cunning killer, two seemingly contradictory behaviors that should not combine seamlessly in a single animal, but do. Humanity's inability to reduce the cat to one or the other of these roles, to place it firmly on one side of the divide between domesticated and wild, echoes the place of creativity in the artistic process. A free imagination is necessary for the artist, but too much imaginative freedom quickly devolves into insanity. The cat perfectly defines that ambivalence. Grén noted something general for all animals that the example of the cat makes especially clear: that animals mark a site of resistance to easy formulations about creativity.¹²

Here we can recall that this image is a manifesto of Goya's art, intended by him originally to be the frontispiece to the *Caprichos* and a self-portrait. It is also a statement about artistic creativity at this moment, one which saw dramatic changes both in the social function of art and, scholars have argued, in conceptions of individual selfhood.¹³ Goya imagines here an art in which creativity is necessary but only partially controllable. And as all cat parents—including possibly Goya himself—know, so is it with your feline, whom you may adore, but whom you will never fully control. Your imagination operates similarly, Goya indicates, and his embrace of this paradox positions him near the beginning of a distinctively modern conception of art in which the darker sides of the human mind influence artistic processes. This association is ironic, since although cats were credited with superior senses and sensation, animals generally were thought not to possess imagination. Goya associates animals precisely with mental abilities that humans possess but have suppressed, and within the animal world, cats best embodied that, teetering as they did between allegory and realism. That Goya based these dimensions in observations of real cats, and not just representations, is highly likely. Lifelike cats recur in his painted and print oeuvres, and these often represent cats in characteristically feline poses and behaviors. Evidence of this is a tapestry cartoon Goya made for the Spanish crown prince's dining room at the Palacio del Pardo, Madrid (fig. 8.7). This image, intended for a *supraporte*, depicts an encounter, realistically portrayed, between two



8.7 Francisco de Goya, *Cats Fighting*, 1786. 56 x 193 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo © Album / Art Resource, NY.

cats working out territorial boundaries. This in turn derives from Goya's *Cuaderno italiano*, a sketchbook he compiled in Italy, which indicates that he observed actual cats in order to represent them in his art.¹⁴

In the years following Goya's meditation on animality and creativity, numerous artists included cats in paintings in which they defined artistic practice. While some representations of artists' studios include cats, other images slyly meld human artmaking with feline bodily pose. To take just one example, Friedrich Overbeck's *Portrait of the Painter Franz Pforr* (1810, reworked 1865), contains a loving tabby cat that doubles as the young artist in this Nazarene fantasy of pre-Raphael artistic production (fig. 8.8). In this image, Overbeck imagines his friend in an idealized



8.8 Friedrich Overbeck, *Portrait of the Painter Franz Pforr*, ca. 1810–1865. 62 x 47 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo © Alte Nationalgalerie / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY.

German Renaissance setting, surrounded by symbols of Christianity. The setting is domestic, signaled by his wife shown sewing in the background. In contrast to her, Overbeck does not show Pforr at work; the cat, posed as a counterweight to the artist's hand (and to the wife's craft), stands in for the painter's labors. The feline's narrow-eyed contemplation of the viewer and its bared claws hint at more menacing intentions. Overbeck subsumes the wildness of the feline into an image of peaceful simplicity, but even in this idyllic view of artmaking, there is a hint of the savage beneath.¹⁵

Half a century later, in France, another artist would turn to a cat to embody his artistic process (fig. 8.9). In Courbet's painted manifesto *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life*, which was the centerpiece of his self-mounted retrospective at the Universal Exposition of 1855, a sinuous, muscular, but extremely furry white Angora cat attacks a toy, or possibly a horse chestnut, at the artist's feet (fig. 8.10). Already Courbet's insistence on the "realness" of his allegory and by extension his cat—along with his convincing embodiment of feline energy in paint—connect him across the centuries to Derrida and his "real cat." The cat is the fulcrum of the composition—the only figure in Courbet's panorama of portraits and types to overlap with the artist's self-portrait, formally linked to the artist's outstretched arm, the white pigment on his palette, the cascading water in the landscape he paints, and the drapery of the nude model. And while other parts of the vast canvas are somewhat summary in their execution, Courbet built up the figure of the cat hair by hair, its silhouette crisply delineated to accentuate its tensely curved back, tail, and paw, its thick white coat rendered so convincingly that the viewer is tempted to reach out and touch it. (Don't! It's definitely a trap.)

Oceans of ink have been spilt on the interpretation of this painting; it has been read variously as a Fourierist allegory, a political attack on Napoleon III, an endorsement of materialist philosophy, a meditation on the artist's relationship to nature, and a negotiation of the artist's individual agency and his place in the collective.¹⁶ But, predictably, very few scholars have anything to say about the cat—a particularly perverse omission considering the lengths to which Courbet went to foreground it. A 1983 article by Margaret Armbrust Siebert comes closest to addressing the centrality of the cat to the painting, pointing to the cat's traditional



8.9 Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Life as an Artist*, 1854–55. 361 x 598 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.



8.10 Detail. Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio*.

identification with liberty and with the sense of sight. She in fact identifies a Goltzius allegory of sight as a possible source for Courbet's central grouping—a tempting lineage given Courbet's qualification of the painting as a “real allegory” (fig. 8.11).¹⁷ The engraving after Goltzius associates the cat not only with the sense of sight but also with the artist himself and the artifice of representation more broadly considered. Not only is the cat vertically aligned with the mirror, the artist's hand, and the canvas, it's positioned so close to the names of the designer, engraver, and publisher that its tail touches the “scu” standing for the “sculptit” of artistic creation. The cat also makes menacing eye contact with those of us exercising our powers of sight on this engraving, with one claw threatening to escape the artwork's frame in our world. It is the cat's formal and conceptual independence within the realm of representation, and its nonhuman instantiation of artistic power, that appealed to Goya, Overbeck, and Courbet.



8.11 Jan Pietersz Saenredam, after Hendrik Goltzius, *Allegory of Visual Perception*, after 1616. Engraving, 24.4 x 18.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The fact that Armbrust Siebert is one of the few scholars in the vast Courbet literature to spend any time thinking about the cat in the picture suggests there's something about the animal that makes Courbet's interlocutors, then and now, uncomfortable. It's not just that

Courbet put a super-cute cat at the center of this allegedly serious meditation on artistic production, although that may very well be a factor. If scholars have been at a loss for words when faced with the cat in Courbet's (and Goya's, and Overbeck's) picture, perhaps it's because the feline plunges us into the wordless existence of the cat—the visual world and its invitation into what Haraway calls “the possibility of mutual response” between human and animal. Courbet's cat—both its artistic rendering and the human-animal kinship it posits—is just too real for scholars of realism, an even more potent a sign than the landscape on the easel of the artist's desire to immerse himself in the natural world—indeed, to be an animal.

As with our discussion of Goya, there's so much to say about the cat's embodiment of Courbet's engagement with pictorial modernism that we have to bracket several avenues of investigation—including the provocative relationship between cat, naked woman, and the demonized femininity of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Likewise, we can only signal here in passing the question of animality and the materiality of art production, which Courbet himself poses with the formal connections between cat, palette, and painting.¹⁹ Instead, we'd like to highlight two important contexts for Courbet's cat—the contemporary embrace of the feline among his friends and rivals in the literary world and the specific connotation of the hunting cat.

Courbet's artistic community—who occupy the right third of his composition—were famously great ailurophiles. As Kathleen Kete has argued, while pets in general had become markers of bourgeois life in the nineteenth century, cats resisted ideological domestication; they were, as she puts it, “the anti-pet of nineteenth-century bourgeois life, associated with sexuality and marginality.”²⁰ But, as Kete notes, the cat was embraced, literally and figuratively, by intellectuals as an emblem of bohemia—that idealized state of creative production on the margins of, and in opposition to, the bourgeois domestic, economic, and political order.²¹ Courbet and his friends were among these cat-loving bohemians. One of Courbet's supporters in *The Artist's Studio* is Champfleury, art critic, novelist, editor of the short-lived journal *Le Réalisme*, and famous cat fancier. A letter from Courbet to Champfleury is in fact the best source for the artist's intentions (or at least his public messaging about his intentions) for *The Artist's Studio*.²² At the time of *The Studio's* execution, Champfleury was at work on a book entitled *Cats*, which was

finally published in 1869 with a suite of illustrations by distinguished modernist artists, including Delacroix and Manet. *Cats* is a belle-lettristic history of human regard for felines, peppered with literary quotations and personal anecdotes that refute negative nineteenth-century feline stereotypes and celebrate cats' beauty and sagacity. Champfleury concludes his book with a passionate case against the stereotype of the egoistic cat. It's quite possible, however, that it was the egoism, or at least the independence, of cats that led Courbet to install one at the center of *The Artist's Studio* as a metaphor for what Bridget Alsdorf has argued is the artist's singularity, even in the midst of his crowd of supporters and models.²³

The colophon for Champfleury's *Cats* is a drawing by the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc of a substantial cat in bread loaf configuration, with the motto *Libertas sine Labore* (Liberty without Labor) (fig. 8.12). Viollet-le-Duc was famous for his creative restorations of France's medieval churches and châteaux (which he referred to in his private notes as *chatós*) and famous also for his love of cats.²⁴ Aron Vinegar has argued that, for Viollet-le-Duc and his contemporaries, cats were a



8.12 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Libertas sine Labore*, plate from Champfleury (Jules François Felix Fleury-Husson), *Les Chats*, 1870. Etching, 27 x 13 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

model of art's political and economic autonomy—hence the architect's quasi-Marxist celebration of the cat's existence outside of capitalism.²⁵ Viollet-le-Duc's and Champfleury's sentiments resonate with Courbet's own deployment of the cat in *The Artist's Studio*. Courbet's cat very much embodies the ideal of liberty without labor; it ignores the room full of real and imaginary humans (and dogs) to pursue its own goals, on its own terms and schedule, in splendid isolation. Its hunt is a form of play, not of labor. Courbet prided himself on his own freedom and autonomy, as the staging of his one-man show at the Exposition of 1855 demonstrated. Indeed, when invited in 1855 to submit his work (including *The Artist's Studio*) to the judgment of Napoléon III, he refused, declaring that "I too am a government."²⁶ Despite his best efforts on canvas and in real life, Courbet never actually freed himself from the rule of government, and he certainly never escaped the art market. But his cat remains a figure of the modern artist's ideal of liberty.

Vinegar also argues that Viollet-le-Duc was attracted to cats both in his daily life and in his sculptural interventions into medieval structures because they represented a wild physical grace tinged with violence.²⁷ According to Vinegar, the cat was for Viollet-le-Duc "a primary technology through which to think the plastic potential of the château" precisely because of his awareness that a pet cat was in fact a house panther: "Despite the cat's domestic nature, it was an unruly lodger, and many of its graceful figures were keyed to forms of attack and defense."²⁸ Viollet-le-Duc's understanding of a modern artistic practice grounded in an essential feline violence is also very much present in *The Artist's Studio*. Courbet's cat may be playing at hunting, but its tense body, outstretched paw, and intent gaze demonstrate that it came to conquer. And so did Courbet, with eyes, nose, hand, and brush extended in an echo of the cat's gesture. Courbet's greatest aspiration, and his bid for painterly autonomy, was to be feline.

To the list of cat-fanciers in Courbet's intellectual circle we can add the poet Charles Baudelaire, who figures prominently in the *Artist's Studio* supporter group. Baudelaire's career-defining *Les Fleurs du Mal*, published in 1857, included the poem "Le Chat," in which his affection for his cat mingles with his passion for a human lover. *Les Fleurs du Mal* was in turn dedicated to the *homme des lettres* and art critic Théophile Gautier (also a supporter of Courbet's) who, in an introduction to a

later edition, declared that Baudelaire himself was a cat: all-seeing, voluptuous, disquieting, eccentric, and faithful.²⁹ Gautier is another documented bohemian cat lover; in 1869, Gautier memorialized his white Angora cat Pierrot, a gift from a female Cuban painter, as the best companion an intellectual could hope for. Only a few years later, Emile Zola, the realist novelist and friend of Édouard Manet, published a short story about a white Angora cat who leaves the comforts of his bourgeois home to explore the rooftops of Paris and returns home to discuss his adventures with the human narrator.³⁰ Clearly, white Angoras, both real and imagined, were circulating in Paris's intellectual circles. *The Artist's Studio* is not Courbet's only painting to include a feline protagonist; in his 1854 *Sifters*, a curled-up ginger cat provides a counterpoint to the hard labor of the female workers (or the painter himself, if we follow Michael Fried's reading), and in his 1864 neo-Rococo fantasy figure *Woman with a Cat*, another white Angora serves as an unambiguous figure of female sexuality.³¹

While labor and sex are two themes dear to Courbet's heart, and central to *The Artist's Studio*, the cat in the real allegory also evokes a different aspect of Courbet's self-image: his love of hunting. Here we return to the idea of cat/artist as sharp-eyed predator, which Goya also evoked in *The Sleep of Reason*. Courbet, like Goya, was an avid hunter; he appears with dog and gun in several of his self-portraits, and hunting scenes make up a substantial percentage of his output.³² Michael Fried in fact links the cat in the *Studio* to the dead stag in Courbet's 1856 self-portrait *La Curée* (fig. 8.13). Fried is right to connect cat and hunter, but wrong about the identification. The real analogy is between the predatory cat and the artist-hunter. Courbet delighted in hunting's visceral relationship between human and animal and the interspecies boundaries that hunting blurred. The cat in Courbet's studio, playfully attacking its prey, brings that blurring of human and animal pursuits to the artist's theater of creation. The cat stands for the dual nature of the artist—he is an animal among animals, immersed in nature, but also a predator whose self-image depends on the killing, or stilling, of the natural world in the field or on canvas. Through the figure of the cat, Courbet proposed himself as an alternate model of the artist in modernity: the artist as hunter, not flâneur, beautiful to look at, partially domesticated but an animal at heart. Courbet answers Derrida's question "Who am I therefore?" with a resounding "I am the cat."



8.13 Gustave Courbet, *The Quarry*, 1856. 210 x 183.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photo © 2025 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The anthropocentrism of modernity and modernism, and of art historical discourse, has obscured the association between the feline gaze and artistic creativity. Later nineteenth-century and twentieth-century painted cats become less critical and more farcical: even the most famous modernist cats (the black cat in Manet's *Olympia*, Gauguin's many kittens) are less powerfully associated with artistic creativity. Part of this is due to the completion of feline domestication, of the cat taking its place among a menagerie of adorable animals, creatures valued to entertain human beings with their playful antics.³³ The Dutch animal painter Henriëtte Ronner-Knip, for instance, made a career of painting cats, but her preferred subject was cute kittens (fig. 8.14). *The Young Artist*, from the 1870s, takes the themes explored in this paper and turns them into a joke: the wee fluffball patting the brush with its paw as if playing/

painting, but not really understanding what it is doing because it is, in this limited view of creativity, “just” an animal. No artist channels the kitten’s energies, and visual cues suggest a space of dilettantism rather than a studio of artistic genius. Even if we read Ronner-Knip’s painting as a parody, it is a deflation of the cat/artist myth. The feline power that so inspired artists like Goya and Courbet is missing. Modernity declawed the cat and dampened the feline’s evocative power.



8.14 Henriëtte Ronner-Knip, *The Young Artist*, ca. 1870s. 24 x 32 cm. Private Collection. Photo © Courtesy of Sotheby's/Bridgeman Images.

We would like to conclude with a reflection on scholarly writing. All our work on cats has been done together, as a duo; collaboration strengthened our thinking. During the process we have turned—endlessly—to the cats that we live with, know, and love, and they have guided our interpretation. They taught us how cats act and communicate with humans in interspecies spaces. In a real sense, we looked at art with real cats. Our experience parallels that of Goya and Courbet, who identified with felines and used them to imagine aspects of their art. As scholars today try to access the experience of real historical animals, they echo the desires of artists past who also tried to identify with the felines they

encountered. Following Haraway and other theorists and scientists, we recognize that our ability to understand the minds or intentions of cats, whether living or historical, is highly imperfect. Haraway, in her critique of Derrida, asks “Can animals play? Or work? Can I, the philosopher, respond to an invitation or recognize one when it is offered? What if work and play, and not just pity, open up when the possibility of mutual response, without names, is taken seriously as an everyday practice available to philosophy and to science?”³⁴ Early nineteenth-century artists took seriously this possibility of communication and identification between humans and cats—and they, in turn, pushed us to take it seriously too. Their work and play with cats, nonlinguistic by necessity and therefore intensively visual, suggested to them (as they did to us) new possibilities for how to look at the world.

Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank Anya Thompson for her assistance in the research for this essay. Assistance with images was provided by the Maria Manetti Shrem, Art and Art History Visual Resources Library, UC Davis; special thanks are due to Leah Theis, Visual Resources Librarian. For a history of feline representation in art, see Stefano Zuffi, *The Cat in Art* (New York: Abrams, 2007). Analyses of the connection between cats and artists would by necessity begin with Leonardo da Vinci and Diego Velázquez, important predecessors of the themes we discuss here.
- 2 Amy Freund and Michael Yonan, “Cats: The Soft Underbelly of the Enlightenment,” *Journal* 18 7 (2019), <https://www.journal18.org/3778>.
- 3 Michel de Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1991), 505, published originally in 1595; and Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369–418.
- 4 Roni Grén, *The Concept of the Animal and Modern Theories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1 and 143.
- 5 Derrida, “Animal,” 374.
- 6 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 22.
- 7 Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 6 and 245–46.
- 8 From the literature on Goya, see especially Anthony J. Cascardi, *Goya and the Art of Critique* (New York: Zone, 2023), and Janis Tomlinson, *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), with additional bibliography.
- 9 Zuffi, *Cats*, 351, describes the animals shown as “terrifying nocturnal visions.” Paul Ilie, *The Age of Minerva: Counter-Rational Reason in the Eighteenth Century. I: Goya and the Paradigm of Unreason in Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, chap. 9), interprets Goya’s cats largely through their traditional association with witchcraft. There is also a tradition of linking cats specifically to owls, as both are nocturnal (or in the case of cats,

- crepuscular) hunters with large eyes; see Laurence Bobis, *Une histoire du chat de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 237–38. Originally published as *Le chat: Histoire et légendes* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).
- 10 For the symbolism of owls in European thought, see Desmond Morris, *Owl* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).
 - 11 In this respect, Goya recalls Pietro della Valle's association of pigment and cat fur made three centuries earlier; see Freund and Yonan, "Cats," note 31. On the manipulations of ink in Goya's earlier versions of this image, see Mark McDonald, *Goya's Graphic Imagination* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021), 118–21. The black cat is a late addition to the composition; in earlier plates Goya included an inchoate mass of ink in its position.
 - 12 Grén, *Concept of the Animal*, 26, and further the animal as a "floating signifier" in discourses of art, 130.
 - 13 For which see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 290–311.
 - 14 Francisco Goya 1746–1828, *Prophet der Moderne*, ed. Wilfried Seipel and Peter-Klaus Schuster (Köln: DuMont Verlag, 2005) 108. Goya's other representations of cats, notably in *Los desastres de la Guerra* (1810–1820), reveal further intimate observation of feline expression and behavior.
 - 15 Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes* (New York: Hacker, 1988), 98. Bobis, *Une histoire du chat*, 161–66, notes that cats were associated with the Virgin Mary in early modern annunciation and nativity scenes, an iconography that would have been familiar to the Nazarenes. Franz Pforr's cat, then, has left behind its Christian duties to serve as the artist's slightly menacing assistant and alter ego.
 - 16 See, respectively, Klaus Herding, *Courbet: To Venture Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 45–61; Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 102–7; Frédérique Desbuissons, "Courbet's Materialism," *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 251–60; Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 148–88; Bridget Alsdorf, *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 75–78. Other indispensable readings of the painting include Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory: Rereading the Painter's Studio," in *Courbet Reconsidered* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1988), 17–41; Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Courbet's Studio as Manifesto," in *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 183–203; and Hélène Toussaint, "Le Dossier de L'Atelier de Courbet," in *Gustave Courbet (1819–1877)* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1977), 249–80.
 - 17 Margaret Armbrust Siebert, "A Political and Pictorial Tradition Used in Gustave Courbet's Real Allegory," *Art Bulletin* (June 1983): 311–16.
 - 18 For more on the perceived link between cats, female sexuality, and racial difference, see Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 119–23.
 - 19 On this question, see Freund and Yonan, "Cats"; and Sarah Cohen, *Enlightened Animals in Eighteenth-Century Art: Sensation, Matter, and Knowledge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
 - 20 Kete, *Beast in the Boudoir*, 115, 126.
 - 21 For the early modern history of the cat/woman association, see Bobis, *Une histoire du chat*, 149–66.

- 22 Chu, ed. *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 134.
- 23 Alsdorf, *Fellow Men*, 78, makes a convincing case for the painting as a statement of Courbet's "singular identity."
- 24 Aron Vinegar, "Chatography," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71, no. 3 (2012): 373.
- 25 Leigh Claire La Berge investigates the nineteenth-century association of cats with the refusal of labor, and the real-life relationships between Marxists and their cats, in *Marx for Cats: A Radical Bestiary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 217–41.
- 26 Letter from Courbet to Alfred Bruyas, in Pierre Borel, *Le roman de Gustave Courbet: d'après une correspondance originale du grand peintre* (Paris: Éditions E. Sansot, 1922), 67–68.
- 27 Vinegar, "Chatography," 365.
- 28 Vinegar, "Chatography," 367–68.
- 29 Théophile Gautier, "Charles Baudelaire," pp. 1–75 in Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1868), 35.
- 30 Gautier praises his white Angora cat named Pierrot at great length in *Ménagerie Intime* (Paris, 1869); Pierrot was the kitten of "a cat brought from Havana by Mlle. Aïta de la Penuela, a young Spanish artist whose studies of white angora cats used to adorn and still adorn the shop-windows of the print-sellers." (17) Zola's story "Le Paradis des Chats" was published in his *Nouveaux Contes à Ninon* (Paris, 1877), 78–80.
- 31 Courbet, *The Sifters*, 1854, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes; Courbet, *Woman with a Cat*, 1864, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.
- 32 Shao-Chien Tseng, "Contested Terrain: Gustave Courbet's Hunting Scenes," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 2 (2008): 218–34.
- 33 Kete, *Beast in the Boudoir*, 134.
- 34 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 22. See also Brian Massumi, "The Supernormal Animal," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1–17.