



Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society Collaboration Project Report

Report by
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Goals

There were two primary objectives to this project; to engage with a specific community, and to mass produce objects that could interact with this community and that could be distributed within its existing infrastructure. We also needed to consider organizing an exhibition in which these objects, along with the chronicling of our relationship and understanding of this organization could be displayed.



Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society
headquarters, Salisbury, Massachusetts.

Choosing a Community

Our group decided that the most effective method to address this project would be to begin with finding the community that we would be working with in order to examine the ways in which they operated and where we might be most successful in providing an object for

them. We looked into a variety of local organizations, searching for one that had a substantial existing network in which we could operate as well as a focus that would provide a compelling topic for our investigation. Ultimately, we decided to work with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. This organization was of interest to us for a variety of reasons, in particular the substantial number of interrelated programs in which we could intervene. Among these programs is a feral cat feeding and trapping initiative which was of particular interest.

We were intrigued by the notion of exploring the relationship between these people and feral cats. These animals are very explicitly not domesticated pets, yet volunteers invest a tremendous amount of time and effort to alter the lives of these “wild” animals. As a result, these feral cats reside somewhere on the precipice of autonomy and reliance on the desire of humans to assign some level of domesticity to their existence.

After some preliminary research and telephone communication, we made the decision to go up to Salisbury, MA to the headquarters of the Feline Rescue Society to meet with a representative of the organization. We decided to document the entire process, through photography, video, and mapping in order to represent our interaction with this community, an aspect of our project that we determined was crucial. During this meeting, we learned of the existence a large number of feral cat colonies in the general area. Each of these colonies has been given a feeding station where volunteers distribute food to the cats. Approximately thirty-five volunteers are responsible for feeding these colonies twice daily.



Feral cat feeding station. The society maintains an extensive program for feeding feral cats.



The Feral Cat Feeding Stations

On this visit, we were also able to view two of the feeding stations which serve as the physical symbol of the connection between these volunteers and the feral cats. The cats have been born in the wild, and consequently they are not responsive to human contact.



The group accompanies a society member to service a variety of the many feral cat feeding stations.

The people never come into actual contact with the cats, their only point of physical connection occurs through this object (the feeding station). The station itself, constructed of tradition house-building material as well as formally resembling a human house, became very interesting to us as an object which seemed to gesture to the inherent confusion in the relationship between humans and these animals, simultaneously domestic in its appearance, yet respectful of the independent nature of the feral.

The Headquarters

Another point of interest which we learned on our visit to the headquarters, centered on the practice of trapping these cats in order to have them spayed and neutered. After this process has been completed, one of the cat's ears is clipped to indicate that they have been spayed/ neutered. They are then returned to their colony. This operation improves the health and reduces the quantity of these cats, but the physical alteration of their bodies provides a symbolic difference between these animals and their truly wild counterparts.

Visiting and Accompanying the Volunteers

Once we determined that we definitely wanted to pursue a relationship with the feral cat feeding program, we scheduled a visit during which two members of our group were able to follow one of the volunteers on her daily feeding route. We continued to document these visits, both for the exhibit and to review as a group. We were all fascinated by the variety of locations of these feeding stations; junkyards, shipyards, residences, etc. We were equally captivated by the idea of this woman, a volunteer for twelve years, going to each of these strange, isolated places week after week, creating relationships between these locations through her circulation over time.



Deciding to Make Maps

Since the organization has no existing mapping of the feral cat colonies, we decided to create a series of maps in order to illustrate the relationships between these locations. We removed the street names in order to preserve the anonymity of the feeding stations and to privilege focus on density and adjacency of the locations to each other and to the Merrimack River.

Designing a Symbol

Ultimately, we decided to generate a variety of objects to be distributed to the thirty-five volunteers in the feral cat feeding program. We produced a symbol that could be used to unify these volunteers and delineate them from the rest of the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. This symbol is a tracing of a feral cat, clearly identifying the clipped ear as an indication of its relationship to the feeders. All of our objects were created in the shape of this symbol.



The group designs a logo for the feral cat feeding program, and begins to produce a series of objects to donate.

Making the Objects

The objects we made are as follows: pins (to be worn on the body of the volunteers), magnets (to be placed in the home of volunteers), coasters (to be placed in the home of volunteers), cling vinyl (to be placed on cars of volunteers), stencils, mouse pads (to be placed in the home of volunteers), and address markers (to be nailed to the feeding stations). Over six hundred individual objects were produced.



The objects were cut from a variety of materials, using the laser cutter in the MIT Department of Architecture rapid prototyping lab.

Our goal was to fabricate objects that could be distributed throughout the environment of the volunteers, but that also would be distributed specifically to these feeding stations in order to symbolize their connection to these locations.

Delivery of the Objects and their Distribution at the Christmas Party

The objects were delivered to one of the feral cat volunteers on Saturday, December 4th and arranged to be given to each of the thirty-five volunteers on Thursday, December 9th at their annual Christmas party (to which our entire group was invited) as “gifts”. They were

received with much gratitude and enthusiasm. The maps will be distributed to the volunteers, and displayed at the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society headquarters in Salisbury.

Our group was successful in developing a relationship with this community, as well as producing a variety of material that will be of use to them and equally intriguing when it is assembled in an exhibition.



On December 7 and 8, 2004, a presentation of the entire process was displayed in the Main Architecture Building at MIT, which included samples of the objects, maps indicating the relationships of the feeding stations, material from the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society, and a documentary video made by group member Oliver Lutz.

Allocation of Tasks and Duties

Our group worked together quite well and there was a lot of overlapping in distribution of tasks, but here is a rough break-down of our duties:

Dan: Project coordinator (contact person), site visits, symbol design, object fabrication

Oliver: project proposal, Video documentation and editing, site visits

Naveem: production of mapping displaying feral cat colonies

Nomita: production of mapping displaying feral cat colonies

Katrice: object “cut sheet” layout, object fabrication

Lilly: project description, object fabrication



The objects were wrapped in Christmas gift packages, and delivered to the society on December 4, 2004.



The gifts were distributed to each of the society's 35 volunteers at their annual Christmas party.