

# Habitat 04

## Kitty Scott

On Parliament Hill in Ottawa, there are a surprising number of haphazardly sited and traditional commemorative bronzes. Among the many figures is a larger-than-life statue of Queen Elizabeth II on horseback and an equally sizable suited and seated Lester B. Pearson (1897-1972). As the symbolic head of state, Queen Elizabeth is familiar; for those who may not remember Pearson, he was Canada's fourteenth prime minister. One of his great earlier achievements, while serving as president of the General Assembly of the United Nations, was winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for proposing a United Nations peacekeeping force to ease tensions during the 1956 Suez crisis. Another accomplishment was his furthering of the Canadian welfare state: his Liberal administration instituted such important social programs as the Canada Pension Plan, the national system of universal medicare and student loans, the building blocks of the so-called social safety net that today distinguishes us from our neighbour to the south and is frequently described as "unravelling." Pearson, before retiring, also participated in Canada's centennial celebrations, including Montreal's Expo 67, which affirmed Canada's new-found internationalism.

Other statues in this garden of oft-forgotten personages are markers of rarely remembered histories; still, there is another monument, hardly ever discussed, that is arguably the most complex. In this scenic location overlooking the Ottawa River, and set behind a stone-and-wrought-iron fence demarcating the grounds, stand two crudely built, miniature, mansard-roofed plywood houses reminiscent of the Parliament Buildings. Several arched entrances articulate the façade of each shelter, and bowls overflowing with food are scattered about. Within the rustic enclosure, a tabby sleeps ensconced in an old rocking chair while

**OPPOSITE:**

*Habitat 04—Cité radieuse des chats/Cats Radiant City, 2004*  
(detail)

Installation view at Darling Foundry,

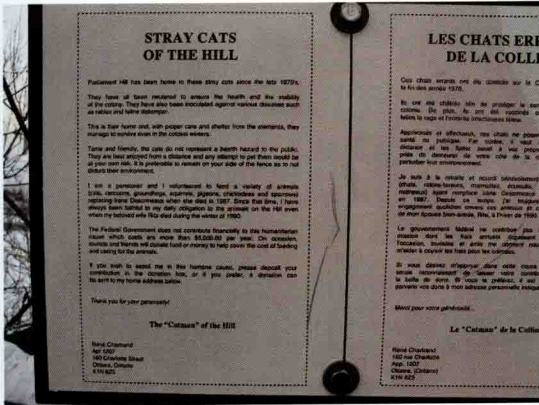
Quartier Éphémère, Montreal, 2004

plywood, carpet, cats

3.35 x 4.57 x 8.53 m (11' x 15' x 28')

Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Photo: Guy L'Heureux



another sits perfectly still, like a nesting hen, watching the birds, squirrels and groundhogs as they come to feed. On one of the most widely used maps of the city this compound is identified as “Cat Condos,” in contrast to the more humane terminology used by the Government of Canada’s Parliament Hill Web site, which refers to the location as “Cat Sanctuary.”

This unusual squatter community and its keeper intrigue tourists and local visitors alike. The cats are apparently descendants of feral animals introduced to the area in 1877 to counter the local rodent population. In the 1970s, Isabelle Desoreaux began feeding and caring for these animals. After she passed away, her neighbour René Chartrand, now known as “the Catman,” took over. He built the shelters and looks after the cats every day. Signage, in English and French, describes the mission and informs readers of the annual maintenance cost of \$6,000. Chartrand’s address is posted on the sign, as he depends on passersby who want to donate to the cause, since the federal government does not appear to financially support the endeavour. Given that all the sculptures on Parliament Hill commemorate some aspect of Canadian identity and history, it is conceivable that the Cat Sanctuary and its residents are permitted to stay because they represent a democratic and positive image of Canadian society: humane, tolerant and generous. As the government’s Web site states, “The contrast between these modest shelters and the formality and tradition of the Parliament Buildings is a symbol of compassion, one of the most important elements of Canadian society.”<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2004, Brian Jungen, partly inspired by the Cat Sanctuary, produced the site-responsive *Habitat 04: Cité radiieuse des chats/Cats Radiant City* in the gallery of the Darling Foundry, a former industrial space in Old Montreal.<sup>2</sup> Rather than creating a conventional exhibition—a contemplative display of objects, such as sculptures, made under his direction—Jungen conceived of *Habitat 04* as a much-needed service in support of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). For the duration of the exhibition, the artist collaborated with the office of the Darling Foundry and the SPCA to establish a new network of relations for the purposes of finding homes for a few of Montreal’s escalating population of stray cats and fundraising for the SPCA. For example, instead of an opening with the Montreal art crowd, a fundraising dinner was held in the gallery. Pierre Barnoti, director of the Montreal branch of the SPCA, gave a speech in English to the patrons of the charitable organization concerning his current activities, and Jungen made available a limited edition of welcome mats inscribed with his Habitat logo. The event found its way onto the society page of the *Montreal Gazette*.

As a temporary and ephemeral artwork made for the gallery, *Habitat 04* possessed a “relational” currency not easily disregarded. The French critic Nicolas Bourriaud maps out “relational aesthetics,” a much-debated and newly minted category of art that some consider to be the definitive art of the nineties, a time that coincides with Jungen’s art school education and emergence as an artist. Bourriaud remarks, “Its basic claim—the sphere of human relations as artwork venue—has no prior example in art history, even if it appears, after the fact, as the obvious backdrop of all aesthetic praxis, as a modernist theme to cap all

Cat Sanctuary, Parliament Hill,  
Ottawa  
Photos: Courtesy of Brian Jungen

modernist themes.”<sup>3</sup> He continues, “It [its novelty] resides in the fact that this generation of artists considers inter-subjectivity and interaction neither as fashionable theoretical gadgets, not as additives (alibis) of a traditional artistic practice. It takes them as a point of departure and as an outcome, in brief, as the main informers of their activity.”<sup>4</sup> The artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, an agent of conviviality who in his well-known works has served meals to people gathered in the gallery, perhaps best exemplifies this artistic attitude. Relational works are often ephemeral, celebratory, open-ended, collaborative and use the installation format. As critic Hal Foster states, “Discursivity and sociability are central concerns of the new work, both in its making and in its viewing.”<sup>5</sup> Within the rhetoric of the relational, all these characteristics represent something good and something supposedly democratic.

*Habitat 04* embodied many of the aspects of relational aesthetics. It involved the conjoining and collaboration of previously unrelated institutions and demanded a complete transformation of the gallery. In what was both a practical and utopian perspective, the new space existed primarily to facilitate bonding between cats and people in the hope that some cats would find homes. In its attempts to foster closer relations between animals and humans, *Habitat 04* represented a new direction for Jungen, who had, for the most part, been making wall paintings, drawings, sculptures and site-specific installations.

Much of Jungen’s well-known early work hinged on the simple act of transforming banal consumer goods into discrete art objects. For his *Prototype* series (1998–2005), Nike running shoes deconstructed and then reconstructed into objects similar to West Coast First Nations masks, and his monumental, suspended, skeletal, whale-like sculptures—such as *Shapeshifter* (2000), *Cetology* (2002), *Vienna* (2003)—were fabricated from fragments of common white plastic patio chairs.<sup>6</sup> With these works, Jungen’s aesthetic language resides in the tensions sounded by the coming together of disparate ideas and ready-made objects.

It is possible to detect the seeds of a relational practice in Jungen’s early wall paintings. First exhibited in 1997, these works are representative of the artist’s attempts to address the identity politics of the late eighties to the mid-nineties. To make these conceptual paintings, Jungen instructed volunteers to solicit drawings from non-Aboriginal people in the street. The volunteers asked the participants to draw their own versions of Native art. The artist then selected a series of these mostly abject and sometimes racist images and reproduced them as wall paintings.<sup>7</sup>

Jungen’s *Arts and Crafts Book Depository/Capp Street Project 2004* (2004), inspired by two icons of twentieth-century architecture—Charles and Henry Greene’s Arts and Crafts-style Gamble House of 1908 and the suburban New Jersey home that American artist Gordon Matta-Clark cut in two in *Splitting* (1974)—is a later example of a more fully fledged relational project. The installation takes the form of a quartered, miniaturized Arts and Crafts house filled with books and periodicals on architecture and crafts, which at the California College of the Arts were borrowed from the host school’s library and from the artist. The semi-comfortable interior was also a screening space for Matta-Clark’s video



Installing *Habitat 04* at the Darling Foundry, Montreal, 2004  
Photos: Courtesy of Brian Jungen



ABOVE:  
Kitty place space  
Photo: Courtesy of Kitty Scott

BELOW:  
Moshe Safdie's *Habitat 67*,  
Montreal  
© Complexe Cité du Havre



version of *Splitting*. As art writer and curator Ralph Rugoff has observed, Jungen altered the function of the college's Logan Galleries for the duration of the exhibition so that it was no longer simply a place for exhibiting contemporary art, it also served as an integral part of the school's research facilities, a place where people went to study the recent history of crafts and architecture.<sup>8</sup>

Although the relational spaces of *Habitat 04* and *Arts and Crafts Book Depository* are sites for encountering history through the reactivation of architectural forms, it is perhaps equally enlightening to situate Jungen's oeuvre, as Vancouver curator Scott Watson does, within the project of retooling the minimalist gesture. Watson cites work from the late eighties and nineties by Felix Gonzales-Torres and Roni Horn, which he claims is indebted to an earlier critical minimalism as practised by Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, and which arose out of a reaction to the neo-conservatism of the Ronald Reagan administration. In this context, Watson elaborates on Jungen's practice: "It is an investigation of sculpture as it impinges on modes of production, implicates architecture, asks questions about how we organize shelter, exposes the truth of materials, and also takes on the theme of identity."<sup>9</sup> Of *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time* (2001), a work by the artist documenting the number of Aboriginal people in Canadian jails, Watson's discussion introduces a darker, critical dimension that is unusual in the field of relational aesthetics and that has implications for a broader understanding of *Habitat 04*: "Jungen brings to the vocabulary of sculpture new strategies of representation and new thoughts on the condition of alienation."<sup>10</sup>

Instead of mining consumer culture's ready-mades, *Habitat 04* followed a logical trajectory that, as the title of the work suggests, looked to resuscitate, if only partially, a pursuit of the modernist ideals set forth by artist and architect Le Corbusier in his visionary but unrealized Radiant City and the exuberant utopian promise of Expo 67 as embodied by architect Moshe Safdie's signature Habitat housing development, sited on a peninsula in the St. Lawrence River. Both Le Corbusier and Safdie attempted to solve the problem of providing shelter for large numbers of people, and each proposed a radical solution whereby sunshine, fresh air, density with privacy, and a strong sense of the social and communal would be privileged.

In dreaming up his Radiant City, Le Corbusier sought to make affordable and livable spaces, rather than luxury dwellings signifying status. In 1935 the egalitarian Le Corbusier wrote, "My own thinking is directed toward the crowds in the subway who come home at night to dismal dwellings. The millions of beings sacrificed to a life without hope, without rest—without sky, sun, greenery."<sup>11</sup> Concerning apartment design, Le Corbusier stated that he "thought neither of rich nor of poor but of man."<sup>12</sup>

The intention behind Safdie's stunning modular building, whose forms were influenced by vernacular Mediterranean hilltop homes, was to make economical, high-density, community-oriented, mass-produced housing using a prefabrication process. Supposedly, this method of building would solve the worldwide problem of housing the masses—in countries such as India and Ghana



as well as in cities like Detroit.<sup>13</sup> However, the units were incredibly expensive to produce and, paradoxically, Montreal's Habitat is now an exclusive condominium community. Still, after Habitat was completed, Safdie did not let go of the potential for change offered by the project's failure:

Habitat reminds us that a major reorganization in the technical field requires a major reorganization among the professions. Architect, researcher, manufacturer must all be a single entity working to a common goal. This will take place eventually, but it will take a revolution to bring it about. And this is where the large-scale prototype produces the shock treatment needed to bring about change.<sup>14</sup>

Situated in the largest gallery of the Darling Foundry, and just a stone's throw from the original Habitat and the monumental industrial concrete grain silos built in the early 1900s and cited by Le Corbusier in his book *Towards a New Architecture* as embodying the spirit of a new age, the nexus of Jungen's project was an ingenious, scaled-down sculptural interpretation of Habitat occupied by eight young, highly seductive but formerly abandoned cats who, when not lounging about or sleeping, were curiously exploring their limited territory and visitors alike. Their activities alone—be they eating, sleeping or playing together—constituted a whimsical gloss on the sociability that is at the heart of relational aesthetics.<sup>15</sup>

*Habitat 04—Cité radieuse des chats/Cats Radiant City*, 2004  
Installation view at Darling Foundry,  
Quartier Éphémère, Montreal, 2004  
plywood, carpet, cats  
3.35 x 4.57 x 8.53 m (11' x 15' x 28')  
Photo: Guy L'Heureux





Fabricated from stacked plywood boxes covered with warm pink- and beige-coloured carpet rather than the harsher concrete associated with modern architecture, this softer Habitat functioned as a humane and highly styled SPCA-approved cat's jungle gym while simultaneously referencing, albeit playfully, cat furniture as sold in pet stores and minimalism as elaborated by Donald Judd's sculptures and the International style. The interiors of the individual modules were appointed with brightly coloured round mats from IKEA, trays of catnip and the occasional toy. *Habitat 04* also incorporated a human presence, a volunteer from the SPCA, who watched over the animals and, if requested or required to, educated visitors about the SPCA and facilitated adoptions. For adoptees, the artist designed a series of takeaway boxes adorned with the same Habitat logo that was inscribed on the welcome mats. With *Habitat 04*, Jungen appeared to be salvaging the promises of Le Corbusier and Safdie's projects, though what precisely was he doing populating a symbolic version of Habitat with disadvantaged and otherwise homeless creatures?

One of the primary reasons the artist and the SPCA concern themselves with the welfare of cats is that the supply of animals far outweighs the demand. For example, in Quebec there are approximately 1.6 million stray cats and, at the time these statistics were collected, 65 per cent of the animals at the SPCA shelters were cats.<sup>16</sup> One of the SPCA's goals is to find prospective homes for cats and so those brought to the Darling Foundry remained there until they were adopted. New ones replaced those that left. During the course of Jungen's project, twenty cats found new homes. At first glance, the entire scenario at the Darling Foundry looked to be altruistic, as *Habitat 04* presented itself as an exemplary solution to Montreal's homeless cat problem. For the cats adopted, *Habitat 04* effectively extended their lives and offered companionship and perhaps even love both to the animals and their new keepers.<sup>17</sup>

On closer inspection, the system Jungen put in place revealed a far more frightening and contradictory reality. Tiny surveillance cameras discreetly placed throughout the central platform captured, in real time, close-up views of the cats' activities and displayed them via individual quadruple-split screens in Cluny (a restaurant attached to the venue) and in the small, closed-off "backstage" gallery.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, this gesture seemed relatively democratic and benign as it increased and dispersed the portals for viewing the project. On the other hand, this so-called model community with its architecture, population and hidden cameras spoke metaphorically of the systemic and sinister workings of power and surveillance. In contrast to the Cat Sanctuary, *Habitat 04* can be interpreted as a dystopia, a modern model of social control, a kind of death camp whose inmates have no knowledge of their fate—for those left behind are, euphemistically speaking, put to sleep.

Although *Habitat 04* married two failed examples from French and Canadian architectural history to a contemporary Canadian version of the SPCA, the latter is the one project of these three whose vision—the long-standing concern for animal welfare—remains tenable and true to its origins. The SPCA's mission to provide humane conditions for animals resembles the architects'

SPCA cats in *Habitat 04*  
Photos: Guy L'Heureux

desires to provide humane conditions for people,<sup>19</sup> and its history coincides with Jungen's interest in labour and particularly with issues of exploitation and commodification as they relate to mass production in capitalist societies.<sup>20</sup>

In particular, the title *Habitat 04* and the actual work, when discussed in relation to the venue, throw the city of Montreal's ostensible progress and inevitable failures into relief through historical moments that span more than a century of change. Montreal's industrial past is visible in the architecture of the Darling Foundry, which was established in Griffintown in 1888, when Montreal was an important centre of the metallurgy industry in North America, but the business fell into decline and closed its doors in 1991.<sup>21</sup> Expo 67, as evoked by Habitat and the idealism of Safdie, sought to promote a modern, progressive, postindustrial Montreal. The city was on the global stage, and it was a cool, cosmopolitan place that had yet to experience the countercultural unrest of the late sixties and the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) crisis of 1970. Much of the neighbouring real estate, consisting of the former factory and warehouse buildings that were once home to artists and other creative individuals, has been converted into offices servicing the high-tech industry, and such places are commonly referred to as "digital corridors." Jungen's live video feeds threaded through the Darling Foundry evinced the technological era's superseding of the industrial past.

*Habitat 04* is at once a contemporary work of art, a charitable organization, cat furniture, a historical cipher, a portrait of the oppressed and an architectural model. Perhaps the greatest strength of this contradictory work is its lack of didacticism. From the artist's perspective, *Habitat 04* as staged in Montreal was simply a solution to that city's cat problem.<sup>22</sup> For others, it was and is at once emblematic of the easy togetherness characteristic of relational aesthetics and the critical position delineated by the minimalist reformation. As political allegory, *Habitat 04* can be interpreted within a broad spectrum ranging from a utopia for the disenfranchised to an experiment in social engineering to a death camp filled with detainees. Still, as much as *Habitat 04* seeks to salvage utopian narratives, it points to the absurdity of this type of thought. Does Jungen really believe that the adoption of twenty cats represents a solution? And is the cat surplus really the problem? Perhaps Jungen is pointing to the transformations that have taken place in Canadian society during our lifetime. For example, the current federal government's refusal to cover the minute cost of the cats living in the Cat Sanctuary is symptomatic of the much broader and systemic disintegration of Canada's social safety net. As the humane social programs that politicians like Lester B. Pearson put in place in the sixties are being dismantled bit by bit, less and less do we have the right to call ourselves a truly compassionate people.



*Habitat 04—Cité radieuse des chats/Cats Radiant City, 2004*  
(detail)

Installation view at Darling Foundry,  
Quartier Éphémère, Montreal, 2004  
plywood, carpet, cats  
3.35 x 4.57 x 8.53 m (11' x 15' x 28')  
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,  
Vancouver  
Photo: Guy L'Heureux

## NOTES

1. See [http://www.parliamentill.gc.ca/text/explorecatsanctuary\\_e.html](http://www.parliamentill.gc.ca/text/explorecatsanctuary_e.html) (accessed 10/28/2004).
2. The exhibition ran from March 12 to May 9, 2004.
3. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon-Quetigny: les presses du réel, 2002), 44.
4. Ibid.
5. Hal Foster, "Arty Party," *London Review of Books*, December 4, 2003: 21.
6. It is interesting to note here that Jungen appears to be drawn to the vulnerable. The cats he is working with have been abandoned, and many whale species are endangered. Both examples, though very different, point to societal apathy with respect to the environment and animal populations.
7. For a more detailed description and interpretation of these works, see Scott Watson, "Shapeshifter" in *Brian Jungen* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002), 15.
8. Ralph Rugoff, *Capp Street Project 2004, Brian Jungen* (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2004).
9. Watson, 23.
10. Ibid.
11. Le Corbusier, *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* (Paris: Editions Plon, 1937), 280-81, as quoted in Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 230.
12. Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse* (Boulogne-Seine: L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1935), 192, as quoted in Fishman, 231.
13. Robert Gretton, *Canadian Architect* 12, no. 10 (October 1967): 31.
14. Moshe Safdie, as quoted in Gretton.
15. It is surmizable that the cats were more captivated by the human visitors than the human visitors were by the art.
16. See <http://www.spcamontreal.com/english/pages/resources/know.html> (accessed 10/26/2004).
17. Jungen dismantled *Habitat 04* and at time of writing had no plans to restage it. As a network of relations, the artwork exists outside the market with the exception of some possibly commodifiable aspects, namely the cats themselves and the edition of welcome mats, among other things. Arguably, the cats could be described as "living ready-mades." Ready-mades are typically commonplace prefabricated objects that have been isolated from their functional context and elevated to the status of art by the mere act of the artist's selection. A cat, given its astonishing ability to multiply and its condition of oversupply, could be defined as an ordinary, mass-produced (and mass-producing) living thing. By incorporating the cats as a component of the work of art, Jungen selected and displaced the role of the domestic cat and elevated it to the status of art. Every cat passing through the Safdie/Corbusier-inspired compound became a living ready-made imbued with all the worth the artist's name signifies in the current art world. In other words, the value-added or commodified cat became a Jungen artwork, or perhaps a "living multiple" is a better description. Possibly such signification increased the chance a cat would be "collected" and survive.
18. This space was devised by the SPCA as a holding room, beyond the public eye, for cats to rest in and for additional cats to replace those adopted.
19. The mission of the SPCA is to protect animals against negligence, abuse and exploitation; represent their interests and ensure their well-being; raise public awareness and help develop compassion for all living creatures.  
See <http://www.spcamontreal.com/english/pages/resources/know.html> (accessed 10/26/2004).
20. See Brian Jungen discussing his *Prototype* series as quoted in "Brian Jungen in conversation with Matthew Higgs" in *Brian Jungen* (Vienna: Secession, 2004), 24: "Sometime later, in 1998, I was on a residency at the Banff Centre and started to investigate the possibility of using athletic equipment as a sculptural medium. Researching into Nike's use of exploited labour—which was being widely discussed in the media—and thinking about the iconic status of their Air Jordan range of shoes fuelled my interest. I started to make connections between the issues of exploitation, production and commodification and started to think about how this might relate to native art generally."
21. According to a pamphlet produced by the Darling Foundry, "The Darling Foundry is a visual arts centre renovated in 2002 by architects of Atelier in situ. It is composed of the Quartier Éphémère offices, two exhibition halls and the ArtBar Cluny. The two exhibition halls were designed very differently so that all manifestations of contemporary artistic creation might be accommodated between them. One measures 5,000 ft<sup>2</sup> and its strong industrial character makes it ideal for large in situ installations. The other is smaller (1,800 ft<sup>2</sup>), more classical and museological... The Darling Brothers established their foundry in Montreal in 1888 at a time when the metallurgical industry was in full bloom in the old Griffintown neighbourhood and the foundries were multiplying. At its height, the Darling Foundry was comprised of three buildings, each with a specific technical function: the warehouse (model showroom), the foundry and the assembly factory, for a total of 120,000 ft<sup>2</sup> employing more than 800 people. The vitality of the Darling Foundry demonstrates the importance of metallurgy since the 1850s, an industrial activity which gave Montreal an opening on the whole of North America. It developed the technique known as 'grey iron' and primarily produced industrial equipment. From 1971 it passed into the hands of other companies, resulting in its decline with the closing of the Lachine Canal (1970) and marked the end of the industrial vocation of Griffintown. In 1991, the Darling Foundry finally closed its doors and was effectively abandoned for the next ten years."
22. The artist in conversation with the author, February 5, 2005.