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"Cats Will Be Cats": Exploring the Negotiated Gaze in Belle Johnson's Feline Photography †

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† This article is dedicated to Ollie, my 13 year old tuxedo cat, who has recently started a new medication for asthma. This medication makes her very hungry, so she helped ensure I took regular writing breaks by letting me know, again and again, that she would very much appreciate it if I got up from my desk to feed her. The curious symmetry that arose as I repeatedly switched between writing about cats to caring for a cat seemed entirely appropriate and an important part of my thought process.

Abstract

This article focuses on a series of cat photographs taken by Belle Johnson, a photographer from Monroe City, Mo., in the early years of the 20th century. These photographs were included in a project called *With Other Photographers*, an initiative from 1909–1910 which showcased the studio set-ups and techniques of professional photographers. Through this set of photographs we see not only the finished results but also process shots of Johnson working with the cats in her studio. In this article I explore how these photographs were part of a larger discussion around two very different approaches to photography in the United States at this time while also insisting on seeing these cats as individual subjects with agency who played an active role in the creation of these images.

Keywords: cats; human-animal history; history of photography; visual culture

1. Introduction

Let's begin with a photograph (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Belle Johnson, Untitled Photograph from *With Other Photographers* (1909). Collection of the author.

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In this image we see a pair of small fluffy cats posed on a table. A photo album is open in front of them, pages of oval-shaped images of other cats. The pose of the cats—one with her paw touching a page of the album—is meant to suggest that these two felines are browsing through the collection of photographs, an activity more commonly associated with humans. This picture was taken by Belle Johnson around 1909 and was part of an illustrated lecture series delivered by Ryland W. Phillips, a Philadelphia-based photographer. This lecture series was so well-received that it was turned into a book the following year. Both the talks and the resulting publication were titled *With Other Photographers*. Phillips's aim with these projects was to provide both "a mental uplift and an object lesson" for photographers by providing information about the techniques and working conditions of "men and women more or less prominent in the photographic world." (Phillips 1910, p. 1).

This was one of 6 contributions by Johnson to Phillips's project (Figure 2), and all 6 of these images were of cats. Johnson submitted this work in pairs, each set of two consisting of not only the final photograph but also a companion image showing the set-up in the studio that allowed her to achieve the finished result. While it is not noted, it is likely that Johnson's assistant, Julia McClintic, helped obtain these images as the photographer herself appears in three of the photographs that are intended to show her working space and process.[1] This type of image pairing was provided at Phillips's request and is repeated throughout the *With Other Photographers* project, but what makes Johnson's contribution unique and of particular interest to me is the inclusion of cats. All of the other contributors focused on portraiture of human subjects.[2] While Phillips's intention was to help educate and inspire others interested in photography about technologies and techniques used by successful working photographers, in the case of Belle Johnson these pairings of finished photographs with photographs showing the work in progress also invites critical reflection on the ways nonhuman animals can be active participants in the image-making process.

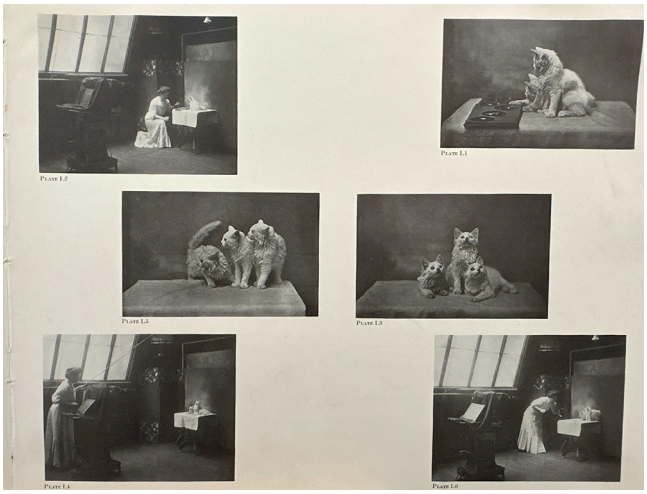


Figure 2. Plate L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, and L6 from *With Other Photographers* (p. 37). Collection of the author.

While many of Johnson's photographs of cats are undeniably shaped by anthropomorphism, this is not the only way to think about these images. I am curious about the specific conditions that had to be enacted for this specific photographer to achieve this specific result. How did the human-feline relationships unfold here, and how much of this dynamic is accessible to us through these photographs? In addition, how might this type of photo shoot relate to broader conversations about the medium of photography at this specific historical moment? By considering the relationship between subject mat-

ter, medium, and resulting image in an example like this, we can create the conditions for critical thinking about the interspecies entanglements that necessarily shape visual representations of nonhuman animals.

This requires situating Johnson's images of cats within the broader context that she lived and worked in. While there is a long history of humans coexisting with cats, the specific framework in which these photographs of cats were both made and viewed cannot be separated from broader social conditions such as the rise of pet-keeping in the United States at this historical moment. This phenomenon was accompanied by the growth of a "pet industry" designed to make life with companion animals more comfortable and enjoyable (Grier 2006, p. 21). Historian Katherine C. Grier has demonstrated how this dynamic was overlaid by a "tension between sentiment and commodification." (Grier 2006, p. 21). As I discuss below, Johnson's images were widely circulated and reproduced and, as such, are part of this dynamic. This goes beyond a specific pet-loving person wanting an image of their own unique companion animal—Johnson's photographs were valued, viewed, and collected by people who had not directly encountered the specific cats she took pictures of. In this way they need to be understood as part of a broader cultural discourse about how humans and cats might ideally co-exist in the United States during the early decades of the 20th century. What I mean here is that Johnson's photographs reinforce the notion that cats should be considered as "pets" in this context (vs., for example, "pests" or "livestock"), cute and cuddly creatures we might want to share our domestic spaces with. These animals are not presented as a nuisance; they are not depicted as threatening or frightening. Rather, they are shown to be such suitable companions that a visual joke can even be made about them engaging in behaviors like looking through a photo album.

And yet even as these images reinforce these larger cultural ideals, there is room to consider the specific cats Johnson photographs on their own terms, and to recognize their agency and their active role in Johnson's photographic studio. Indeed, this tension between the broader cultural context of pet-keeping and the specific human–cat encounters unfolding in Johnson's studio makes this a particularly interesting example.

Katie Hornstein makes similar observations of a much larger type of cat in *Myth and Menagerie: Seeing Lions in the Nineteenth Century*. In this study, Hornstein understands the lions who were depicted in 19th century art to be "historical actors and participants in visual culture" and the resulting "works of art as spaces where relationships among lions, artists, and viewers become activated and negotiated." (Hornstein 2024, pp. 4–5). In other words, visual depictions of nonhuman animals can be important starting points from which to explore interspecies encounters through a historical lens.

There is a long history of nonhuman animals taking on symbolic roles in Western art and, unsurprisingly, art historical writing has, for the most part, stayed within these same confining boundaries. However, in recent years a number of scholars have started to focus on how art and other kinds of images can offer opportunities to think through human entanglements with nonhuman species in new ways, in ways that attempt to see the nonhuman animals depicted on their own terms even if this is always an imperfect process. As Daniel Harkett and Katie Hornstein have proclaimed, "let us make our study of art history less human. Let us speculate and experiment. Let us tell unfamiliar stories about familiar objects and draw attention to histories of human and animal interactions that sometimes requires us to dwell in discomfort, failure, and unknowing." (Harkett and Hornstein 2025, p. 18).

This kind of approach invites us to think more deeply about the individual animals represented and their active presence in the creation of the resulting imagery. Much like interspecies encounters themselves, this can be messy, uncertain, and unpredictable work. This is largely due to the fact that the experience of nonhuman animals is something

we can never fully know. The distance that both time and species lines create frustrate any attempts to see the world from the perspective of a cat, a lion, or any other type of nonhuman animal, especially from a time period that is not our own. Or, as Hornstein puts it, these "experiences will necessarily remain fundamentally, doggedly unknowable." (Hornstein 2024, p. 5). But it can also be rewarding work. Given the powerful ways that art and visual culture can shape "real world" attitudes and assumptions about nonhuman animals, these kinds of inquiries matter. The way we depict nonhuman animals is directly related to the ways in which we engage with them outside the frame of any picture.

As Katharine M. Rogers has explored, human–cat relationships have a long and complex history. From animals valued for their ability to hunt rodents and protect valuable crops to cultural associations with witchcraft, ideas and assumptions about cats have undergone many cultural shifts in different times and places (Rogers 2006). These ideas influence how cats have been treated by humans. Simply put, the history of human—cat relationships includes both compassion and cruelty, and these responses do not happen in isolation. Culture shapes how we think about and treat the species we coexist with. Many elements of these histories have found their way into images of cats over the centuries—Caroline Bugler notes that "cats creep quietly through Western art." (Bugler 2011, p. 6). That sense of stealth evoked by Bugler, of course, is a nod to a notable feline behavioral trait, but there is also a deeper consideration here. This sense of slinking through a scene unnoticed also applies to the writing of art history. As Amy Freund and Michael Yonan write, "the anthropocentrism of modernity and modernism, and of art historical discourse, has obscured the association between feline gaze and artistic creativity." (Freund and Yonan 2025, p. 187). The visual presence of cats within art does not necessarily mean that they are given consideration *as cats*. While there are countless examples of cats taking on symbolic roles in art and culture—perhaps most notably in discourses of sexuality and femininity—as Desmond Morris reminds us, the rise of cats in art also directly relates to the domestication of these animals (Morris 2017, p. 7). These are interspecies entanglements visualized.

The following discussion, therefore, considers these photographs by Belle Johnson within the shifting discourses of early 20th century photography in the United States but also takes these cats seriously *as cats*. As we will see, these two areas of focus are connected through the actions Johnson had to take in her studio to achieve these results. Jody Berland has argued that "the complicated geometry of cat-human relations is further complicated by the technologies that mediate them," (Berland 2019, p. 165) and that is certainly the case here. In other words, conditions specific to the medium of photography are interwoven with the interspecies interactions in these examples.

2. The Photographs

The first pair of images includes the example I opened with, a photograph of two cats posed with a photo album. One cat stands tall, while the other crouches lower down, but both have their eyes and ears pointing forward, an indication they are alert and paying attention to their surroundings. They are photographed from the side, in profile, a composition which allows the album in front of the cats to be displayed in a way that is visible to the viewer of the finished photograph. If we could not determine what was on the pages of the album, the intended meaning of the picture would be lost. The finished image (Figure 1) presents a portrait of intelligent, thoughtful cats even though we, as viewers, know that cats do not choose to spend time flipping through photo albums. The suggestion that they might do so is incongruous to what we know cat behavior to be, and yet for anyone who has spent time with cats there is a recognition of their body language and expressions—their rapt attention is focused on something in their field of vision. If not the album, what are they focused on?

The companion image (Figure 3) answers this for us. This second image was taken from across the studio and shows not only these cats on the fabric-draped table, but Belle Johnson herself crouched down in front of the table directly engaging with the cats. She holds "an object attached to a string" in her left hand while her right hand is folded around a shutter release that is, in turn, attached to the large view camera visible on the left side of the photograph (Phillips 1910, p. 36). Johnson's left hand—the one with the toy—is at a height just slightly above the table so that the object she is moving is directly in the line of vision of the cats, while her right hand is below the table, visible to us but not to the cats. This set-up allowed Johnson to operate the camera while engaging the curiosity of the cats and directing their body language in a way that provided the final result she sought.



Figure 3. Belle Johnson, Untitled Photograph from *With Other Photographers* (1909). Collection of the author.

The second pairing (Figures 4 and 5) shows three cats looking upward in the same studio set-up as the previous example, although this time the photo album has been removed. The two cats on either end of the composition are lying down, but their eyes and ears are alert as they focus on something to the right of where they are resting. The third cat in the center of the composition sits up tall and her upward gaze is slightly more centrally focused than that of her companions.

In the studio process photograph for this set of images, we see Johnson back near the camera, quite a distance from the cats when compared with the previous pair of images. In her left hand she holds a fishing pole from which a toy dangles. While it is difficult to determine the precise nature of this toy simply by looking at the image, a description of her process noted that "a wad of paper about the size of a golf ball" was typically what Johnson often used for this aspect of her process (Miss Belle Johnson's Cat Pictures Featured in Photography Magazine 1957, p. 3). Reports from those who observed Johnson at work in her studio recalled how she would move the dangling toy "in front of her subject by moving

it up and down, letting the cat (or cats) grab at it and suddenly jerking the whole out of the picture area. By that time, as surprised by the sudden turn of events, the subject would always remain motionless for a short period, long enough for her to make comparatively long exposures which at that time were necessary." (Miss Belle Johnson's Cat Pictures Featured in Photography Magazine 1957, p. 3).



Figure 4. Belle Johnson, Untitled Photograph from *With Other Photographers* (1909). Collection of the author.



Figure 5. Belle Johnson, Untitled Photograph from *With Other Photographers* (1909). Collection of the author.

The third pairing (Figures 6 and 7) features a trio of cats, once again posed on the same fabric-draped table against a neutral studio backdrop. Here the body language of the cats indicates a sense of alarm mixed in with their curiosity—this is indicated by the fact that their ears are tilted back and also by the puffed tail and crouched position of the darker colored cat right in the center of the photograph. As was the case with the first pairing,

our vantage point means we see the faces of the cats in profile as they turn their attention towards something outside of the frame.

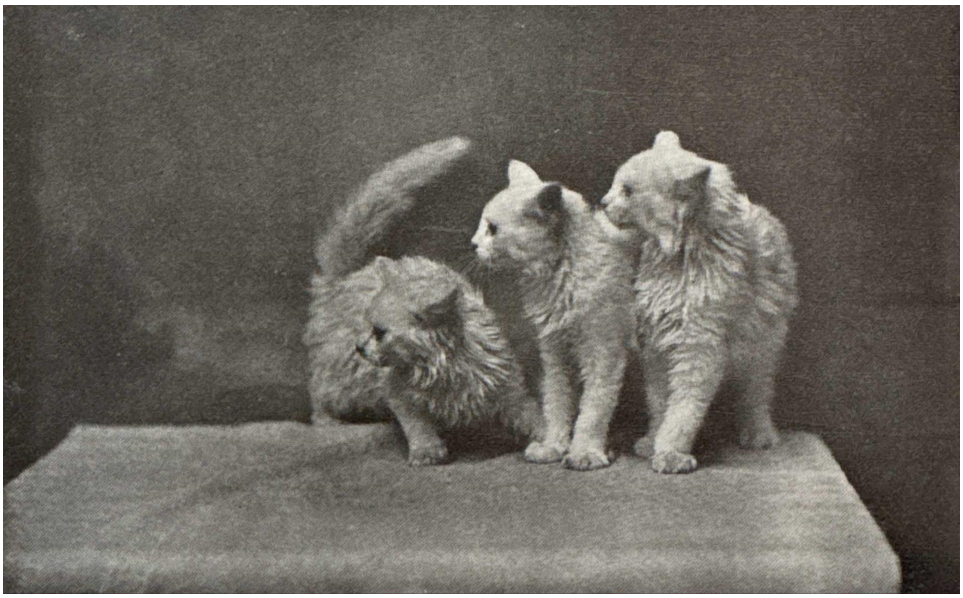


Figure 6. Belle Johnson, Untitled Photograph from *With Other Photographers* (1909). Collection of the author.



Figure 7. Belle Johnson, Untitled Photograph from *With Other Photographers* (1909). Collection of the author.

When we look at the process photograph in this instance, we can see, once again, that Belle Johnson is positioned to the side of the table near the large window illuminating the scene. As was the case in the first pairing, in her right hand she holds a cable release that activates her camera's shutter. But it is the item in her left hand that has the attention of these cats. It is difficult to see precisely what she holds due to the nature of the early 20th

century printing process used in *With Other Photographers*, but in the accompanying text Phillips states that here Belle Johnson is "presenting to the beasts a strange dog." (Phillips 1910, p. 36). Given that Johnson lived on a farm and had several different kinds of animals roaming her property, the description of the encounter given by Phillips makes sense (Pussy and the Photographer 1908, p. 7). Johnson likely had puppies on her farm, and a puppy held in her extended hand would certainly create a reaction in the cats like the one we are seeing here.

Johnson goes to carefully calculated lengths to coerce these cats to look in particular directions and in certain ways. Phillips's commentary on these images stresses that this is much more difficult to achieve than one might assume—"it requires a very thorough knowledge of cats I should think to keep them within the focus of the lens." (Phillips 1910, p. 36). As a result of these maneuvers, the cats look at Belle Johnson or, to be more precise, at what she holds in her hand. Johnson looks at the cats. We look at both Johnson and the cats, at times within the same frame.

When we consider the politics of "the animal gaze" here, it is important to keep in mind that the relationship between humans and cats is not an equal one. Comparatively speaking, these cats have little agency, but they do have some as evidenced by the many things Johnson needs to do to capture, direct, and keep their attention. The cats could jump down from the table, refuse to cooperate, fight with one another, or arrange themselves in ways that did not necessarily make for a successful picture from Johnson's point of view. This point was underscored by a reporter from Johnson's home town in a 1914 article about the difficulty of photographing cats: "many photographic plates have been ruined because the cat changed its position just before the picture was snapped." (Teaching Kittens to Look Pleasant 1914, p. 7).

In his rich and nuanced exploration of 17th century trophy paintings, Thomas Balfe has demonstrated that depictions of nonhuman animals can initiate consideration of interspecies power dynamics that occur when compositional elements "invite and confront our own act of looking" at nonhuman animals (Balfe 2021, p. 5). There are, of course, obvious and important differences between 17th century Flemish paintings and the early 20th century photographs I focus on here, but I share Balfe's assertion that to take images of nonhuman animals seriously, we need to understand them as sites of "complex forms of relationality." (Balfe 2021, p. 21). In this example we are presented not only with Belle Johnson's photographs of cats but also photographs of Belle Johnson looking at and interacting with the cats in her studio. In other words, we are invited to witness aspects of the active human–cat interactions that played out in this specific context. While this kind of interspecies relationship is clearly an important aspect in obtaining photographs of nonhuman animals, it is not something viewers of the finished images often have the opportunity to witness.

John Berger has famously noted that "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance." (Berger 1991, p. 16). However, in these specific examples, we are invited to take a look at Belle Johnson's studio process and, in this context, the cats looking back at the photographer become an important point of departure. The active techniques of engagement that Johnson uses to obtain these photographs invite further reflection on early 20th century debates about the nature of photography itself—something I discuss below—as well as the specific human–cat interactions that played out in front of her camera.

We are also, of course, looking back through history. These cats do not meet our gaze—we are prevented from this direct encounter through the distance created by time, location, and visual technologies. Unlike Derrida's now famous encounter with his cat, we are not standing directly in front of these particular felines. But in much the same way that

Derrida stressed that the cat observing him was a specific cat and not an abstract "*figure* of a cat," exploring these image pairings as Phillips and Johnson intended means that we need to see the cats in Johnson's studio as "real" cats and not as "an allegory for all cats on earth." (Derrida and Wills 2002, p. 374). As I suggest above, this means recognizing these cats both as part of a broader cultural conversation around pet-keeping and as individual animals with agency. To be sure, there are gaps in the historical record. We may not have much information about these particular cats beyond what these photographs can tell us, but in order to take nonhuman animals seriously in the fields of art history and visual culture it is imperative that we insist on seeing representations of animals in specific terms and not only as pictorial symbols for human conceits and concerns.

3. Who Was Belle Johnson?

Belle Johnson was a photographer from Monroe City, Missouri, who began her career in 1890 and continued to actively photograph right up until her death in 1945 (Howd 1987, pp. 12–13). While she was proficient in many different forms of photography, including portraiture and flower pictures, she soon gained a reputation as "perhaps the most famous animal photographer in the country." (Mullett 1914, p. 8).

As was standard for most professional photographers at this time, Johnson used a view camera and glass dry plate negatives to obtain her images (Howd 1987, p. 38; Yates 2000, pp. 4–6). Johnson's studio had a large window that provided light for her photo shoots, and advertisements for her business reminded potential portrait clients that her hours of operation were shaped by the availability of natural daylight (Howd 1987, p. 38). The quality and intensity of light are important considerations for photographers as these factors have a direct impact on both shutter speed and exposure time. Longer exposure times and/or slower shutter speeds due to reduced available light can have a detrimental effect on the success of a photograph. The fact that Johnson was able to repeatedly achieve high-quality photographs of cats using this studio set-up attests to her knowledge of the photographic process as well as her skill and patience when it came to working with these animals.

Johnson's success in this area brought her national recognition. As an article from the *Monroe City News* pointed out, "whenever you saw a particularly good cat picture in any national publication of the period, almost certainly the credit line of 'Belle Johnson' would appear beneath it." (Miss Belle Johnson's Cat Pictures Featured in Photography Magazine 1957, p. 3). Johnson received several awards for her photographic work (Teaching Kittens to Look Pleasant 1914, p. 7), and also achieved a good degree of commercial success—as a 1914 article in the *Washington Herald* noted, "her kitten pictures have gone all over the world, as calendars, cards, and features of advertising 'literature.'" (Mullett 1914, p. 8). Her work was published in many daily newspapers around the country (Yates 2000, p. 10), but also was frequently circulated amongst the early 20th century photographic community in the United States through industry-specific publications. For example, the April 1904 issue of the *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* showcased several of her photographs as did the September (1906) issue of *The Camera*. The editor of *The Camera* praised Johnson's skill in photography, noting that "she has produced results that are enviable and worthy of the highest praise." (September 1906, p. 325). The editor for *Abel's Photographic Weekly* called her "the Country's Greatest Photographer of Cats," (*Abel's Photographic Weekly* 1911, 140) and the 2 January 1914 cover of *The Amateur Photographer's Weekly* featured one of Johnson's photographs that had appeared in *With Other Photographers*, the one of three cats facing the viewer and looking upward (Figure 4) (Kittens by Belle Johnson 1914, front cover). In her biography of Belle Johnson, Juanita Yates notes that many of Johnson's photographs were used in Eastman Kodak advertising campaigns (Yates 2000, p. 11).

Johnson also held a demonstration of her photographic process at the 33rd annual convention of the Photographers' Association of America, which was held in Kansas City in 1913 (The Best in Photography 1913, p. 7). During this demonstration, Johnson enlisted the help of her assistant Julia McClintic, and together they took photographs in front of the gathered crowd of "two yellow kittens and one white one." (Side Lights on the Convention 1913, pp. 130–31). Much to the delight of the assembled audience, Johnson and McClintic dangled toys, "rattled a bunch of keys," and offered saucers of milk to keep their feline sitters engaged and attentive (Side Lights on the Convention 1913, pp. 130–31).

I offer this list of examples to demonstrate that within the early 20th century photographic community in the United States, Johnson and her photographs of cats were held in high regard by many of her peers. However, as a participant in Phillips's project, Johnson's work would have been positioned in opposition to one of the most significant communities of early 20th century photography in the United States, the Photo-Secessionists.

4. With Other Photographers vs. The Photo-Secessionists

Phillips's *With Other Photographers* project included 25 photographers, 19 men (including Phillips himself) and 6 women. Only one photographer residing outside of the United States was included, Rudolph Duhrkoop of Hamburg, Germany. Phillips presented *With Other Photographers* as an illustrated talk "at several conventions," (Bring Them to You 1910, p. 6) and it "created a profound sensation wherever given." (Now Ready: The Greatest Book Ever Written for the Photographer 1910, unpaginated advertisement). The location at which this talk seemed to attract the most attention was in 1909 when Phillips delivered it at the Seneca Hotel in Rochester, NY, as part of the annual Convention of the Photographers' Association of America (The Convention of the Photographers' Association of America 1909, p. 623). Here Phillips's presentation was paired with an illustrated lecture given by Gertrude Käsebier titled "Not Always My Way." (The Convention of the Photographers' Association of America 1909, p. 624). That evening, the room was packed and many sat on the floor or leaned against the wall in order to hear these two prominent photographers speak (With Other Photographers 1909, p. 625). This pair of talks was intended to illuminate an important debate in the world of photography at this time. As reported on in the *British Journal of Photography*, this was a debate "between what has come to be known as the recognised or established school and the school which some ten years ago was dubbed the 'Secessionists.'". Phillips represented the "established" school, Käsebier the Photo-Secessionists.[3]

The Secessionists (or Photo-Secessionists) were a group of photographers drawn together by a commitment to "advance photography as applied to pictorial expression," (The Photo-Secession 1903, p. 2) and who believed that "photography is capable of producing pictures which possess genuine artistic value." (Exhibition of Secessionists at Buffalo Museum 1910, p. 227). This was a like-minded and loosely organized group of photographers that centered around Alfred Stieglitz in the early years of the 20th century. Stieglitz was, at that time, based in New York City, but he drew inspiration from English pictorialist photographers such as Henry Peach Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson (Homer 1983, p. 9). The first issue of *Camera Work*, a publication edited by Stieglitz to promote the artistic goals of the Photo-Secessionists, had multiple features on Käsebier, indicating her prominence in the movement (Caffin 1903, pp. 17–19; Benjamin Johnston 1903, p. 20).

"The dividing line is sharply drawn," proclaimed an article about this professional showdown between Phillips and Käsebier in the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* (Intent Audience Listens to Exponents of Two Schools 1909, p. 15). Phillips's illustrated lecture drew on images from participating photographers in his project and included both finished photographs as well as a behind-the-scenes look at the studio set-up, technique and equip-

ment each photographer used to obtain their results as well as their skills in retouching their images. This review of the event pointed out that Phillips "explained the position of the skylight, the accomplishment of desired shadows by the skillful use of screens, the posing of the subject, the arrangements of draperies with the idea of producing an ideal picture." (Intent Audience Listens to Exponents of Two Schools 1909, p. 15). This was significant because these types of manipulations introduced into the photographic process were rejected by many associated with the Photo-Secessionist movement. As Käsebier explained to the audience gathered, these kinds of tools and techniques created something "dishonestly beautiful." The reviewer stressed that Käsebier had "utter disregard for the conventional methods" and instead aimed "to represent with fidelity how the subject actually looked rather than how an idealic picture might look." (Intent Audience Listens to Exponents of Two Schools 1909, p. 15).

As a rebuttal, Käsebier's talk included projected pictures of her studio in New York which attested to "the entire absence of any of the ordinary accessories which are supposed to be indispensable to the best results, from the viewpoint of the established school." (Intent Audience Listens to Exponents of Two Schools 1909, p. 15). The reviewer of the event went on to explain further: "the idea of Mrs. Käsebier is to place her subject in the most natural surroundings, and while thus a part of a picture which in its make-up is natural rather than artificial, the subject is caught by the camera." (Intent Audience Listens to Exponents of Two Schools 1909, p. 15). In sum, Käsebier stressed the importance of "honest nature" in the pursuit of photography as an art form while the talk given by Phillips demonstrated "how a photograph is transformed into a picture" through various manipulations both in the studio and in retouching the finished image (Marriott 1909, p. 625).

The book version of *With Other Photographers* was based on Phillips's illustrated lecture and was the result of "years of careful research" (Now Ready: The Greatest Book Ever Written for the Photographer 1910, unpaginated advertisement) and published by the Eastman Kodak Company in 1910. This is significant because it meant that the approach to photography being championed by Phillips and his co-contributors had gained the stamp of approval of one of the industry's leading players.[4] This arrangement undoubtedly pleased Phillips, who was considered by many as "one of the leading photographers of Philadelphia" and "one of the finest men in his profession." (Phillips 1925, p. 4).

In terms of Johnson's participation in this project, her work can be seen as a good example of the so-called "established" school of photographers. In addition to the standard studio props and careful control of lighting, Johnson's cat photographs also required a level of manipulation in the form of toys and treats in order to coerce the cats in her studio to pose in ways that would lead to successful pictures. Her reliance on these techniques underscores the fact that the animal gaze here is a negotiated one. To perhaps oversimplify, this is not only about a photographer and her nonhuman animal subjects regarding one another in a studio setting. In order to gain the cooperation of the cats and achieve successful photographic results, Johnson had to be an astute observer of the behavior, preferences, and emotions of each individual cat she worked with and then respond accordingly. While this is undoubtedly the case with anyone who has built a successful career photographing nonhuman animals, the unique opportunity for the viewer to see Johnson's techniques in action through the structure of Phillips's *With Other Photographers* project means overt recognition of the cats as active participants in this process.

Interestingly, the same year that the *With Other Photographers* project was published in book form, Gertrude Käsebier took a photograph of her family which also included a feline subject (Figure 8). The resulting image is a platinum print with an unusual "L" shape. It is a picture of the photographer's daughter, Hermine, and two of her grandchildren, Hermine's daughters, posed in profile in an outdoor setting. Hermine sits on a chair next to

a table laden with a tea tray, her head bent down looking at her hands. One of the children stands next to her mother clutching a branch or bundle of leafy twigs in one hand; the other sits on the grass facing a kitten lapping up a meal from a bowl. This would be a tranquil image were it not for the jarring and unexpected shape of it. The missing corner of the photograph draws our attention, the peaceful scene interrupted by this absence. According to photographer Sally Eauclaire, this unusual shape was the result of Käsebier editing out her grandson: "she had to lop off a corner of this blessed vision when she discovered that her grandson was picking his nose." (Eauclaire 1990, p. 194). If Käsebier had cut the entire right side of the image off, the kitten would have also been omitted. Instead, she chose to preserve the feline family member at the expense of the young boy who was not conforming to the image she was attempting to create. The kitten, therefore, can be considered an important part of this composition.



Figure 8. Gertrude Käsebier, Untitled [The Artist's Daughter, Hermine, and her Children at Tea] (1910) Public Domain, Collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/106RQH (accessed on 16 August 2026).

Was this an example of image manipulation in the same way that Käsebier spoke out against at the 1909 Convention of the Photographers' Association of America? Even though Käsebier would likely not have seen it this way and this photograph was made in the year following that event, it remains an interesting point of comparison. Unlike the pairs of photographs that Johnson supplied for Phillips's project, with this example, we do not have the opportunity to learn more about the processes that led to this cat being included in Käsebier's family photograph. Perhaps the kitten was a willing participant; perhaps he had to be tempted into position through the offering of a range of different types of tasty treats. This is not information we have access to. However, the placement of the cat's dish in line with one of Käsebier's grandchildren coupled with the violent editing of this image (softened, it was reported, by the use of this blank space to write a Christmas greeting when sent to friends and family) underscores the connection between subject and medium in a way that is not dissimilar to what we see in Johnson's images. Of course, the key difference between this image and the Johnson photographs I am exploring here is that we are not

given a "behind-the-scenes" glimpse at the set-up of this photo shoot. The congruity of the body language of the three humans in this photograph indicates that careful posing and composition must have taken place. That Käsebier felt the need to edit out her grandson in this manner reminds us that there is often a gap between the photographer's intent and the finished photograph no matter the species.

5. Johnson's Cat Photography

While the media coverage of the debate between Phillips and Käsebier in Rochester did not single out any specific photographer from Phillips's *With Other Photographers* project, it is interesting to consider how audience members may have responded to Johnson's cat photographs given their popularity in other venues. As noted above, Johnson enjoyed a good professional reputation, and her photographs were widely published and circulated.

Johnson was by no means the only photographer taking pictures of cats at this time, but her ability to obtain images that were both technically strong and visually interesting was significant and contributed to her professional success. As one of Johnson's contemporaries noted, "the average operator usually comes to grief" when attempting to photograph cats (L.T.W. 1919, p. 473). This is echoed by Arnold Arluke and Lauren Rolfe in their book, *The Photographed Cat: Picturing Close Human-Feline Ties, 1890–1940*. After in-depth analysis of hundreds of cat photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they concluded that the difficulty of getting cats to cooperate meant that "there are more technically bad photographs of cats from this period than of any other pet images, even when compared to pictures of wild animals." (Arluke and Rolfe 2013, p. 2). This makes Johnson's work all the more remarkable, and she achieved this by paying close attention to the cats she brought to her studio, noting their preferences and how they might react when certain objects or sounds were introduced. One commentary remarked on how Johnson's "supply of patience must have been truly prodigious" in order to achieve consistently successful photographs of cats (Miss Belle Johnson's Cat Pictures Featured in Photography Magazine 1957, p. 3), while another noted that Johnson's "clever handling of these graceful little animals results in pictures so life-like that one can almost hear them purring." (Curtis 1915, p. 12). As a 1914 article in the *Monroe City Democrat* about Johnson's success in the field of feline photography noted, Johnson had to work with the cats "as though they were human. Their likes and dislikes must be taken into consideration in order to get the proper pose." (Teaching Kittens to Look Pleasant 1914, p. 7). This required Johnson to have a fondness and familiarity with cats, something she had ample opportunity to develop. Not only did she have her own pet cats,[5] but her sister brought any stray cats she found to Johnson's studio "on condition that she find good homes for them" after she was done photographing them (Pussy and the Photographer 1908, p. 7).

In my research I encountered multiple instances of early 20th century photographic periodicals offering advice to photographers who wished to take pictures of cats. It was generally acknowledged that this was a difficult task—as one photographer noted in an article appearing in a 1904 issue of *Western Camera Notes*, "cats will be cats, and more contrary animals, from a photographic standpoint, have yet to be created." (Shepherd 1905, p. 140). These advice articles, therefore, often stressed the importance of taking the time to carefully observe the behavior of the cats and to not rush the process of photographing them.

For example, a photographer from Camden, Maine, named Frank L. Harris published an article in *The Camera* giving tips on how to best photograph cats. Some of Belle Johnson's photos also were included as illustrations in Harris's article alongside samples of his own work. In this article Harris stressed the importance of taking the time needed to allow a feline subject to feel comfortable with the situation: "Having a fondness for the little

fellows helps wonderfully in taking their photos, as one must be very patient with them and take great care not to ruffle their tempers." (Harris 1907, p. 12). This was echoed in other publications as well. In the January 1906 issue of *Photography*, the editors reported on photographer and author Carine Cadby's advice for working with cats:

> To get good cat studies it needs two people, one to entertain puss and one to take the photograph. She must not be made too playful or she will get out of focus and give no end of trouble, but should just be lazily amused with strokings or a quiet game with a bit of string. Food is not to be advised except as a last resource, as it makes a cat too eager. (Mrs. Carine Cadby Writes Upon the Photographing of Cats 1906, p. 97)

Cadby also stressed the importance of photographers being prepared because "chance is seldom kind to cat photographers," and that "the great secret is not to be in a hurry. . . Puss distinctly dislikes hurry, and one may have to wait an hour or longer before the chance occurs of getting a good attitude." (Mrs. Carine Cadby Writes Upon the Photographing of Cats 1906, p. 97). And, finally, an author known only by the initials L.T.W. wrote for *Abel's Photographic Weekly* in 1919 that any photographer who wanted to find success with taking pictures of cats had to pay close attention to the attitude and "behaviour of the feline 'sitter.'" (L.T.W. 1919, pp. 473–74). This is echoed in Johnson's own comments about this type of photography: "It takes patience and you must love the little felines. That's how I do it." (Snapshots 1911, p. 140). These advice articles amplify the ways that cats often exercise agency when it comes to being photographic subjects.

In *Virtual Menageries*, Jody Berland notes that "cat photographers invite their subjects to insist on their own presence." (Berland 2019, p. 170). When we consider Johnson's contributions to Ryland Phillips's *With Other Animals* projects, this aspect of human-feline relationships becomes especially apparent. The fact that Johnson had to devise and utilize techniques to get the images she wanted during each photo shoot reminds us of the always present agency of the feline sitters. By dangling toys, rattling keys, offering treats, or introducing a puppy, Johnson is entering into a negotiation with the cats she is photographing, and the inclusion of photographs showing this process in *With Other Photographers* makes visible these types of dynamics that often happen outside of the frame of the photograph. Johnson is still in charge, but the cats are not passive subjects. They are active—if unequal—participants in the making of the images, and their behavior, personalities, and preferences shaped how the finished photographs looked. This echoes David Gary Shaw's observation that in terms of interspecies encounters, the agency of nonhuman animals "makes things go on at least a little differently." (Shaw 2013, p. 167). Certainly in Johnson's studio, things unfolded "a little differently" because of the behavior of the cats she was working with. At the risk of belaboring the point, had Johnson been photographing a still life composition or a human adult sitter, the techniques employed in these photographs would not have been necessary. But in these examples they were required because of the ways these specific animals engaged with their specific surroundings at this specific moment. This is not to say that these cats were necessarily aware that they were participating in the process of creating photographs for a broader audience. As Chris Pearson has argued, "human levels of intentionality are not a precondition of agency." (Pearson 2013, p. 130).

6. Conclusions

While Belle Johnson's contributions to Ryland Phillips's *With Other Photographers* amounted to a mere six photographs, these pictures are of broader interest because of the way they were presented. These three pairs of images allow us to compare the photographic process—including the direct moments of encounter between Johnson and her feline sitters—with the final images, and this, in turn, underscores that these are images that

were negotiated across species lines. The cooperation of the cats was not a given, but it was necessary to achieve the types of results Johnson knew would be commercially and professionally successful for her.

The entanglements that existed between Johnson and the cats she brought to her studio also positioned this work as the antithesis of the type of photography advocated by Stieglitz, Käsebier, and other photographers associated with the Photo-Secessionist movement in the United States at this time. While Käsebier's family photograph (Figure 8) does not show the extent of the human-feline negotiations in the same way as Johnson's photographs do, the fact that the cat in her image cooperated (when her grandson did not!) indicates that—at least when it comes to the negotiated gaze across species lines—these two approaches to photography may have had more in common than the dominant rhetoric in the early 20th century photography community would indicate. By taking the time to think through the circumstances of these photographs, we become attuned not only to the working process of these photographers, but also to the types of questions and lines of inquiry that we might ask of other images of nonhuman animals.

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Notes

1 In her biography of Belle Johnson, Juanita Yates notes that McClintic helped Johnson with many aspects of the photography business. See Yates (2000). See also Woman Photographer of Monroe City (1913); Howd (1987).

2 Frances Benjamin Johnston's contribution to the *With Other Photographers* project included a portrait of a young girl posing with a dog. The use of lighting here emphasizes the girl as the primary sitter while the dark fur of the dog blends into the textile background. This was presented on the same page as a portrait of a woman taken in Johnston's studio. While Johnston was a very successful photographer, she was not known for her photographs of nonhuman animals. Belle Johnson had a reputation as a cat photographer, and it is for this reason that I consider Belle Johnson's work separately in this analysis.

3 In his book on the Photo-Secession movement and, in particular, Alfred Stieglitz's founding role, William Innes Homer has noted that by this time Käsebier was feeling alienated by some of Stieglitz's policies and comments and was beginning to pull away from the group he was the nucleus of, but she continued to advocate for some of the ideals of this group, namely the artistic potential of photography. See Homer (1983).

4 Phillips's photographic career is punctuated by many of these sorts of high-profile moments, including the recognition he gained when he was credited with "discovering" a young Evelyn Nesbit. See New Type of Beauty (1901).

5 One of the most widely circulated photographs of Belle Johnson is a portrait of her snuggling a fluffy orange cat she called Boy. It was taken by Blanche Reineke of Kansas City. See Back Fence Serenaders and $500 Tabbies to be Exhibited This Week (1914); How Women Have Won Fame in Photography (1914).

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