

Cat futures

By Shaun Johnston, see shaunjohnston.org. 2013.

"How's the index?" I said.

Our lives had become so bound up in these futures indexes that it was difficult to tell where breakfast ended and the day's work began. I was already sitting facing towards my terminal and, though she had her elbows on the breakfast table and the coffee cup still in her hands, Martha was gazing at her screen, as if girding up for another day's research.

You had to start early. The market in futures was racing at breakneck speed. When you went on line in the morning you always faced the possibility that the entire world had turned and raced off in another direction during the night, and left you stranded.

We were trading in futures in postmodernism. Once the market in modern art had gone soft, it had collapsed without trace, overnight, as if it had never been, taking most of the art market with it.

Of course, there had been the usual desperate rush to figure out what had knocked such a robust market off its perch, but for two agonizing days nobody had been able to figure out what that was. The world's markets had seesawed crazily. A flurry of "Futures in Futurism" jokes swept the InterChange, as the world's on-line network of stock exchanges were called--Futurism as in "Italian Futurism," the machine-esthetic art movement early in the 1900's. Spontaneous demonstrations broke out in cities throughout central and Eastern Europe--a small statue in honor of Paul Klee was toppled with great enthusiasm in front of a huge crowd in his home town, to mocking chants of "Circle, Square and Triangle." In Lenigrad the city's main daily described the erection of a colossal virtual monument in honor of Marcel Duchamp just so that in the next edition they could celebrate the heroism involved in its equally virtual demolition.

The first signs of the market's new direction were rocketing prices in futures in recycling. All the wildlife preservation organizations found themselves taken public and gorged with more money than they could conceivably spend. A dormant trust set up years before to take over the national parks suddenly drew so much investment it became the basis of a new third party that within a week won an important off-year election. The new direction became unmistakable when one small branch of art took off and reached astounding records; canvases by Stubbs, Sir Alfred Munnings and other horse portraitists reached astronomical evaluations, and the world's entire stock was reassigned within a few hours. No Audubon print remained outside a fire-proofed safe-deposit vault. A century-long pent-up passion for natural form burst with massive force upon the market. The idea of basing art on geometry and a machine esthetic was seen to have been a fraud all along, an esthetic in service of low-cost, ornament-free manufacturing. Had you actually adored the sterile lines of a metal box, a concrete-and glass tower? No, it was

nature people had really wanted all the time. Recycling, wetland preservation--these had just been acceptable outlets for something you couldn't directly acknowledge.

We were among the first to sell offerings in the ASPCA. We'd figured out that the public would quickly turn from celebrating nature at large to wanting a small piece of it to themselves, and for a piece of nature inside the home there was nothing as rewarding as a cat. Almost immediately, however, since the ASPCA's inventory was pathetically small, we also set up a futures in cats, sending out to our stringers on the InterChange a torrent of requisition forms for felines of all kinds, together with their litters. Within six hours we'd cornered the market world-wide, and prices were soaring. We figured our life's work would be over in about a week. You can't expect to make a second killing like this in the future's market; you do it once, then you retire and enjoy yourself.

But we were still subject to the usual mechanisms of the market. We'd sewn up one avenue of competition--increase in the supply of the product--since the supply of cats and kittens couldn't be increased for at least six weeks. That was ample time for a killing in futures. But an alternative source of supply could be devised. There were rumors that raccoons were equally potent embodiments of nature, and as tolerant as cats of human company.

That's why we had started a futures in toe-nail sheaths. What had so far disqualified raccoons from equaling cats as pets was that they were unable to retract their claws. Clip their claws? No-- that was ruled out by the ethics of the new esthetic. And so were claw sheaths--unless, that is, pet owners already used them themselves. So anyone wanting to promote raccoons as pets would first have to establish a style for wearing toe-nail sheaths among their potential owners. While I turned to tracking the world population of raccoons, I once again prompted Martha, whose job it was to track the indexes, to note any movement in this new futures we'd just launched.

She was still gazing moodily over the top of her monitor. "The index--you know," I repeated sharply. "The toe-nail sheaths." Her answer, in a flat and expressionless voice, took me completely by surprise. "Henry, I'm leaving you," she said. "It's all arranged. I'll be leaving later this morning."

I was stunned, stupefied. I know I gaped at her, open-mouthed for several seconds. When I recovered enough to speak, I could only utter those time-worn words, "There's...There's someone else, isn't there?"

She nodded, dully.

"Martha," I replied, gathering my wits, "Don't leave me. We've got great futures ahead of us."

She shook her head. "It's no good Henry. Joe has futures of his own. We're going to manage them together."

"Joe...futures..." I began "It's not ..."

"No, Henry, it's not raccoons. It's something bigger?"

"Bigger than raccoons?" I said.

" Yes," she said. "Babies."

Babies! My mind raced. Hadn't we covered that? Our futures didn't just include adult cats. If not kittens, what? Then my blood ran cold. Maybe this Joe was into exotics; maybe I'd misjudged the whole issue.

"You mean, lion cubs, baby elephants, baby seals...?"

"No, Henry, real babies. Human babies. We're setting up a franchise business in child-care. We pay the parents just a small amount per child per day, then we charge people to come and watch them. There's nothing else can put you in touch with nature like a young child of your own species, it stands to reason. We've cornered the market in child care."

"Look, " I said desperately, "I can make you a futures that's closer to nature than that. I'll start a futures in nursing homes. Old people facing death, that's where you really get in touch in nature..."

"Forget it, Henry, we're ahead of you. We've already set up a futures in grand-children."

She gazed at me almost pityingly. I lost control. I said things about her and this guy Joe that it pains me now to recall. Slowly she got to her feet, and backed out of the room. As she rounded the door post, she whispered, "Goodbye, Henry, goodbye," and was gone.

What was I to do? You can't manage a futures business by yourself, it's much too stressful. I glanced over at her terminal, where her InterChange navigator was calling for her--I thought somewhat plaintively. "Martha, Martha, where are you? I have something interesting for you." Momentarily I felt a twinge of common feeling with it, but then I realized she would simply retrieve it from the next terminal she hit, while I would still be sitting here alone in this room.

Well, what did I need her for! I'd dream up an even juicier postmodern resource, something that would sell itself. I'd do it right now. What's important is not just that something is natural--everything's natural, after all-- the secret is how close you can get to it, how intimate you can get with it. Something you can get even closer to than a baby.

Then it hit me. What about me, myself? Aren't I a product of nature? And don't I have complete insight into myself. I'm a postmodern resource all by myself, both product and customer in one transaction. The deal may be a wash financially but I'd get closer to nature than anyone else in the world--that must count for something, something to tell your friends about. Hey, maybe it was even worthwhile.

I thought about the ways I was a part of nature. Didn't I piss like any other mammal? Didn't I have sex the way an animal does, and make animal noises while doing so. And it was all natural, I wasn't putting it on. My mind raced.

But I couldn't maintain my bluster. The room was growing colder from her absence. What good did it do to find nature in yourself, when you were also the one outside nature wanting to do the looking? You couldn't be both nature and the one studying nature, at the same time. You had to be studying something else, someone else. Someone as close to you as you yourself, but not you. Someone you knew as well as you knew yourself.

I leaped to my feet and ran through the house. "Martha, Martha, come back," I cried. But before I could get to the front door I heard the crunch of a car's tires on the gravel and the whine of its acceleration as it turned onto the street and sped away. I'd lost her. I remember only falling to my knees and sobbing, rather than crying, "Martha, Martha, It's not a futures I want. It's you."

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