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Pay to Play: Dispatches From the Cat Cafés of Tokyo

It's hard to recollect much about my first cat café besides the unmitigated pleasure of the whole experience. The place was called Cateriam, on the second floor of a nondescript building in Shimokitazawa, and it had the cozy feel of overpriced daycare, with lots of low stools and pillows, but also with branches chained to the ceiling, and plush beehive-shaped hidey-huts, and cats.



PHOTO: YASA_/FLICKR

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Cat-Industrial Complex

- In Search of the Living, Purring, Singing Heart of the Online Cat-Industrial Complex
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It's hard to recollect much about my first cat café besides the unmitigated pleasure of the whole experience. The place was called Cateriam, on the second floor of a nondescript building in Shimokitazawa, and it had the cozy feel of overpriced daycare, with lots of low stools and pillows, but also with branches chained to the ceiling, and plush beehive-shaped hidey-huts, and cats. *f*Le

There were maybe ten or twelve of them (cats). There were little placards on the walls with their names, specs, and Twitter feeds. My brother Micah and I sat there along with two Japanese adolescents on a date —cat cafés, one of Micah's friends subsequently told us, with some discomfort, are apparently big date spots—and we watched some cats drowse.

After a while the young female employee came out to intervene. She was somewhere between a shill and a fluffer. She picked toys from the central quiver and schooled us in wrist-flicking. I consider myself a person who has played with cats for a long time—I was four years old when I named the alleycat that adopted us Mistofeles, after Mister Mistofeles in CATS —but the shill/fluffer was really something to behold. I don't think I've ever seen anybody as good at cats.

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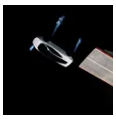
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Presidential Historian Answers US Election Questions

She focused on drawing out the recalcitrant odalisque of a Persian. Her name was either Paunchy or Punchy; either name would've been plausible, the first in earnest and the second ironically. She had that really overwhelmed, melancholy disbelief you see in a good Persian. The shill/fluffer passed me the baton and at last I got some traction; the cat skittered and pounced. Then she caught the baton tail and took it away. She sat down in the middle of the little room and began to yowl, great successive gulping sobs that made all of our ears go back. The other cats pretended not to notice. She wouldn't stop. She just sat there in curdled hypnosis, clutching the baton's whiptails in her claws and squealing.

The fluffer was unruffled, but I felt creeping concern.

"Is she happy or unhappy?" I asked.

"Very, very happy!" she said. It was a relief. Then the shill/fluffer jumped up in haste and picked her way between the islands of cushions across the room. One of the British shorthairs was lapping at the young Japanese woman's green-tea latte off a low table. She took the green-tea latte from the bewildered shorthair and went to fix the Japanese woman a replacement. That was when Micah first realized he could pick up a cat. He did. "I hadn't even realized I could pick one up." The Ragdoll was the size of his torso and didn't seem as though it had realized anything. We'd been there for maybe forty minutes and it hadn't occurred to us that we could pick the cats up. Micah, who works in a particularly

distinguished branch of the cold-metal industry – a Time magazine video on cat cafés had quoted one woman's contrast of her day job's cold metal with a cat café's warm fur – held the tolerant, docile cat and he loved it. I sat back and disengaged, and the Persian I'd fancied waddled over and snuggled my feet. I picked it up. We felt relaxed. Micah and I held cats and looked at each other.

"I have a friend," I told Micah, "who really likes to sleep with prostitutes, or at least he used to."

Micah guessed the friend correctly. (Micah doesn't know him that well, but he's the kind of guy you wouldn't have to know very well to guess this about.)

"But what he really liked to do," I continued, "was sleep with a prostitute enough times that they would sleep with him for free. He liked to win over prostitutes." He wanted to take the transaction and decommercialize it, to get for free what he'd once paid for. He wanted to get the woman to admit an interest that was more than strictly financial.

"So anyway," I went on, that's what this is like. You come here and pay to be with the cats. But then you hope the cats will want to play with you regardless of the payment."

"Except," Micah said, sensibly, "the cats don't know you're paying for it. And if they did they would never let that get in the way of continuing to ignore you."

The hour was up so quickly. We put our shoes on and went to pay. There was a little shop where you could buy DVDs and postcards and figurines of the cats you'd been playing with, and more information about their Twitter feeds. The shill/fluffer and the shop's proprietor, who wore a pointy goatee and a Victorian waistcoat and a bowler hat, stood with us as we paid. Micah turned to me and whispered, "There's got to be at least thirty grand of cat inventory in here."

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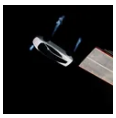
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He turned back to the proprietor. “Who owns all these cats?”

The proprietor smiled and pointed at himself with his thumbs.

“Where do you get them?”

“From breeders, and maybe from other cat cafés that have kittens.”

Micah and I almost jumped into each other’s arms. “There are cat cafés with kittens?”

The man took out a copy of Tokyo Cat Café Magazine 2011 and pointed to the listing for a place in Jiyugaoka. “This place, only place with kittens,” he said. I took out my pen and circled it. He quickly took the magazine back and went to make a photocopy for me. No wonder these cat people hadn’t wanted me in their homes, writing in their cat magazines. The fluffer showed us a YouTube video of the kitten café. The English subtitles called it a “cattery.”

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*Photo: yasa /Flickr*We waited for our photocopy. “I wonder what the business model is,” Micah said. Micah can’t go anywhere without thinking of the business model involved.

“The business model is that these people are tired of junk and tired of cold metal. The business model is that we both just paid like twelve bucks each to be mostly ignored by some cats for an hour, and if we didn’t have to meet your fiancée for lunch I think we both know that we’d still be in there right now, no?”

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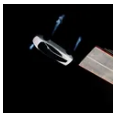
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"I want to go back in there," Micah said, in a sympathetically abject way.

"We can't, Micah. We have to meet Sydnie." I put my arm around him.

"I know," Micah nodded. He looked forlornly back at the cats, who didn't notice we'd left. Two of the cats jumped over the three-foot gate and chased each other around the shop between calendars of themselves. Micah looked anew at the gate. "I just realized what that little gate is for." He paused. "It's not to keep them in, it's to keep us out."

It didn't take a whole lot of convincing to get Micah to take a few hours off work to come with me to another cat café the next day, this one in Ikebukuro, a commercial and transit hub of northwest Tokyo. The cat café was called Nekobukuro and it was on the seventh floor of a Tokyu Hands department store and it was totally horrible. We should've known it was going to be depressing and substandard when the receptionist handed us a slip of paper with rules for the cat café, in English:

Let's be friends with Kitties 1. Please come close to them calmly and touch softly. If you touch them roughly, they may get angry. 2. Please take a seat when you hold them. Please hold their rump tightly in case of struggling. 3. Some of them don't like to be held. If they look like they're unhappy, please let them go. 4. When they get angry, it's possible to be scratched and bitten by them. When they get angry, please leave them alone.

The numbered/nonnumbered sections had a call-and-response rhythm, and I half-expected an employee to take us through it out loud. Underneath was a special addendum to parents, asking them to please explain the above to their children. It noted especially that "the kitties are moody animals, so sometimes it's difficult to hold them."

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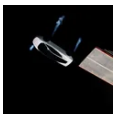
The inside of the cat café felt like a kitty detention center; there was none of the opium-den down of Cateriam. The place lacked even the pretense of being an actual café. It had the chilly fluorescent glare of bureaucratic hostility, linoleum and formica in primary colors. It smelled like cat pee. The cats lolled in a benzodiazepene fugue. Totally Xanaxed out of their gourds, these cats. They'd limply lift a paw, nod off again. Little kids pulled their tails and the cats flicked their ears with the faint racial memory of protest.

On the upside, though, it was cheap—only ¥600, or like eight bucks, for all the cat you could pet. (The bathroom, however, was outside the entrance, and there was no reentry. I wondered if perhaps we weren't smelling cat pee.) The cats, for their part, were big, and some of them were exotic. There was this giant Selkirk Rex, a curly-haired cat, this one in a ratty auburn color. There was a Himalayan the size of a body pillow, a handsome colorpoint called Hiyawari, with that classic just-chimney-swept facial poof. They all looked sunk in either pharmaceutical lethargy or clinical depression.

Most of the cats were sleeping. Some of them were sleeping out in the open area, in little tubs and covered bins and artificial hollows, but some of them were sleeping behind glass. There wasn't any logic to which cats were out for sleepy petting and which were envitrined. Presumably they were on shifts. It hardly mattered. The cats at work were sleeping and the cats on break were sleeping. One little tortie showed vague signs of animation and I tried to pick it up, holding its rump tightly as it struggled, but it looked unhappy, and I didn't want to get scratched or bitten or ostracized by the Japanese. It jumped from my hands and bounded away. Micah looked over. "Remember that the kitties are moody animals," he said.

"You're a moody animal," I said.

"No, you are," he said.



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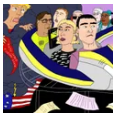
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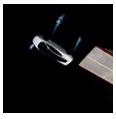
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We'd always gotten along great, but he lived in Tokyo and we hadn't seen each other in almost a year and we felt uncharacteristically out of touch. The time we'd spent chatting over held cats in Cateriam had been restorative, but the cruel shock of Nekobukuro was again making us defensive and tetchy. We left in a hurry. I was going to meet Rebecca, my college friend and cat-person translator, and he was going back to work.

"Don't go to the kitten café without me," he said.

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*Photo: Andy Smith/Flickr*Rebecca and I stood outside the large windows of the kitten café, Neko Cat Club. Above the door, red-and-white checkered panels, like something from a second-tier food chain, framed an eight-foot statue of a well-turned-out but droopy cartoon basset hound.

"Probably best not to ask," Rebecca said.

We were in Jiyugaoka, a neighborhood that's legibly irritating in the way of Park Slope or Noe Valley. The walk from the train station was one dog outfitter after another.

"This is the part of town for yuppie stay-at-home mothers," Rebecca explained. "But it's also trendy, because Japan is one of the last industrialized countries on earth where women still aspire to be yuppie stay-at-home mothers."

The Neko Cat Café felt like a nail salon, though the walls were painted in flaming cherry and hung with heavily textured oil paintings. Some of them seemed nonrepresentational, but others showed tits or volcanoes. A spiral staircase wound up through the

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waiting room to the private booths upstairs; you could rent them out if you wanted to be alone with the cats, or alone for another reason. We registered and the receptionist gave us little body-stickers barcoded with our entrance times. As we took off our shoes, Rebecca asked me if there were any rules.

"Well, at the first one, the rule was that you could take pictures—"

"Obviously you can take pictures."

"You didn't let me finish. You can take pictures but no strobe."

"Got it. And the one in Ikebukuro?"

I'd kept the little piece of paper about tight rump-holding, and showed it to her. She agreed that cats were moody animals.

Inside the cat area they'd thrown down a few circles of white shag on the brown tile, with beanbags the size of meditation cushions distributed around the periphery. The YouTube intro to this place had indicated they had only Scottish Folds and Munchkins, but there were a few Persians here and there. Munchkins, I'd heard, had only been introduced to Japan ten or fifteen years back, but they'd gotten huge. They're the Dachshunds of the cat world, with stubbly legs and a long, thick torso. One of them had jumped into a Japanese woman's handbag, which she'd clearly left open to that possibility. In fact, it looked as though she'd actually emptied it in a gesture of feline invitation. The cat burrowed down into the handbag and she and her companion took photographs. I took photographs of them taking photographs. The cats were tuckered, roundly sacked out here and there like stranded travelers late at night at a long-distance bus station in Cleveland or San Antonio.

"I wonder if they're drugged," Rebecca said.

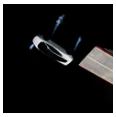
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"At Nekobukuro they almost definitely were, but not at Cateriam. I don't know about this place. It's early afternoon and they might just be tired." Rebecca splayed against a beanbag and took a kitten into her lap. It was a brown patched tabby. I lay face-down on the white shag entreating a dapper, snooty young Persian. It was completely silent except for the occasional bird-titters of young Japanese couples and the soft thump of two cats at intermittent tussle. A Munchkin took reluctant interest in my pen, which I traced in broad swirls across the shag. It felt like the scene in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* where Joan Didion sits with the crew of hippies on acid and all anybody says for five hours is "Wow."

"This place feels like an opium den," I said.

"Not quite. With those huge windows onto the street it's more like an opium atelier," Rebecca said.

"Even I feel slightly drugged," I said.

"So do I. I think it's because nothing at all is moving except the cats, and the cats are moving more slowly than cats usually do. We're measuring time in the movements of cats and we're calibrated wrong. But then again I probably haven't spent enough time around cats."

"There's no such thing as enough time around cats."

Rebecca ignored me. "That woman over there is pretty good at cats."

On the adjacent shag was a woman who'd just sat down and was, indeed, very good at cats. Four or five cats had simultaneously risen from their torpor. The woman had a lured baton in one hand and her phone in the other, and the cats looked one from to the other and back. What made her so good at cats was that she was mostly paying attention to her phone. She refused to gratify, which is to say alienate, the cats by paying primary attention to them. The cats

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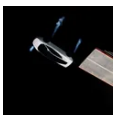
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were peeved about her phone. What they didn't realize, however, was that she was mostly using her phone to take oblique high-angle panoramic shots of the cats. I started writing in my notebook, with the hope that the same gimmick would work, and indeed the Persian wandered over and bunted my pen-top, sending a jagged scrawl against the lorem ipsum I'd been writing.

"That woman is hogging the cats," Rebecca said, without rancor.

"What are they talking about?" I asked. By now there were maybe eight other people in the room, quietly admiring the cats.

"They're not exactly having conversations," Rebecca said. "They sound like we do – a lot of half-words of endearment, 'Cute cat' and 'Oh, look at that one!' and 'Sleepy little guy' and 'I had that one's interest for a second there!'"

We got up to leave; our hour was almost up and I'd already squandered a fortune on cat cafés in two days. On our way out, she stopped to talk to the receptionist. She asked if the cats were siblings. No, none of them were siblings, the receptionist said, although she conceded that many of them had the same mother. Rebecca decided not to press the point. Rebecca asked, at my urging, if it was true that this was a cattery and they sold their cats at maturity to other cat cafés. The woman stiffened and said, in Japanese's most high-strung tone of fuck-you politesse, that they did not sell cats. I murmured to Rebecca that maybe the rumors we'd heard about the cat-yakuza connection were true. She elbowed me silent.

As we looked through the glass it became a true cat party inside. In an instant a dozen cats had risen from the beanbags and moved toward the center of the room. It felt like a mass-awakening scene in a zombie movie.

"See?" I said. "They were just sleepy, and now they're waking up to play."

They moved toward the various water dishes secreted around the room.

"No," Rebecca said. "They're going to get more drugs."

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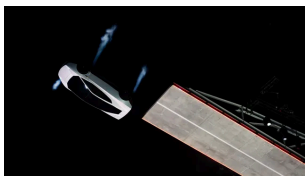
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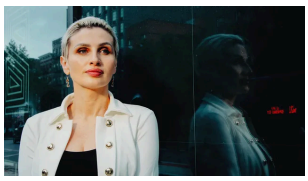
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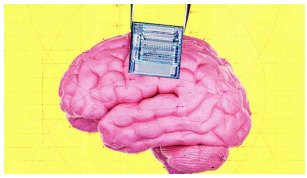
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