

Pat McCarthy: Case Study

I first met Pat McCarthy in a Winnebago parked outside of 245 Center Street just north of Chinatown. I was stripping the paint away from the old window frames (and the astronaut suiting station would soon go) and Pat was welding in a structure that would later become a full service mini-bar. We both, at the time, worked for TS, the enfant terrible of the downtown New York art scene. Pat had been fired and rehired three times already; I had almost been fired once for mishandling live ammo that was going to be part of a Satanist cabinet piece.

“This sucks,” I said, ripping off my respirator.

“Job’s a job, man. Just think of it like being a monk chopping wood and carrying water.”

Pat McCarthy is a tinkerer, a semi-transient, and pigeon keeper. He writes fanzines devoted to the celebration of pigeons as well as a smut zine that features photographs of women he hired off of craigslist to come over to his apartment to take pictures of spread-eagle over his couch. Pat is also notorious in the New York art scene for showing up, uninvited, to gallery openings and selling grilled cheese sandwiches off of the front of his custom made “Cheese Bike” that is built complete with a grill, generator, storage, and even a \$40 sandwich that features pigeon eggs from his own flock. Now living in a former punk crash house in Bushwick with a pigeon coop on the roof, I had a feeling that Pat would make an excellent contact for a case study. I had heard rumors about Pat still had a pigeon coop.

Bearing a six-pack of Budweiser tallboys and fresh Moleskine notebooks, Ken Amarat, Sam Lavigne and I rung the buzzer of Pat’s brownstone honestly not knowing what to expect. Pat can be very reticent or, usually when a little drunk or high, a rambler.



Pat apparently started becoming a pigeoneer when he officially moved into the house he's currently living in. Around the block from his place is a "pet store", which is actually just a store for pigeons and the "old neighborhood dudes who sit around on bags of feed and smoke cigarettes." From what I know of Pat, he has a tendency to hang back in a new environment and then see the system at work and glean what he likes from it.



"I started out with just one, and then it just went on from there. I have 50 now, I hope to have twice as many eventually." Pat sits on a stool at his workbench. We're in his studio, the third floor of the house he now lives in. As he lights up a rolled cigarette, behind him on a small black and white monitor I can see what looks like an infrared security image of pigeons huddled in shelves. Behind him to his right is a cage with two pigeons inside and a small perch. We'd learn later that Pat selected these pigeons to mate. Apparently, once placed inside a cage for 48 hours, are inextricably mated. Each pair produces two eggs about once a month. I was surprised at how simple that process is.

"Yeah, exactly man, that's why Darwin first studied pigeons when came to evolution. It's also why pigeons were some of the first domesticated birds. In a really fucking short time you can get a bird with exactly the traits that you want."

I was horrified to find out that part of "pure" breeding means mating sons with their own mothers in order to keep their genes going in the "right" direction for the traits a breeder might want. As far as breeding goes, Pat is more interested in maintaining a healthy flock than one that has members with exotic (and potentially inbred) traits.

After getting over some of the awkwardness of trying to explain why he keeps pigeons and learning that our interest in pigeons was quite broad, Pat surprisingly opened up a lot more.

"Yeah, man, I think that there's where that line of decadence and civilization meet up for the first time, when man domesticated animals. It's like saying that we are both separate from animals and that we have total control over them. Have you read *Against Nature*? There's this dude who gets so bored with this gigantic tortoise that's just wandering around that he has it encrusted with diamonds and jewels and shit and even when it dies he still finds it an object of fascination. It's wanting to fuck with the natural flow of nature, that's what pure decadence mean. That's why pigeon fancying used to be considered such a high class activity."

When we had first approached Pat about talking to us regarding pigeons, all we knew was that we wanted to somehow elevate the status of the common pigeon in the eyes of New Yorkers. Alternatively we wanted to somehow commodify them to a point where people would have a financial interest in them (“Money. On. The. Table.” as Sam would say later, regarding pigeon guano.) Pat’s philosophical notions toward his flock fascinated me.

“Look, I’ve been a janitor. I know what it’s like just to clean up after people. When I first started taking care of the flock I approached it like a designer. Like, ok, here, I’ll build them this coop and make it how I want and make them nest bowls and tend name them all. The first time I had a bird die it was pretty emotional. I even went to the cemetery to bury the guy. But that was two years ago. Now I’m trying to incorporate this whole thing of saying as little as possible. Of course, of course I have an influence on these guys but where is it my place to make so many decisions for them? So in a way, I guess I’ve gone back to being more of a janitor. Like a shepherd of a flock.”



This struck me as a profound shift from the sort of semi-exploitative relationship I thought Pat had with his flock. Before coming to his house and speaking to him about his flock, I knew Pat had kept and bred them and used their eggs for sandwiches. I also knew that he produced a “smut zine” that featured women he hired off of craigslist to pose in extremely sexual and objectified ways. It was hard to reconcile this aspect of Pat’s work with the soft-spoken philosopher and tinkerer I knew. My thoughts on it now is that Pat, although he claims to want to “say as little as possible” is actually somewhat of a silent director. The only line I can draw between his role as pornographer and pigeonier is that he likes control, but in a way where his subjects (birds and women) are forced into positions of being seen by a voyeur. Here were two

pigeons being forced to make in a small cage in clear view of strange visitors while a CCTV in the back showed the rest of the flock trying to keep warm up in the rooftop coop.

A little tipsy off of the 24 (ok, 36) ounces of beer and dunked in cigarette smoke, I began to feel both more chummy with Pat but also somehow complicit in an activity that violated my ethics of animal treatment. I have only ever kept cats as pets and let them roam free both indoors and outdoors. Somehow keeping a flock of birds (however free they may be) for the sake of having them disturbed me slightly. However, as we made our way to the roof to see the coop itself, my perception changed again. What Pat had built on the top of his roof looked more like a rustic hunting lodge than any sort of cage. Complete with a warming lamp, slanted and shingled roof, and even lined with genuine fox furs to insulate against the February cold, this coop ensured the pigeons were living in some form of luxury, high above the quality of life for any feral pigeon or factory farm fowl.



"I want the coop to be a gathering place, for both pigeons and people. I want people to come up here and want to hang out. Like make this coop a conversation piece and let the pigeons do their own thing and let the people enjoy that. I like being a good host."

Pat likes being a good host. Not only the sort of guy who is warm and friendly (at first handshake, he certainly isn't the most forthcoming dude) but a guy who has all the necessary amenities to make sure his guests feel welcome. And, like any earnest host, wants an intimate conversation with his guests. I guess that part that makes Pat a bit peculiar in the way that he wants (and gets) intimacy is through display and documentation. Although we were definitely listened to as interviewers, it was very much of a "show-and-tell" meeting.

We made our way back down the icy ladder, Pat said, "Oh before you leave, I have some zines to give you guys."

Although I can't speak for our whole group, I believe that I was most impacted by our case study with Pat by approaching our project, a guano collector, as a way of being a host. It's my belief that human interaction with animals is that even observing animals changes their behavior, so we might as well offer something in return. What I take the most from our final project is that it first and foremost is a functional perch for pigeons with the added bonus of being able to use their guano, which would have normally gone to waste. I am curious as to what it would be like to have a resident flock in my backyard, but I believe that in some way having passive communication (feeding and attendance) to a group of birds would be like saying hi to a neighbor to whom you haven't yet been introduced.

