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We can haz film fest!: Internet Cat Video Festival goes viral

Diane Burgess

A festival devoted to internet cat videos set out on a 2014 cross-Canada tour with this promotional tagline – ‘All the cattiness of the film fest. But with cats.’ Just for Cats: Internet Cat Video Festival drew programming from its internationally-acclaimed namesake (also known as #catvidfest), which was launched in 2012 by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The Canadian tour’s short title brings to mind the renowned Montreal-based comedy festival Just for Laughs, which may be a serendipitous resonance given that the premise of a public celebration of viral videos seems to invite a response that is not entirely serious. The Toronto premiere was met with some good-natured barbs, sparked by the presence of the Prime Minister’s wife Laureen Harper as a special guest and co-host. Coverage included news parody segments on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*⁴⁶ complete with laugh track, and on the *Rick Mercer Report*, for which Mercer outlined an ‘eccentric cat lady’ checklist.⁴⁷ Both of these clips appeared on the Just for Cats 2014 website⁴⁸ alongside a photo of a supine kitten that purred in response to clicks on the paw or belly for more information. In support of the overarching goal to ‘elevate the status of cats’ these clicks provided details about cat welfare and encouraged visitors to donate to the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (the event organiser). The tour’s premiere at the TIFF Bell Lightbox even featured a red carpet cat adopt-a-thon.

A global festival network

This connection to TIFF’s year-round programming positions Just for Cats in the context of the cultural organisation’s mission ‘to transform the way people see the world, through film’.⁴⁹ In other words the film festival context suggests that the event is about more than sponsoring animal welfare and further elaborates on the connotations of the Internet Cat Video Festival’s art world genesis. The festival began as an initiative of the Walker Art Center’s Education and Community Programs department, which focuses on fostering access and community building, and Open Field, a summer cultural commons devoted to crowdsourced events.⁵⁰

Walker's inaugural Internet Cat Video Festival (ICVF) was held in the green space adjacent to the center (the site of Open Field) and attracted an audience of 10,000 people, a number that grew to 13,000 for the second installment in 2013. The program's success spawned a series of tours. International co-presenters have included the Glasgow Film Festival (2015), Vienna Independent Shorts (2013, 2014), and London's Victoria and Albert Museum (2014). Events have been hosted in Sydney, Stockholm, and Gifu, Japan, placing the Walker Art Center at the heart of a global festival network.⁵¹

The use of a variety of screening spaces points to the potential challenge of classifying these feline festivities as art. Venues have ranged from cinemas and museums to concert halls and libraries, even including Woodinville's Homeward Pet Adoption Center (a no-kill shelter in metropolitan Seattle). After describing it as 'perhaps one of the most unexpected art world hits of recent years' in *Canadian Art*, Leah Sandals cites the following justification from Walker art historian and ICVF founder Katie Hill: '[t]his is why it works – because people crave the non-hip, the unironic, or just a genuine experience that's joyful.'⁵² Yet this quote is attributed to the SXSW 2013 session '#catvidfest: Is This the End of Art?', which began with a humorous enticement-cum-warning to the audience that they are about to watch some cat videos.⁵³

There is an intriguing and at times uneasy tension that arises from the use of film festival tropes to frame content that seems to resist this association. Two days before the Toronto screening the *National Post* published a spoof of the capsule review format with the critiques attributed to the 'feline counterparts' of the news-



Photo courtesy of Walker Art Center.

paper's Arts and Life team. The reviews ranged from Buster's quasi-highbrow assessment of the voiceover in *Cats Playing Patty Cake* as 'PostModern society's *cri de coeur*' to Nayaboo's use of the memetic convention of mawkishly poor spelling to praise the warrior-like qualities of Sailcat from *Cat Jump Fail with Music* (whose ears 'haz bitez out of them').⁵⁴ For online readers the capsule reviews were accompanied by the embedded YouTube videos, making it possible to watch entire portions of the festival's program in advance. Of course the videos were already easily accessible, and the reviews acknowledged their popularity. For example, *Surprised Kitty (Original)* had over 73 million views while *Cat Jump Fail with Music* had a more modest 13 million. Both videos gained an additional two million views apiece in the year since the article's publication. Thus, although 'Cats on Cats' promoted the festival the capsules were not typical audience teasers in that they seemed to undermine the cachet of exclusive access associated with a program's premiere. The easy accessibility of the videos suggests that these viral texts are not actually the event's main draw. After all, even the curated version of the collected shorts and clips can be watched on the Walker Art Center YouTube channel.

Festival space

The attraction of this touring program appears to have more to do with creating a festival space for audiences than with resolving issues related to access. As a global festival network ICVF is not providing a 'solution to the unbalanced distribution market'⁵⁵ or serving as a corrective response to Hollywood's hegemony.⁵⁶ In addition, given the literal absence of print traffic, the ICVF events do not appear to constitute a distribution circuit of discrete exhibition sites interconnected by supply chain needs.⁵⁷ However, it could be argued that the networked nature of these events points to the organisational need of festivals 'to establish activities that keep them going' throughout the year.⁵⁸ Although this argument might explain the involvement of several of the co-presenting agencies it does not account for the appeal of the #catvidfest program as a film festival or for the flexibility of its viewing contexts. In Vancouver the Just for Cats screening was presented in conjunction with the Pacific National Exhibition. This venue located the cat videos in the context of other animal exhibits like the 4-H festival or the horse show rather than in the more cinephilic setting of the Vancouver International Film Festival's Vancity Theatre. The TIFF Bell Lightbox premiere may have been the anomaly on the Canadian tour since Just for Cats is part of the national animal welfare initiative of the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies. Nonetheless, the PNE is not the only state fair that has hosted the ICVF. In its second year Walker's festival was

held at the Minnesota State Fair before returning to Open Field in 2014. With its combination of live music on the main stage, project booths, and cat videos on a big screen – all in a spectacular grandstand setting – this 2013 State Fair edition was referred to as ‘Cat Woodstock’.⁵⁹

Regardless of whether the screenings are presented in an art world setting or at local fairgrounds it is the festival experience that lies at the heart of the ICFV. Marijke de Valck has explored the impact of the experience economy of event culture on film festivals, noting an increase in visitors ‘for whom the context of the “festival” is at least as important as the films themselves’.⁶⁰ In particular she notes the elements of spectacle, buzz, and an atmosphere of anticipation or audience enthusiasm that demarcate festival screenings as a special site for cinephilia. Arguably, at the ICFV, the shared viewing context might actually be more important than the videos. Walker’s website describes the festival as ‘the first offline celebration of online cat videos’ and notes ‘the greater joy [of] sharing the experience of watching very familiar videos with each other’.⁶¹ This distinction between offline and online behaviours taps into the intersection of the program’s institutional goals of community building (linked to Education and Community Programs) and crowdsourcing (for Open Field). The virality of online cat videos emerges from lone viewing practices that are often associated with procrastination or the general time suck of social media. Many of the shorter clips, especially those that run for less than a minute, consist of amateur home movies in which a pet owner captures some cute, funny, or idiosyncratic behavior – preferably all three, as in the case of one kitten’s response to belly tickling in *Surprised Kitty (Original)*. As they post, view, and click social media users seem to get caught up in an urge to share. However, this desire is somewhat problematic. In an offline setting it is generally not considered socially acceptable to spend a lot of time sharing quaint details about cats. As these viral videos creep into the day’s interstitial spaces they tend to be seen as a distraction from more productive tasks. The ICFV shifts these shared solitary practices into a communal space, thereby turning a crowdsourced pastime into a spectacular event.

Crowdsourced curation

This offline celebration of cat videos retains traces of the potential embarrassment evoked by the exposure of socially-awkward behaviour or unrefined taste. In Walker’s mini-documentary on the 2013 event local letterpress artist Jenni Undis declared her love of ‘those stupid videos’, noting that there is something ‘fun and weird’ about a festival celebrating content that is usually watched ‘slightly guilty pleasure style’.⁶² Similarly, Charlie Schmidt indirectly acknowledges the contra-

dictions inherent in the ongoing popularity of his 1984 video *Keyboard Cat* which features a blue-shirted orange tabby whose paws hover over a portable keyboard (with the owner's hands presumably concealed by the aforementioned shirt). Noting that he made the video during a period of unemployment, Schmidt explains 'you can't do this on purpose ... it isn't like I'm talented'.⁶³ Even the ICVF origins have been attributed to a moment of whimsy, as Walker program associate Katie Hill initially raised the idea 'as a sort of joke'.⁶⁴ The call for entries went viral, sparking international media attention, and Hill blogged that '[she'd] never have imagined this playful experiment would cause such a stir'.⁶⁵ Within less than a month she had received 7,000 crowdsourced nominations which would subsequently be whittled down to the 79 videos featured in the first #catvidfest. According to coverage of the inaugural festival in *The New York Times* museum officials downplayed any curatorial intentions, which led reporter Melena Ryzik to describe it as 'less Cannes than I Can Haz Film Fest'.⁶⁶

This raises the question of how to interpret the curatorial framing of the #catvidfest program. Regardless of the crowdsourcing of content or the lighthearted intentions of the organisers, the process of preparing and presenting the video compilation evokes curatorial intervention. The videos were grouped by genre (e.g. comedy, musical, foreign), a decision that Hill mentioned in her 26 July 2012 blog post,⁶⁷ and even included annual Hall of Fame inductees. In 2013 during event producer Scott Stulen's introduction to the State Fair screening he cited the key figures of 7,000+ entries viewed by 20 jurors who then selected the 65 videos included in the final program.⁶⁸ This numerical evidence evokes the curatorial language of the film festival by not only suggesting a level of interest that far outstrips available slots but also highlighting an arduous selection process. In other words the program gains value from the acknowledgement that the entries have been winnowed down (or weeded out).

This process of assembling the program, even if it is not associated with rigorous curatorial assessment, helps to ensure a positive experience for festivalgoers. Similarly, online references to #catvidfest or the 'prestigious Golden Kitty Award'⁶⁹ serve as markers of critical value aimed at capturing the attention of discerning YouTube users. Winners of the Golden Kitty (a people's choice award) include Will Braden's *Henri 2: Paw de Deux*, a black and white subtitled exploration of one French kitty's existentialist angst, and Sho Ko's *8 Signs of Addiction*, a jazz-scored riff on the compulsive lure of a catnip banana. Both videos are ostensibly narratives that draw structural elements and aesthetic references from familiar cinematic tropes. Taken in the context of disavowed curation it is important to note that the festival organisers select the people's choice nominees, thus limiting the potential recipients of the Golden Kitty. The aesthetic exception amongst the

Golden Kitty winners is *The Original Grumpy Cat*, a one-shot home video showing the perpetually frowning feline getting a belly rub.

Viral festival memes

Although Shorty and Kodi (aka Sho Ko) have over a million Facebook fans and Henri has his own book, Grumpy Cat is a veritable celebri-kitty whose image forms the memetic basis for numerous lolcats (humorous user-generated image macros). Limor Shifman has differentiated between a viral video, which spreads ‘without significant change’, and a memetic video, which ‘lures extensive creative user engagement’.⁷⁰ While viral videos express communality Shifman notes that memetic texts simultaneously demonstrate a user’s affiliation and individuality.⁷¹ The term memetic references the role of mimesis in the spread of memes – cultural units that biologist Richard Dawkins defined as ‘analogous to genes’.⁷² Internet cat videos can be discussed as memes given their transmission of highly resonant cultural ideas. For example, Sharon Crowell-Davis, a professor of veterinary behavior and anatomy, attributes the Internet popularity of cats to their unique combination of individualistic aloofness with expressive sociality, citing Grumpy Cat as emblematic of a sweet animal’s understandably negative response to contemporary world events.⁷³

Shifman also has advocated for a tripartite understanding of memes as ‘an idea, a practice, and an object’.⁷⁴ Here, it is interesting to note the interchangeable use of Internet Cat Video Festival and #catvidfest by the Walker Art Center. The hashtag invokes crowdsourcing and invites viral dissemination across social networks. As an offline gathering ICVF is a festival devoted to the celebration of memes. However, #catvidfest also draws on the memetic appropriation of festival tropes. Separated from its links to the film industry supply chain, the global network of #catvidfest appears to posit the festival experience itself as meme – at once a copy or imitation, touched by hints of parody, but simultaneously a viral cultural phenomenon.

The notion of a memetic festival that is both devoted to memes and is itself a derivative re-working of the festival format could push film festival studies into new territory. What is the fate of festival circuits in the digital era of crowdsourced curation and internet distribution networks? Has the spectacular element of screening events become overdetermined, turning festival space into pastiche? Or, is the light-hearted work of feline critics a signal of creative user engagement with practices that have developed deep cultural resonance? Perhaps the final word is best left to event producer Scott Stulen, who explains ‘[y]ou can think

really serious things about it, about all the context of this, or you can just enjoy a couple of hours and watch some cat videos.⁷⁵

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