

**CATS, from page 10**

for a rhinoplasty surgeon. "Were the Betacam videos for fun or for art? They are the same to me. It wasn't for sharing. It was just for me."

When the technology became available to digitize his disintegrating Beta tapes, he decided to keep Keyboard Cat for posterity and to amuse his daughter. YouTube had just launched; a friend suggested he post the clip there.

"I didn't really know what YouTube was. It was like the Internet was ready; the cat was

already way ahead of the times," Schmidt reflects. "The fact that there's some success and income based on just doing something that I wanted to do, I'm really glad about that."

"It reinforces me making art. It makes me want to make more. It's been just a totally all-round great experience. I've learned so much, something exciting and new every day. I live in Nowheresville (Spokane, Wash.), and the Internet helps distribute my stuff

globally from my dining room table. That's fantastic."

Unlike more conventional artists, Schmidt has 80,000 unread messages at the moment.

Sociologists, psychologists and scientists have produced reams of research in a bid to explain why these memes — or fads, like a video or funny picture, that go viral on the Internet and are shared millions of times — are so popular. Why are cats funnier than dogs? Why do cats like to squeeze inside boxes? Why are people compelled to watch them over and over and over again and share them with everyone they know? How can marketing companies hijack these fads and turn their products into a universally loved global phenomenon?

People who know cat videos best say — with no small amount of glee — the simple fact is we can't really ever answer these questions, and marketing types can never cook up a surefire hit in a consumer-testing lab.

"We've had clients who've said, 'We'll just pay for the rights' or 'Get the cat here and we'll just shoot it ourselves,'" muses Schmidt. "I don't know if you want to try that. ... It takes a certain temperament of cat, for sure. You can't just take a cat and think that it's going to work. Once in a while they make it look good, but it doesn't look the same."

Scott Stulen, founder of the Internet Cat Video Festival, has watched "tens of

thousands" of cat videos. "There are more people trying to make a cat video that goes viral than ever before. But I'm convinced there is no magic formula. You can't manufacture it," he says.

Like Schmidt, Stulen comes from a fine-art background. He had worked in museums for 10 years as a curator and educator when he and Katie Hill, an intern who worked alongside him at Minneapolis' Walker Art Center, dreamed up the Internet Cat Video Festival in 2012 as "a fun way to close the summer," getting folks together in an open space beside the gallery to watch much-loved funny cats and, like Cannes or Sundance, award prizes for the best.

"We had no expectation of it becoming as large as it did," Stulen says. "We thought maybe a couple of hundred people would show up." They circulated a press release drawing attention to their cute juxtaposition of high art versus low (museum versus cats), and within three hours, they were being interviewed by the L.A. Times. The estimate of 500 visitors upped to 1,500, then 5,000.

"In the end, 10,000 showed up, and we had all this residual traffic of people buying from the shop, buying tickets to other events; they went to see our exhibitions," Stulen says. "It cracked that thing that everybody in the museum context is after — how do you get people to care, how do you change your audience?"

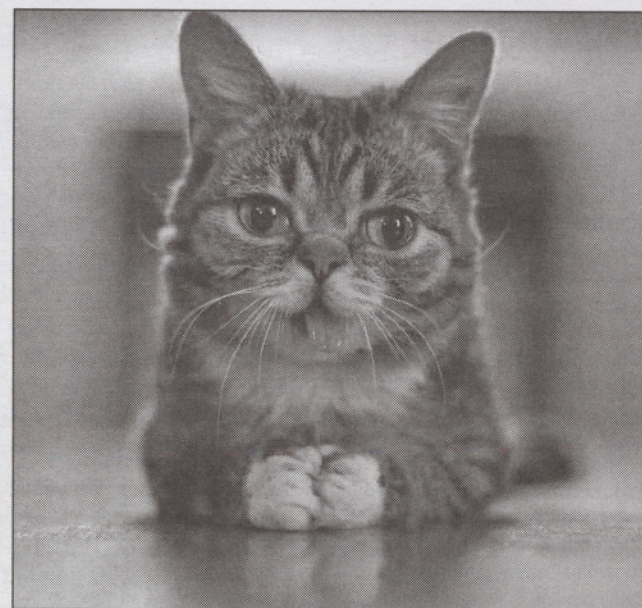
Almost immediately, Walker Arts Center received requests to tour CatVidFest. This was a triumph for Stulen.

"There was a lot of snobbery, internally at the Walker and externally from other places. Katie and I snuck this thing through. It would not have happened if it wasn't for us being able to navigate the museum a little bit politically and also a little slyly. A lot of curators didn't want this to happen. If they'd known the level it would grow to, it probably wouldn't have happened either."

Stulen, who was subsequently headhunted and is no longer directly involved with CatVidFest but consults for Cat-Con, approached the curation of the festival from a meticulous, art-critical perspective. It wasn't just stuff we fritter hours on at home; clips were carefully edited, a program pieced together, proper filmmakers invited. The most celebrated was Will Braden, whose moody Henri, Le Chat Noir black-and-white shorts are beautiful and darkly funny. Braden, who is now curator of CatVidFest and will also be at Cat-Con, is another "proper artist." But can cat videos really be called art?

"I'm not going around saying this is fine art," Stulen insists. "I'm saying the festival is an interesting experience that I think does fall into the art realm of experiences. Art should delight and challenge. It should make you mad sometimes, and most of all it should make you think. Good art does all those things, and a lot of these videos are like that."

"Fun doesn't have to be frivolous, and



Lil Bub

IAMLILBUB/WIKICOMMONS

smart doesn't have to be boring," he adds. It's a sentiment echoed by Schmidt (his website states: "I don't know regular life from art. But I do know that if something is boring and then you call it art, it is still boring").

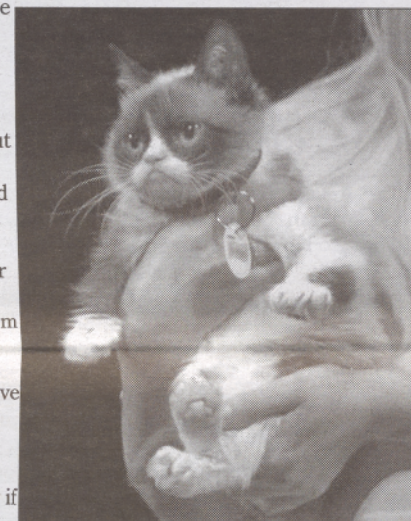
This year, the Walker Center's CatVidFest moves from the museum to the St. Paul Saints' new sports ground.

"This is not a lucrative operation for the Walker," says Ryan French, director of marketing, when asked if it's cashing in on cats.

"However, the success is clearly due to the popularity of cat videos. Other festivals based on other video genres have popped up, but none have had this success. This is a weird phenomenon no one predicted would be so popular."

He argues that the art world has been "overwhelmingly supportive of the concept," and most venues that have booked the tour are art museums or art house cinemas. Audiences comprise "mostly people who enjoy a cat video, whether they know it or not," plus a few "fanatics who dress up like cats or try to bring their cats" — but mainly it's people sharing a cheerful experience. And as for sniffy types who think cat videos are beneath them, he says: "Coolness is in the eye of the beholder. The festival has no pretence, it is an incredibly earnest and open experience."

Courtesy of INSP News Service [www.street-papers.org](http://www.street-papers.org)



GAGE SKIDMORE/WIKICOMMONS

Grumpy Cat speaking at the 2014 VidCon on June 28, 2014.



Dignity



Poverty