ED HALTER

CATS&

ZAK KITNICK

THE TRUTH ABOUT CATS & DOGS

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To make her film *Viet Flakes* (1965), Carolee Schneemann used an 8mm motion-picture camera to rephotograph images of atrocities from the Vietnam War she had collected from magazines and newspapers. For more than seven minutes, her camera zooms in and out of these images, changing focus, scanning and panning, isolating details, paradoxically reanimating the photographs while revealing their frozen, artifactual nature. Her camera's movements resemble what has come to be known as "Ken Burns effect" in Apple video-editing software, but unmoored from the solemn ponderousness—the weight of "history"—that functions as Burns's emotional stock in trade. Rather, Schneemann's camera is unmistakably alive, agile, and contemporary; it is a probing, indicting eye, not a passive witness.

In May 2015, Zak Kitnick attended a screening of *Viet Flakes* at Light Industry in Brooklyn and was immediately drawn not merely to the striking nature of Schneemann's subject matter, but also to her technique. He became fascinated by her ability "to isolate parts of an image, to extend, dilute, to add duration to a still image," as he would later explain.

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The fact of seriality links the legacy of cinema to the larger field of image reproduction and distribution in which we all now operate. In pre-digital cinema, still images appear on a strip of film in sequence, one frame after another. Nowadays, a similar series of single images is rendered digitally. When the film is projected, we imagine this rapid series of still images as a single, moving image, with twenty-four still images combining to create each second of screen time. Seriality is the unconscious of cinema: the basis of our visual experience but hidden from active thought. We see the whole, not the parts.

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For several years, Kitnick has been working off and on with a certain style of illustrative poster as his source material. Originally designed in the 1980s and early 1990s, the posters depict categories of food items—varieties of bread, cheese, vegetables, spirits, etc. Often laid out in a rough grid, these taxonomic displays resemble figures from a children's encyclopedia, rethought as cheery decorations for the home or workplace. While the posters depict multiple items, each is meant to be, as Kitnick has remarked, "consumed whole, single image." In his 2011 catalog *1-4,* Kitnick discusses his *Compendium* series, created from the aforementioned food posters, in terms of "Information as Decoration / Decoration as Information / Decoration as Organization / Organization as Aestheticization."

To create *C&D*, Kitnick began with a set of postcards, similar to the posters, that show various canine and feline breeds: one a grid of dogs, the other a grid of cats. These postcards are reminiscent of Marcel Broodthaers's *The Farm Animals* (1974)—a reproduction of which hangs in Kitnick's kitchen—and likewise depict genetic permutations, created by human culture, of the same animal species.

After seeing *Viet Flakes*, Kitnick scanned the postcards and enlarged the image of each cat or dog so that its height would fit a three-foot by two-foot panel, using one to four panels as needed to fit the animals' varying widths and placing the image against a matte black background. By coincidence, this

process produced forty-five panels for each species. Each series is exhibited in a single room, covering all four walls with evenly-spaced lines of panels, held aloft by continuous shelving. Shelving has been another interest of Kitnick's in recent years: he has spoken of a desire to create "a shelf that holds nothing but an image" and "a shelf that holds nothing but information."

The images have been given an odd quality through resizing: the dogs and cats become almost equal in scale, tabbies and terriers swollen to the size of Great Danes. The shift from poster size to postcard to panel reveals how each animal is composed of smudgey Ben-Day dots, providing some evidence to the viewer of the operations undertaken, of the time and process that separate Kitnick's versions from their distant originals.

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Pop understood the close relationship cinema had to other image-reproduction technologies. For Warhol, the screenprint was an analog for the 16mm print; his first screenprint portraits, naturally, were of film stars like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. Comics, newspapers, magazines, movies, television, celebrity photography… Zooming in on each kind of source material allowed Pop to help us see that larger circulation of images through the culture that Guy Debord would come to term the "spectacle," carefully defined by Debord as "not a collection of images," but rather "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." In other words, as a global structure of communication, unmoored to any specific technological substrate.

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Once the process of making *C&D* was underway, Kitnick began to think of the project in relation to the structural film, a concept first articulated by P. Adams Sitney in 1969. For Sitney, structural film was a new tendency exemplified by the work of filmmakers like Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, and Michael Snow "in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal impression of the film." Sitney would ultimately delineate four techniques that he claimed could be found, in various combinations, in structural films: fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography. (Notably, Scheemann was not referenced by Sitney in his observations on the structural film, but some aspects of her work arguably overlap with his definition at the time.)

While each of these techniques has a meaning specific to film technology, Kitnick interpreted them more loosely. For Kitnick, *fixed camera position* came to refer both to the presentational format of the original images and what he calls the "singular but repetitive view" of the observer in the gallery; *flicker effect* might be understood as the black-backgrounded panels repeating against a white gallery wall; *loop printing* is referenced by the continuous line of their display across each gallery wall, enhanced by the exact placement of similarly-sized swinging doors; *rephotography* alludes to the scanning and reproduction of prior images.

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C&D recalls the proto-cinematic motion-analysis photography of Eadweard Muybridge, who indeed employed beasts such as these in some of his studies of animal locomotion, usually shot from a side angle in a similar fashion. Each individual animal is extended into a series of animals. Originally undertaken for scientific purposes, Muybridge's images have been long appropriated

(and thereby, as Kitnick might say, aestheticized) by artists for their own purposes, from Thomas Eakins to Francis Bacon. Hollis Frampton appropriated not their content but their structure for a series of photographs entitled *Sixteen Studies from Vegetable Locomotion* (1975).

Not only does each room of Kitnick's animal images resemble both a Muybridge series of still images and a continuous roll of motion-picture film (with the visible shelving as something like sprocket holes), but also evokes a zoetrope, that 19th-century philosophical toy that predates and in certain ways informed the development of cinema itself. In a zoetrope, successive images are placed on the inside of a rotating circular chamber; as it spins, the user peeps through slits between each image to experience the illusion of motion. Unlike a reel of film, which is typically hundreds of feet long when unfurled, the zoetrope is a relatively tiny loop of images, more like a contemporary animated gif than a true movie. Because of this, we can gaze upon the complete circuit at once, when the toy is still, and understand it in its entirety.

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There is a tension in Sitney's concept of structural film. While each of his four aspects is rooted in a technological process specific to film production—and indeed structural film has long been considered a quintessentially medium-specific form—the viewer's experience of these phenomena does not necessarily require those same particular processes. In other words, fixed cameras and rephotography may be equally achieved by analog or digital systems, and there is no reason why the effect of loop printing or flicker can't be achieved by cutting and pasting a segment of video over and over again in an editing timeline. Precious few spectators today could discern the difference between a 16mm print and 4K transfer of Snow's *Wavelength*, Frampton's *(nostalgia)*—or, for that matter, Scheemann's *Viet Flakes*, which now circulates in digital format for most exhibitions.

Thus Kitnick's creative transposition of the four elements of structural film to non-cinematic work points to a larger issue: that there are patterns of image reproduction and circulation that exist beyond any particular medium or technology.

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Extrapolating from *C&D* we might imagine a set of four new structures to image production and exhibition:

TRANSFERENCE
The journey of images from one medium to another

RESIZING
The malleability of image dimensions through expansion and contraction

REPETITION
The endlessly reproducible nature of images, encouraging an aesthetics of seriality

PERMUTATION
The ability to create various versions of images through this process of repetition

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