

Nina Katchadourian

# The New York Times

## An Exhibition Worth Thousands of Words

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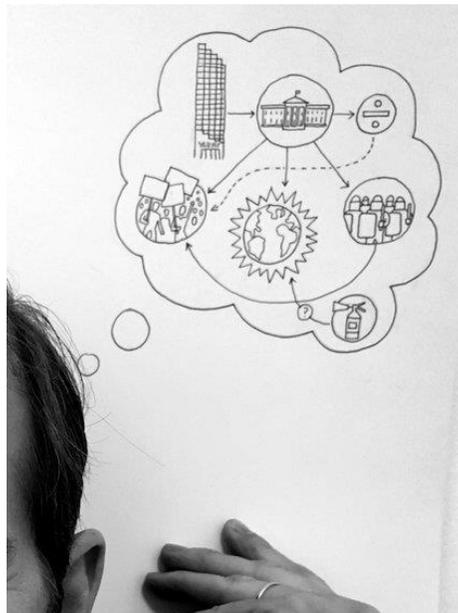
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By Roberta Smith

Published on July 6, 2017

One of the savviest, wisest, most revealing museum exhibitions of the summer may not have much actual art in it. But it circles the subject relentlessly like a satellite around a planet, wobbling in and out of art's force field. We're along for the ride, courtesy of a series of often riveting, mostly wordless visual dialogues between artists, conducted entirely by cellphone.



Nicholas Blechman speaks (posted Dec. 11, 2016) ...Credit Metropolitan Museum of Art

In each of these dozen pictorial tête-à-têtes, two artists share images — scores, sometimes hundreds — and the occasional brief video. They tap moments of beauty or strangeness; of everyday life or travel; of buildings, streets and weather. We see flashes of wit, poetry and even genius and observe momentous events, both private and presidential. Everywhere puzzles are set in motion for us to contemplate and parse, making our own meaning.

As museum shows go, [“Talking Pictures: Camera-Phone Conversations Between Artists”](#) was a relatively loose, even risky, proposition undertaken where you might least expect it: the august Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Fifth Avenue building, even). It was cooked up by Mia Fineman, associate curator of the Met’s photography department, who was intrigued by how the camera phone had transformed photography, giving it a diaristic, real-time intimacy and turning it, she says in a wall text, into “a fluid, instantaneous, ephemeral medium, closer to speaking than to writing.”



... and Christoph Niemann responds (posted Dec. 16, 2016). Credit Photographs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ms. Fineman wanted to examine the speechlike nature of cellphone photo-chat through a finer lens: artists’ longstanding habit of communing with others of their kind. So last fall she selected a dozen artists of varying ages,

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origins and sensibilities, working in photography, painting, illustration or multimedia. Each was asked to invite another artist to communicate through a shared iCloud album for several months, however often they liked but without typed messages. (Ms. Fineman could check in, taking the project's pulse, but not comment.) The museum would exhibit each exchange unabridged; images would be labeled with only the sender's name and the date sent.

Ms. Fineman had little sense of how her recipe might work, but in April she lifted the lid to find the makings of this marvelous exhibition nearly done: some 1,822 images, including 183 videos. Two conversations are displayed as photographic prints on the gallery's walls; four are slide (and video) shows on digital monitors. Six are on iPads or printed in books stationed at tables with seating. An inviting, plain-spoken ambience prevails — part gallery, part archive.

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Irina Rozovsky (posted March 2) Credit Metropolitan Museum of Art

Nearly all the artists bend the pixels to their own purposes, aesthetic proclivities and preoccupations. Thus no two conversations are alike. Some are brisk. The American painter [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#), who was born in Nigeria, and the Zimbabwean interdisciplinary artist and educator [Nontsikelelo Mutiti](#) exchange 51

vivid notes focused on common interests: stalls selling bright African fabrics (in Africa), beadwork flowers and hair-braiding salons on both sides of the Atlantic, snow-covered streets probably on the Eastern Seaboard.

The Chinese video artist [Cao Fei](#) and the New York-based photographer and videographer [Wu Zhang](#) weigh in with the record number of postings: 647, including 29 videos projected on the table across from their book of images. They seem to take us everywhere. Ms. Cao is mostly in Beijing, working with her family swirling around her. Mr. Wu mostly roams New York like an old-time street photographer, exploring its grandeur and desolation, returning regularly to Trump Tower, as if to a riddle he can't solve. Both board planes to cities on other continents and we guess which.

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Manjari Sharma (posted March 3) Credit Metropolitan Museum of Art

No surprise, the 2016 presidential election figures in at least half of the dialogues, and it brought one to a standstill. [Teju Cole](#), a Nigerian-American photographer and the photography critic for The New York Times Magazine, teamed up with the documentary filmmaker [Laura Poitras](#), but she stopped posting after Hillary Clinton lost. Mr. Cole posted several images of flowers, hoping to entice her back, but it didn't

work. In contrast, the painter [Nicole Eisenman](#) and the [artist-activist A. L. Steiner](#) (founders of the curatorial collective [Ridykeulous](#)) turned their back-and-forth into a terse, often sarcastic timeline of the campaign, the election and its aftermath, finessing the ban on language by posting pertinent screen-swipes from Twitter.

Some of the best conversations are carefully structured from the start. Most classically cameracentric is that between the photographers [Manjari Sharma](#) and her invitee, [Irina Rozovsky](#). The two opted for a strict call-and-response process, an image-for-image swap. Their collaboration has an unusual poetic and visual logic and a diptychlike orderliness. Also an unexpected depth: Both artists were pregnant, their babies due three weeks apart. They record their swelling bellies and, toward the end, we see Ms. Sharma's placenta. Ms. Rozovsky's final comment shows two orbs — a giant close-up of her right eye nearly touching the head of her sleeping infant — and has an intensity worthy of Odilon Redon or Philip Guston. Ms. Sharma counters with gritty reality: We see her in the delivery room, cradling her newborn, weeping.

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Daniel Heidkamp speaks (posted Nov. 23, 2016) ... Credit Metropolitan Museum of Art

Two painters insinuated their preferred media. [Cynthia Daignault](#) invited Daniel Heidkamp to post only images of the paintings each made for their conversation,

rendered mostly from life on 18-inch-square canvases to fit the proportions of the phone screen. While it is sometimes difficult to tell who did what, their glowing, seemingly textured prints warm up the show. (To see some of the actual paintings, with titles, visit [Mr. Heidkamp's current show at the Half Gallery](#), a few blocks from the Met.)

Perhaps the most brilliant example of truth-to-medium was achieved by [Christoph Niemann](#), an illustrator-editor, in concert with his friend, the illustrator-cartoonist [Nicholas Blechman](#), art director of The New Yorker. In an eyes-wide-open game of [Exquisite Corpse](#), presented here in book form, they mostly draw their way through the project, each posting comical scenes that the other completes — or one-ups. Just so we get the point, a black dot bounces through the first few images of their exchange. A few photographs, along with some pencils, eyeglasses and bits of tape, are interjected, as when Mr. Blechman's photograph of the front half of a red station wagon is completed, in red-and-white tape, by Mr. Niemann. Their 102 posts are a sustained performance worthy of [Saul Steinberg](#); even the puns have puns. See, for example: Mr. Blechman's photograph of two subway air vents repurposed into salt and pepper shakers by Mr. Niemann.

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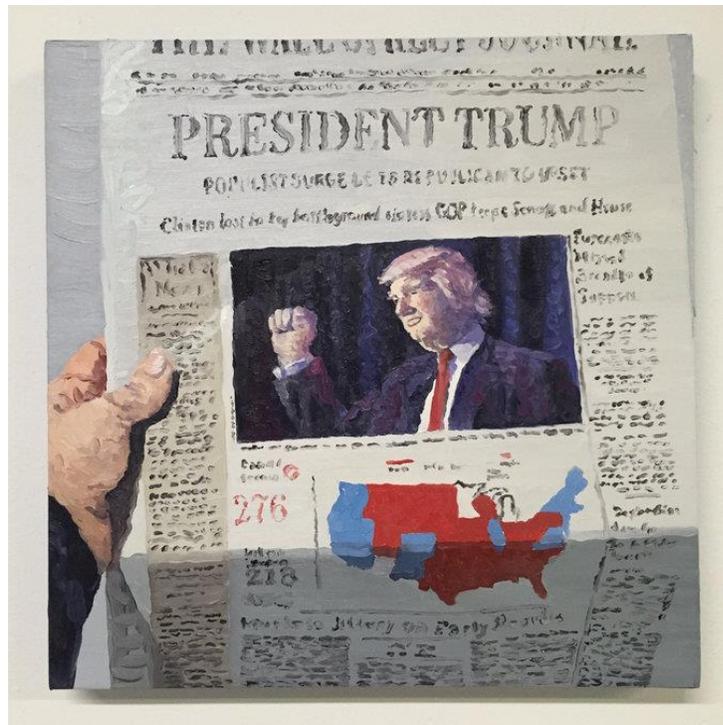
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... Cynthia Daignault responds (posted Nov. 27, 2016). Credit Metropolitan Museum of Art

Sometimes the artists seem to be talking more to themselves than to each other. The artist [Sanford Biggers](#) and the filmmaker and cinematographer [Shawn Peters](#) begin their 62-post iPad exchange with 12-image soliloquies before edging toward a conversation that is rarely in sync. But the pictures are gems. Other times, we follow a tennis match. The pioneering Conceptualist, painter and photographer [William Wegman](#) and his correspondent, the video artist [Tony Oursler](#), volley with 360 postings (233 images and 127 videos) that together make a 57-minute slide show. Expect anything: Mr. Wegman's familiar Weimaraners and his less familiar grown children; overlong bits of wry experimental filmmaking; gleeful stunts in the subways.

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The interdisciplinary artist [Nina Katchadourian](#) and her teammate, [Lenka Clayton](#), play a tighter, faster game in just under four exuberant minutes. Ms. Katchadourian posts three seconds of an elevator door opening; Ms. Clayton returns with two seconds of her dishwasher door. Feet, usually Ms. Katchadourian's, recur. A view of them in black socks is most amusingly countered by Ms. Clayton with an image of an untitled abstract painting by Myron Stout. But Stout's smooth archway shape in white on black is upside down, so it appears to have legs and even stubby doughboylike feet. This startling visual connection made me laugh out loud and kept me there until it looped around again, twice.

Talking Pictures: Camera-Phone Conversations Between Artists  
Through Dec. 17 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, [metmuseum.org](http://metmuseum.org).

A version of this review appears in print on July 7, 2017, on Page C13 of the New York edition with the headline: Visually Speaking.