

Lenka Clayton

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### What Happens When Artists Have Camera-Phone ‘Conversations’?

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Nina Katchadourian took a picture of her hand and sent it to Lenka Clayton, beginning their exchange of images.

NEW YORK — So when Mia Fineman, associate photography curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, contacted the participants in “Talking Pictures: Camera-Phone Conversations Between Artists” did she use her cellphone? It would only be fitting.

The premise of the show, which runs at the Met through Dec. 17, could hardly be simpler. Solicit a dozen artists to carry on a visual back-and-forth with another artist of his or her choice, starting last November and ending in April. The one catch: Each exchange would consist of still images and/or videos taken with the artists' phone cameras.

Simplicity of premise does not mean simplicity of result. Looking at "Talking Pictures," you all but feel the stimulation the artists derived from their assignment. Take an ever-handy implement (phone camera), a barely limiting constraint (exclusive employment of same), and anything-goes subject matter. That's a direct flight to the realm of whim, than which there are few places an artist feels more at home.

Part of the pleasure of "Talking Pictures" is its happy ephemerality. What's less palpable, or enduring, than a set of pixels? That said, some of the images have been printed out and pinned to the wall (no mattes or frames, of course, that would be a mite too traditional), and the images of the video- and photojournalist Wu Zhang are presented in a book far thicker and heavier than the tablet computers used to present several other conversations.

Sometimes the exchange becomes thematic. Manjari Sharma and Irina Rozovsky (she teaches at Massachusetts College of Art and Design) were both due to give birth in April, so pregnancy and motherhood dominate.

Sometimes the exchange is a function of medium. Painters Cynthia Daignault and Daniel Heidkamp swap photographs of paintings they've just done. The presence of paint, even when mediated by pixels, is a happily retro sight.

More often, the conversations remain varied and digressive — as most good conversations do. Visual puns abound, as do political and social commentary, personal expression, and venting (all of which can significantly overlap). That, and whatever catches the artist's eye.

The happiest grace notes involve visual duets. Rather than going their own way (not that there's anything wrong with that), many of the artists engage in visual call and response.

Tony Oursler photographs a William Wegman image. Wegman photographs the Oursler photograph of that image. Oursler then photographs . . . well, you get the idea . . . the images becoming progressively blurrier.

In a variant on that approach, Nina Katchadourian photographs her hand and sends that along. Lenka Clayton photographs the photograph. Upping the ante, Katchadourian sends a video of someone walking on crutches. Clayton replies with a YouTube video of the great unipedal performer [Peg Leg Bates](#) dancing up a storm.

Illustrator Christoph Niemann photographs a bicycle locked to a signpost. Illustrator Nicholas Blechman replies with a line drawing of a cyclist — only he's in the saddle without a bike. Presumably the one in Niemann's photograph awaits him.

Throughout "Talking Pictures" there's a sense of intellectual playfulness. Clearly, the artists felt liberated — with the result that viewers feel exhilarated.

A sense of play does not preclude grimness in imagery or topic. Look again at the dates; most of the conversations include at least a glimpse of the now-incumbent president or related ephemera (pink hats, anyone?). The most visually poignant political consequence occurs in the exchange between photographer/critic Teju Cole and documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras ("Citizenfour"). She stops photographing after Election Day. He, quite charmingly, sends her a series of photographs of bouquets.

The most bracing aspect of "Talking Pictures" is conceptual. Anyone with a phone camera — which effectively means everyone — can do something like this. True, you or I are unlikely to do it as imaginatively, wittily, or memorably as these 24 artists. But using a phone camera as a kind of visual diary or notebook is something many already do. The democratization of photography, a process dating back to George Eastman and the Kodak Brownie, long ago left the snapshot and family album far, far behind. "Talking Pictures" might make you start looking at your camera phone differently. More important, it might make you start looking at the world around you a little differently, too.

TALKING PICTURES: Camera-Phone Conversations between Artists

At Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave., New York, through Dec. 17. [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org), 212-535-7710