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THE IPHONE CELEBRATES ITS 10TH BIRTHDAY WITH METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART SHOW

By Sarah Cascone, June 29, 2017



Just in time for the 10th anniversary of the iPhone, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art has opened an exhibition of works created entirely using the world-changing device. For "Talking Pictures: Camera-Phone Conversations Between Artists," the museum has commissioned 12 pairs of artists to engage in visual dialogues, sending photos and videos back and forth on their phones for a period of five months.

"Whereas the camera once functioned chiefly as a tool for preserving the past, today people share their visual experience in real time and with unprecedented intimacy," reads the exhibition's introductory wall text. "Photography has become a fluid, instantaneous, ephemeral medium, closer to speaking than to writing."

"I've been thinking mobile phone photography for a long time," said Mia Fineman, the museum's associate curator of photography, to artnet News. "It's a coincidence that the exhibition opened on the tenth anniversary of the iPhone, but it's a happy coincidence."

After considering a number of different forms for the project, she settled on the idea of the exchange because "I was interested in eavesdropping on a conversation that they might have with another artist," Fineman explained. She reached out to an internationally diverse selection of 12 artists—six men, six women—about participating, some of whom had already explored the use of the smart phone in their practice.

"Rob Pruitt did a show of his iPhone photographs at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in 2008, which was really one of the first shows of mobile phone photographs from any artist," said Fineman. "Everybody takes pictures with their iPhones, but most of the other artists were not using their phones to intentionally create art."

Each artist was responsible for selecting their own conversation partner. The final pairings were Manjari Sharma and Irina Rozovsky; William Wegman and Tony Oursler; Cynthia Daignault and Daniel Heidkamp; Nicole Eisenman and A. L. Steiner;

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Sanford Biggers and Shawn Peters; Cao Fei and Wu Zhang; Teju Cole and Laura Poitras; Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Nontsikelelo Mutiti; Nina Katchadourian and Lenka Clayton; Christoph Niemann and Nicholas Blechman; Ahmet Ögüt and Alexandra Pirici; and Pruitt and Jonathan Horowitz.

“There’s a lot of variety in how they approached it,” said Fineman of the finished product. “They all had a fantastic time doing it. They embraced the project and loved it.”

Where the project’s most prolific conversationalists, Fei and Zhang, exchanged no less than 647 messages, Poitras and Cole’s discussion petered out after just 45. “After the election of Donald Trump, Laura just couldn’t respond,” explained Fineman. “She was very affected by the election. The whole end of that dialogue is just him sending her different pictures of flowers in consolation.”

For their part, Daignault and Heidkamp sent all their messages in painting form, snapping images of artworks they had made specially for the conversation, based on their daily experiences. “It was a very interesting way to approach the project,” said Fineman. “They are observational, representational works, so they are almost like photographs—except they are paintings.”

The exhibition showcases the resulting works in a variety of ways, with interactive touch screens and video projections—some of the artists sent video as well as still images—as well as traditional photographic prints. “We’ll probably acquire some of the dialogues from this show [for the Met’s collection],” Fineman noted.

It may seem strange to elevate the ubiquitous iPhone photo to the status of museum object, but Fineman sees it as a natural step in the history of photography. “Everyone has always used cameras,” she said. “The explosion of mobile phone cameras has just made that into a much broader phenomenon. Many more millions of people not only have a camera, but always have it with them.”

“In the context of the art museum it’s interesting to see how artists use this technology,” Fineman added. “I don’t think there is any significant difference in how artists use the camera and normal people use the camera, except maybe artists have a higher success rate of good pictures!”