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THE MET'S NEW ART EXHIBIT IS TOLD ENTIRELY THROUGH
SMARTPHONES

By Shannon Liao, June 26, 2017



As the world gets ready to celebrate the iPhone's 10th anniversary on Thursday, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City gave a sneak peek at its experimental Talking Pictures exhibit today, which invites artists to communicate to one another only in photos snapped on smartphones.

For the exhibit, the Met commissioned 12 artists of different backgrounds and asked them to invite another artist to be paired with to engage in these digital and visual conversations. The rules were simple: artists had to work within a five-month period from November 2016 to April 2017; send photos to their artist partner without providing any captions, comments or context; and not share any of the photos on social media until the exhibit was revealed.

The effect is a stream of consciousness visual version of verbal diarrhea, filled with visual puns and images that sometimes speak to each other or disagree. Some photos convey a certain ghoulishness and cut off sensibility, as seen by a woman's

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portrait with the face omitted by the camera flash by photographer Manjari Sharma. “Sometimes, we’re agreeing and echoing and sometimes we’re coming apart,” photographer Irina Rozovsky described her digital conversation with Manjari Sharma to The Verge. Both Sharma and Rozovsky happened to be pregnant during the commission period, so a lot of their photos engaged that subject matter.

Six of these conversations are displayed on tables, in either printed books, tablets, or on a projector, while the other six are shown on the walls, either on flat-screen televisions if they include videos or as large-scale prints. The Met is still deciding on the best medium to showcase digital art.

Ironically, the exhibit is housed in the Joyce and Robert Menschel Hall for Modern Photography which has little to no cell service. (I use Verizon.) The event is sponsored by Adobe, marking the second partnership the museum has had with the company, the first being a 2012 exhibit called “Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop.”

A big theme in these installations is the 2016 election of President Trump, which is only natural, explained the Met, since the commission period was during the aftermath of the election. This is most notably seen in the conversation between Laura Poitras, a journalist and artist, and Teju Cole, an author and photographer, when Poitras stops responding to Cole’s photos after Trump is elected. Cole and Poitras’s dialogue already begins sort of one-sided: Cole frequently sends photos, while Poitras replies once in a while. It reminds me of when I text someone a lot and they infuriatingly reply with a simple “k.” But the tension between the artists appear to escalate toward the end of this dialogue, as Cole sends a series of flowers in consolation post-election and Poitras responds with silence.

There’s an element of contrivance to the whole affair since we know that the Met asked the artists to engage in these dialogues — any spur of the moment, organic quality to the art is lost. Yet, the artists themselves were eager to do more of these kinds of pieces; Sharma and Rozovsky say they are already working on their next collaboration.

What these artists capture through the lenses of their smartphones tell us intimate details about how they see life, even if all mediums are rendered equal. As Sharma puts it, a good piece of technology to her just disappears into the background as she’s using it, and “it’s more about thought than form.”

Even anti-techies were getting into the medium. “I have a lot of feelings about technology and how it’s a waste of time,” said Tony Oursler, a multimedia artist. “But this allows us to get some of the space back and get some of that energy.”

Some of the most beautiful images at this exhibit are of everyday, ordinary objects transformed because they were simply caught at a different angle. Sharma captures a hand grasping string lights and water trickling down from what looks like a shower or a window. Much like how critics blast modern art by saying a kid could draw it, some critics could also say that any of us can take photos on our phone and pose them as art. Still, it’s an interesting thesis as we enter a world where emoji and other forms of imagery are quickly replacing text. What messages are perceived in a world without words?