Reach Out and Touch Someone

Katie Schwab

Hunted
Jenae Westra, nz. (Green Smoke, Combined Negative Smoke 1&II), toned gelatin silver print, artist frame. 70.0cm x 50.1cm, 2014.
“Departing doesn’t have to mean disconnecting,” advertises Delta, the airline that flew me from London to New York City for the fall semester MFA exchange program at Hunter College. Four thousand miles from home, it is hard not to feel a separation, especially since the feeling of connection is often linked to proximity and touch. I miss hugs from friends and hand squeezes from my boyfriend, and I’ve become dependent on communication networks — the postal service, the telephone and the internet — to stay in touch. Although cheering, a phone call or an email can never replace human contact. Since moving to the USA, I have found myself drawn to artists whose work questions technological systems that claim to enable connection, and those who explore how closeness and communication can be engendered through physical touch.

Touch is understood as the sensation of hands or fingers coming into contact with a surface or body. An ocean away from my boyfriend, physical touch is currently impossible, so I send home letters and cards, and recently, a HATS postcard I purchased on eBay. HATS, or “Hands Across the Sea,” postcards were popular in the late nineteenth-century with British immigrants living in America who wanted to keep in touch with people back in the UK. My postcard was printed by Davidson Bros. (a publishing firm based in NY and London) at some point between 1901 and 1907, and it shows male and female hands clasped over a stormy ocean, an image of ivy tendrils below them.

The depiction of ivy (a symbol of eternity, fidelity, attachment, friendship and love) on this HATS postcard reminded me of Delta’s maxim that, even when far from home, it is still possible to feel connected. Though now collectable, HATS postcards became unfashionable in the 1920s due to the growing popularity of telegraphs and telephones, which began to make handwriting, and the comparatively slow postal system obsolete. This evolution of technology has continued to the present day, with computer screens and email now connecting people all around the world.

My postcard was an attempt to collapse the distance between my boyfriend and myself, and to place something physical in his hands.

Although the HATS cards offer some comfort in their call for physical touch, they only represent an illusion of physical closeness. My boyfriend and I remain far apart and the closest we get to actually touching is shaking hands through the screens of our laptops; virtual Hands Across the Sea. My ability to see and talk to my boyfriend is dependent on mobile phones and computers, and I’m beginning to realize how much of a role corporations play in facilitating our correspondence. I rely on telecommunication and airline companies to sell me “connection” through flight tickets, mobile phone and broadband deals. My American mobile phone network, AT&T, even uses the slogan “Reach Out and Touch Someone” in its advertising campaigns, evoking the legacy of HATS. Yet, like HATS, these promises of connection are always mediated — through screens, wires and carpenters — which is a far cry from real human touch.

Over the fall semester I considered the effectiveness of these communication systems, and thought about how to develop and maintain a sense of closeness with friends both here and at home. These questions are also relevant for Alexis L Grisé, Sophie Grant and Jenna Westra, artists and MFA students who work out of Hunter’s MFA studios at 205 Hudson. With its concrete floors, windowless studios, and doors that require swipe cards to open, the building does not make socializing easy or comfortable. Yet within these studios, Sophie and Jenna produced a body of work that investigates how physical proximity and closeness can be generated in an environment that encourages separation and alienation. Alexis created a series of photographs that question the ways in which technology enables and obstructs communication. Collectively, their work has helped me think through how distance impacts my ability to communicate in New York City and at Hunter College.
Sophie and Jenna’s recent collaborative exhibition at 205 Hudson addressed the question of communication directly through documented conversations, email correspondence and the physical exchange of objects. The pieces in the show incorporated the aesthetics of both artists through a shared currency of materials, shapes and forms. Jenna exhibited a series of hand-printed, large-format photographic works and Sophie showed a collection of cut-out ceramic, book cloth and mylar collages. Hand-shaped, circular forms, pins and the use of black and white were prominent in the work of both artists. These works, produced by hand in studios only a few doors away from each other, show how proximity enables distinct practices to touch and intersect.

The individual works in this show also demonstrated how materials and objects can overlap in layering and composition. In Sophie’s collages, namely *Henri in A Wild Workshop (Toucans and Journeys, Air and Exercise)*, clay either sits on top of book cloth, or rests on or next to a cut-out mylar shape. In Jenna’s photographed still-lives, such as *Grain Focuser with Eyelashes*, objects are juxtaposed, or attached. Touch is evinced in the ways objects and materials relate to one another, suggesting intimacy and closeness of form.

As one of the five senses, touch can also be understood as the relationship between bodies and materials. In Sophie’s *Little Clicks*, two ceramic hands reach out to each other over cut-out, layered book cloth. Her ceramics also appear in Jenna’s four gelatin silver prints, *Sophie’s Shapes with Combined Negatives* 1-4, and in works featuring Sophie herself. In *n.t. (Arm, Shape)*, Sophie is photographed with her hand on her hip, a ceramic shape nestled in the gap underneath her armpit.

In the exhibit, touch is foregrounded not just thematically but in terms of the intersection of techniques, the juxtaposition of works, the layering of objects and materials, and in handmade processes. The image that introduces this publication is Jenna’s *n.t. (green smoke, combined negatives smoke I & II)* which was created by layering two negatives in the enlarger, and later pouring dye into the developer tray. The resulting green print is a layering of two different images of smoke that drift and diffuse across the planes of the print. This image reflects Jenna and Sophie’s process of collaboration, which originated when the artists “met... touched... really looked at things.” Driven by friendship, conversation and physical contact, their separate practices merged into a third, shared mode of production. Communication became the vehicle and inspiration for the forms of the works. Like a smoke signal, these pieces draw attention to the need for intimate communication, and for contact and touch.

While smoke signals were useful as a way of communicating over long distances, they were also limited in their ability to express exactly what needed to be communicated. Alexis L-Grisé’s photographs deal with the limits of contemporary social and technological systems that claim to generate “connection.” In particular, his works explore how the tools and techniques associated with digital photography also distance viewers from communication and physical contact. Jenna’s work with chemicals and light in the darkroom evokes a different kind of touch than Alexis’s work, which is edited on a computer with Photoshop. Alexis’s images reference developments in technology, and, in doing so, reflect the changing ways in which we communicate with each other.

The remote control and the instruction manual are two contemporary tools devised to aid the digital photographer. Alexis’s *Timer Remote Controller TC-80N3* is a remote switch with the following timer control and exposure count control functions. It is very useful for time-lapse photography of blooming flowers, astrophotography, etc. *p.14-15* is one of a series of inkjet photographs of a remote-control camera manual printed in Japanese. The manual itself holds the promise of a step-by-step explanation, yet since it’s only a photograph, the manual cannot be flipped through and read. Furthermore, the text is unreadable to those who do not speak Japanese. In this work, the remote-control manual becomes a metaphor for

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1. Studio conversation with Jenna Westra and Sophie Grant, November 2014
communication systems like the HATS postcard, which attempt to aid communication but which often fall short in their ability to do so.

The telephone is another tool that both facilitates and enforces separation between people. Alexis's photograph 33 Thomas Street, 550 feet, 20 floors, an example of Brutalist architecture, construction completed in 1974, contains 4ESS switches used for telephony interexchange is an image of a windowless, concrete AT&T telephone exchange in New York City. Though 33 Thomas Street is the site of a complex network of long-distance phone conversations, the architecture of the building — like that of the MFA studios at 205 Hudson — evokes feelings of inaccessibility and detachment. The AT&T building symbolizes the increasing disconnect between verbal exchange and physical contact, and Alexis's image highlights the role that corporations play in enforcing this separation.

The work of Alexis, Jenna and Sophie call attention to the fact that while technologies may enable some forms of communication, they can never replace the intimacy and closeness of real physical contact. When I sat down to write this text I listened back through the recorded audio conversations that I had with the artists in their studios. I had one file for each studio visit, but there was also a two-second WMA file in the folder that I didn't recognize. I pressed play, heard a scuffling sound, and then a voice said "Yo, Katie." Alexis' verbal note, left on the audio recorder, was a small memento of our conversation and meeting. This file functions in a manner similar to the work of these artists: It is a reminder to recognize the importance of proximity and contact, and to look closely at the systems that enable and limit our access to communication. Collectively, these artists propose how we might take communication into our own hands and physically reach out and touch someone; which is to say, how we might look, speak and connect amongst ourselves.
Jenna Westra, A.Z. (Arm, Shade). Gelatin silver print. 43.9 x 29.6 cm. 2014

Jenna Westra, Open Face with Eyelash. Gelatin silver print. 35.6 x 27.4 cm. 2014

Jenna Westra, Glue Trap. Gelatin silver print. 59.1 x 48.8 cm. 2014
Jeana Westra. Spooky’s Shapes with Combined Negatives 1 of 4, 2 of 4, 3 of 4, and 4 of 4, gelatin silver prints, 40 x 37.6cm each, 2014.

Jeana Westra. Pig Board Pattern, unique gelatin silver photogram, 66.5 x 52cm, 2014.
Sophie Grant, Évas, book cloth, ceramic, glaze, pine, 51×13cm, 2014

Sophie Grant, Moon, Air, Sunrise (and detail), book cloth, ceramic, glaze, pine, 135×274cm, 2014
Sophie Grant, *Cézanne Bouquet*, book cloth, ceramic, glaze, pins, 56 x 64 cm, 2014

Sophie Grant, *Little Clock* (and detail), book cloth, ceramic, glaze, wood, nylon, indigo dye, pins, tape, staples, blush, 125 x 89 cm, 2014
Sophie Grant, House in a Wild Workshop (Tennis and Journeys, Air and Exercise) (and detail), book cloth, ceramic, glaze, stytra, leather, tape, pins, acrylic, graphite, oak, wall, mouse melon 173 x 190cm, 2014
Alexis Le Gribo, Taotaoan, Grid, minerals mined in Australia, purchased from the Netherlands, photographed in New York, as and oz. Inkjet on silver gelatin paper, 2014
Alexis L.-Grizé, Thomas Street, 500 feet, 29 floors, an example of Brutalist architecture.
Completed in 1973, contains 4000 offices used for telephone central exchange,
archival inkjet print, 2014.

Alexis L.-Grizé, Orange Juice, Michel Franchetti and Neun Cherokee 1974.
Jonathan Tibbs, Hands Across the Sea postcard, iPhone photo, 2015
"Promises of connection are always mediated — through screens, wires and earpieces — which is a far cry from real human touch."

HUNTED is a research project by graduate students in the Department of Art & Art History at Hunter College that explores both the history and future of their department. Taking the form of an ongoing series of experimental publications, Hunted draws on primary documents from Hunter's archives, interviews with students and faculty, and artworks from the school's studio program. Each edition of Hunted is devoted to a single year, or range of years, starting from the foundation of the College to the present day. Deeper than they are wide, each edition focuses on a single aspect of the department at a given moment in time. Taken together, they make up an intentionally irregular timeline whose intervals are marked by the rich details of anecdotes, styles, and personalities.
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Reach Out and Touch Someone
Katie Schwab