

# METRO PICTURES

Goodeve, Thyrsa Nichols. "Camille Henrot," *The Brooklyn Rail* (December 9, 2015).

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that beats the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things. And continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.

Michel Foucault, Preface, *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les choses*, 1966)

In an age when artists are pressured to present themselves as easily identifiable brand personas, thank the art world for offering up Camille Henrot, who perpetually undoes any easy expectation one might have of her work. Let's call it her drive to confound, in other words her interest in messing and musing with taxonomies and epistemological categories, whether they be scientific, historical, anthropological, museumological, or in the case of her current show, psychosocial. As the press release for her 2014 exhibition at the New Museum, *The Restless Earth*, put it, "... she follows intuitive research pursuits across disciplines and finds a variety of aesthetic and morphological links between disparate systems of knowledge."

In a pitch-perfect gesture of throwing the Chelsea gallery experience into a fantasy recreation of art addicts reaching out for help to Nicki Brand's (Deborah Harry) *Emotional Rescue Show* in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), we enter Metro Pictures to find a retro-futuristic phone bank of whacky trickster self-help phones hanging on all four walls. The collection of plastic, high-saturation green, yellow, aqua, and grey biomorphic appliances, fit with contrasting colored touch tone buttons, provokes a rush of pleasure, play, and the fetishistic need to touch so intensely, one isn't sure whether to tickle, pet, or actually pick up the phone receivers to see who's there. Crowds of Chelsea art-seekers, tethered by old-school curly-cue chords, hang on various handsets, their expressions suspended between bemused expectation and dark concentration.

Indeed, "who is there" and who are we as we take such a call, or, what is it to "be on the phone," is the question raised by this famous appliance in Avital Ronell's prescient and still-stupefying philosophical artist book, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, and Electronic Speech*, written way back in 1989, a fitting companion manual to Henrot's telephone self-help bank. Ronell calls the telephone "a storage tank of reserve of otherness." ...telephonic logic means here, as everywhere, that contact with the Other has been disrupted; but it also means that the break is never absolute. Being on the telephone will come to mean, therefore, that contact is never constant nor is the break clean.



We don't control the call, it is always calling us. "Thus we are inclined to place the telephone not so much at the origin of a stage of reflection but as a response, as that which is answering a call." So, of course, the unhelpful, dysfunctional self-help line is the perfect toy or pet to represent our current existential disconnection—our "hang ups" (we know where that comes from), or the promise of connection always on hold. After all, the familiar refrain of the old Verizon commercial, "Can you hear me now?" or rather, "Will you hear me?" has become the primal self-help motto one must untangle when intrapersonal communication is jammed.

And yet, Henrot's brand of emotional rescue phones don't even call us, we just pick them up, and as we do, we follow dutifully the directives of the voices on the line. (The texts are written collaboratively with writer Jacob Bromberg.) Dawg Shaming (2015) offers help with a disobedient dog but ends up abusing the very person who is seeking advice; Guilt Tripping (2015) pummels our ears with the poetic ranting of a complaining male (the voice is Willem Dafoe's)—"enough is enough!"—as we watch a tiny screen image of a spastic animatronic tiger toy slashing back and forth in seizure, the words on the phone synched to the movement of the tiger's mouth. In fact, a tiny screen is embedded in many of the phones, yet the visuals appear categorically unrelated, more contrapuntal, such as in Splendid Isolation (2015), where we watch the mesmerizing abstraction of ink drops swirling into patterns in a sink as we are asked to tell the voice such things as our life story in four minutes.

Quite affecting is Is He Cheating (2015), where, having called in because of suspecting infidelity, a vulnerable piece of crushed magenta cellophane paper retracts as if in pain as it slowly unfolds. Most sinister and yet timely is Bad Dad & Beyond (2015), where the male voice in the headset asks you to describe problems with your father as you watch a screen crawl index of instances of police brutality roll by. Software messages appear such as: "Data decryption error." The correlation between the public news feed and one's personal etiology hits a gut that is both personal and cut from the very bowels of contemporary America. When juxtaposed with Skypesnail (2015), across the room, where a scruffy overweight father and troubled son stare in mute absence of communication across the Skype interface, only to find communication in smoking cigarettes, blowing smoke-rings, and cancerous coughs, the effect is no longer so playful and fun, but utterly devastating.

In the gallery beyond, one phones into Maso Meet Maso (2015) to connect with legendary masochists Jean Jacques Rousseau or Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, staged within the context of Henrot's rollicking portrait gallery of gracefully rendered, painterly cartoon doodle hybrid portraits. Here Matisse's line meets with the intellectual genius of Saul Steinberg to display a teeming exegesis on the current/post/un/non/human condition. There's plaintive Sad Dad (2015), with the head of what could be a Newton Creek Egret, red penis leading, as he escorts his tiny wayward fledging along the beach. Or Warren B (2015), a horned (or is it a bow that is his forehead?), flaccid poseur he-man, all pink-wash flesh, trucking triumphantly and made ridiculous by his Steinberg fat lady shoes and miniscule hand weights. Or the monstrous Single Parent (2015), who stands next to his contrapposto saggy breasted, horsehead chain-smoking partner, looking down with a cool affectless gaze at the baby that erupts from his belly like the famous Alien offspring.

But at last, it is the curious curatorial hiccup that Henrot places so quietly amid her cartoon portraits that shatters, shakes, and confounds, demonstrating what makes her so good: a tiny bronze ring figure on a horse inspired by a Dogon sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, set on a pedestal in subtle proximity to the portraits. Its presence pulls us out of the space of contemporary art-reverie, breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, that constitute our very "selves" and this exhibition.