

METRO PICTURES

Barron, Michael. "Camille Henrot," *BombMagazine.org* (January 15, 2016).

BOMB



Camille Henrot, *Guilt Tripping*, 2015, three-dimensional nylon polyamide print with video and telephone components, 28 x 7 7/8 x 2 3/8 inches.

At the recent opening of Camille Henrot's solo show at Metro Pictures, I stood in a line, waiting to use a telephone. There were eight of them, all occupied by people with receivers cupped to their ears. But one in particular, stylized and colored like a Nickelodeon TV show prop, had caught my attention. Its occupant, a young woman whose bunned hair threatened to topple from her head, widened her eyes and furled her brow as she listened to the voice on the other end. Finally, she hung up and shot me a nonplussed look. "So weird..." she said. Then, as if proffering advice, she suggested, "I just pressed 'O' for every question. Maybe you can keep hitting '1' then come find me to compare answers." I picked up and heard a male voice who, friendly enough and definitely assertive, had me run a gamut of bizarre questions, such as, "If your dad has fathered more than nine children, press 'O' / If your father has eaten any of his children, press '1'." For a non-native English speaker like Henrot, who expatriated from Paris to New York in 2011, hotlines are a demonstration of how easily language can bewilder and command.

Being misunderstood has given Henrot an appreciation for the exotic. In her first work completed in New York, *Is It Possible to Be a Revolutionary and Still Like Flowers* (2012), Henrot created a series of installations inspired by Ikebana—the Japanese art of floral arrangement notorious for its opaque techniques—to explore a grand metaphor for translation and the limits of cultural understanding. Henrot's most famous work to date, *Grosse Fatigue*, is a thirteen-minute multimedia narration of Google images, Youtube videos, and a spoken word voice-over that explores the diversity of creation myths and underlines one of humanity's greatest gifts: its ability to tell stories.

On a Wednesday afternoon, I met with Henrot at her long, two-room suite on the Bowery. One room had been converted into an office, where a small team of assistants tended to administrative tasks. In the studio, paintings, sculptures, and a zoetrope were pushed to the side leaving a wide-open floor space. Henrot has a light and easy demeanor. She is quick to laugh, but also assured in her thoughts and well-spoken. Our recorded conversation is below



Camille Henrot, *The Birthday Letter*, 2015, watercolor on paper mounted to dibond, 76 3/8 x 59 3/8 inches.

Michael Barron This show of hotline phones is so linguistically rich and playful, yet the overriding theme appears to be an investigation into authority? How do you see a hotline as authoritative?

Camille Henrot I always felt like language was a way to dominate people, and especially as a non-English speaker, I often feel very powerless and vulnerable here in New York. I can tell when someone is trying to intimidate me, because they will ask me to repeat myself two or three times. It's the same when I try to use American hotlines like AT&T, the multiple choice just confuses me, especially if there is a word I do not understand. Of course, there isn't a French option, but there is a Spanish option. I speak a little Spanish, and even tried using these hotlines in Spanish to see if they were less frustrating, but no.

MB I didn't rise to the levels of fury I often feel with regular hotlines, including AT&T, but I did feel somewhat caught. I felt compelled to go through to the end, even though I didn't know what the end was or what I was trying to achieve.

CH Yeah, they are a bit hypnotic. You want to go to the end of the options. That's the way we—me and the poet Jacob Bromberg—wrote and structured them. The first one we wrote, "Hello & Thank You"—the one that was presented at the Lyon Biennial—was so massive, with a maze of multiple choices. Navigating the whole thing from beginning to end would've taken over four hours. At the time, I wasn't thinking so much about having a series of these hotlines. I just knew that I wanted to make a machine, and that it would resemble a phone. The one in Lyon looks more like a surrealist sculpture. There is a long, looping bar that ends in the shape of piano keys. Next to it is a number pad. A public announcement is speaking through a speaker shaped like a giant ear. It can actually be experienced collectively.

MB Which means you can walk away from it much easier, whereas putting a phone to your ear locks you in place.

CH Yes. After Lyon I realized that. I began making the smaller phones. I also wanted to integrate video. Intercoms were especially fascinating to me. That's why they all look more like intercoms than regular phones. That's also why they are all on the wall. I wanted that whole room to be perceived as a public space.

MB So it's still a social piece.



Camille Henrot, *Killing Time*, 2015, watercolor on paper mounted to dibond, 76 3/8 x 59 3/8 inches.

CH Right, because an aspect of the show is about society. It's about the problems we all face individually, and how we search for answers collectively, and what we are willing to sacrifice in order to get those answers. This ties into our relationship with authority, not just language, but anything that has authority, especially things we depend on like technology, government, police, health care, religion, lovers, pets. All these things inspired the hotline. They lead you to some extreme wonder about yourself and how other people think about you. In a way, it's our interior world being tortured by the outside world.

MB I found my choices to be almost uncomfortable. Like why did I press "0" to confirm that my dad had fathered more than nine children? Why did I press "1" to confirm that he ate his children? It left me feeling shameful.

CH I feel bad for you, but I also like that. The work is meant to be perverse. The interaction we have with hotlines are totally perverse and fucked up. It's the same online. Like if you suddenly discover you have a chronic pain in the stomach and you want a diagnosis, instead of going to see a doctor you go online, and you find a forum of people complaining about their stomachs. And if you dig deeper, you find out about people with terrible insomnia, or women willing to try anything to get pregnant, or people who think they have cancerous growths... It just gets so dark.

MB You get sucked into an accidental community, just by briefly investigating a problem online. Suddenly you're involved and know more about this world than you did even a moment ago.

CH Right, which will then tip off Google to your searches and suddenly your browser is invaded with ads for sleeping pills and fertility drugs!

MB Were these some of the things you discussed with Jacob when you were writing the scripts?

CH We worked on the scripts together, actually. I'm not a native speaker, so he wrote them out, but I did give him input. For example, for *Bad Dad & Beyond*, I suggested some forums and blogs where people went to complain about their fathers. We also looked into hysterical and mythological bad dads. And so we twisted all this material into questions like, "Has your father eaten your siblings?" But a lot of what you hear did come from Jacob. I compiled all the information, and then I gave him a few ideas of how to guide each hotline to resolutions. But Jacob wrote the script.

MB How did you and Jacob originally meet?

CH I was given financial support from India for a film called *The Strife of Love in a Dream*, which was later presented at the New Museum. It was a film I started working on in 2007. Jacob had been hired to translate my text. I liked what he did, so I began to hire him myself whenever I needed a translation. He was such a good translator and also such an easygoing person that we became friends. But it was really when I started working on *Grosse Fatigue*, when I wanted to include all the stories of creation embedded into one narrative as a spoken word-style voiceover, that I asked him to help me write it. I collected all the narratives, and highlighted aspects of them that I liked. Then we discussed how the whole structure would work. It was a fascinating conversation that we had on Skype. Like there are all these unique tales, and we had to figure out which would come first—does the sky come before the ground, does the turtle come before the bird?

MB And who read the text?

CH Akwete Orraca-Tette. He's an artist who works in a lot of different disciplines: he's in the band Dragons of Zynth. And he's also an actor and artist and poet. So yeah, many disciplines. The text was way longer originally. It was exhausting for Akwete, actually. He would do one take and his voice would just break because it was a lot of words that had to be spoken in rapid succession. I had asked that it be performed in a certain, inhabited way, like a sermon.

MB It's so much information given to you at once, so many cosmologies to process, that Akwete is really the lifeline of that piece, the guide.

CH Yes, I wanted to include something that people could hold on to. So he really is the guide.

MB So now Jacob has become one of your primary collaborators.

CH Absolutely. I think *Grosse Fatigue* and the hotlines would have turned out much differently without him.

MB Where did the idea of the "bad dad" come from? Does the father hold a malevolent symbolism for you?

CH I was interested in seeing how a father abuses his power to hurt when he's supposed to use it to protect. So *Bad Dad & Beyond* is an investigation into a figure who uses his authority in violent ways. I was also interested in assembling the rules and values of various authority figures, not just for fathers. So also the government, the police, men in general, and how they abuse their authority and force you to respect them. When I first started this project I was feeling very rebellious and I wanted to challenge all this authority, but I came to realize that this war that I was initiating was making me feel childish. I wanted to explore that feeling—that any criticism of a figure of authority can make you feel childish, and how you have to domesticate this idea, or go over this idea, to be able to express criticism of authority in a mature way, which includes channeling your anger to good use, seeing authority for its benefits, and demanding authority be used to serve you.

MB There's an interesting juxtaposition of anger and authority in the way these works are presented. The phones look like props from a children's television show and the paintings are done in simple strokes and pastel colors. Are you challenging your emotion to authority as well?

CH Yeah, I feel like the way for art to address social problems is for it to have many layers, clear and instructive, but also to challenge and be opinionated. Like burning a dollar bill to criticize the government might make some people applaud, but if it doesn't challenge your way of thinking, it ceases to be an artistic statement. So I want people to question their own beliefs, and force them to think outside of their ideologies.

MB Do you see that relating to the way Charlie Hebdo criticizes the sacred?

CH No. What I am doing is very different. Charlie Hebdo is a newspaper, so the audience is different. And they are very straightforward. So the fact that they are expressing opinions that are very literal is really not in the same artistic vein. We can discuss ethics, if you'd like, but maybe we shouldn't go there. As an artist you don't have to commit to an opinion that is so clear that it convinces people. Actually I think it's more interesting to have an attitude that is very different from a newspaper. You can be more complex, and more unclear, and people can't easily wrap their head around it; you don't have to repeat the media's discourse. I like to create a situation where people have to independently interpret the information they're given.



Installation view of *Camille Henrot*, 2015, Metro Pictures, New York

MB I want to talk about your watercolors. I'd read that after you made *Grosse Fatigue* you had a desire to return to painting.

CH (laughter) When did I say that? I don't remember.

MB It was in another interview. You said something along the line of how you envied painters for their freedom to create, that they didn't have to acquire complex materials or ask permission to use resources. Did these watercolors emerge from that envy?

CH Yeah, maybe. I think I was exhausted after doing *Grosse Fatigue*, which was really complicated to put together. I had to get a lot of institutional permission to do it.

MB Even though you were an artist-in-residence with the Smithsonian?

CH Getting permission from the Smithsonian was a very traumatizing experience for me. I mean, you've probably gathered that I'm very anti-corporate and anti-bureaucratic. (laughter) So I found the whole process of asking for permission, of waiting of for answers... all going back and forth with so many people... what made it all worse was that I had this big deadline for the Venice Biennale. My fellowship was in February and March, and the Biennale was in June! So I had to conduct research, get permissions, and film, all in a time frame of three months.

MB Did you sleep?

CH (laughter) No, that's why it's called *Grosse Fatigue*.

MB Both *Grosse Fatigue* and the hotlines involve narration. Are you interested in telling stories with your work?

CH I've always been interested in narration. My very first film was developed from the idea of making a commercial movie set entirely in a bedroom or kitchen. What developed was *Room Movies*: three short pieces where I changed the narratives of preexisting films—like changing a porno to a love story, or a destroying the hero in an adventure film—by drawing on the film roll. I did end up making the whole thing in my bedroom. Narratives also connect easily to human emotions, like desire or fear. Sometimes narrating an emotion is the best way to deal with it.

MB Are you influenced by literature?

CH Yes, in fact I envy literature's ability to connect with people emotionally, people like myself. (laughter) Reading is a great pleasure for me, so yes, I do take inspiration from books. Actually, the hotlines were inspired by my emotional experience of reading *Ulysses*. I first felt rejected by its complexity, but I was also feeling excited and challenged to forge ahead. So I was going back and forth between rejection and passion. Finally I decided to read it very slowly. I spent a whole summer reading it, trying to understand everything that Joyce was writing about. I even read supplementary material about *Ulysses*. It was an obsessive quest but with a beautiful ending—I was crying when I finished the last chapter.

MB How did *Ulysses* inspire the hotlines?

CH Some of the characters inspired the script. In the the masochistic hotline, for instance, there are references to both "Stephen" and "Leopold."

MB I love that little detail. Speaking of inspiration, I'm curious about your relationship to technology. Do you intentionally think of things like phones and Google images as being part of the discourse on your work?

CH It's true that I use technology, but it's never really the topic I'm trying to address. It's more about human experience, and it's really difficult to talk about human experience outside of technology. I only interact with machines as a human being because, like everyone else, I use them to connect with the rest of the world. Like the telephone—that's a primary tool in communication. Of course, it can also be used invasively—that's what my hotline, *Easy Cheating*, is about.

MB As a growing public figure in the art world, do you find it hard to take a break from communicating with people?

CH I feel the division between the interior/exterior growing. I think the inside world is being more and more invaded by the outside world. Everything, even your private life, feels exposed.

MB The outside world is the ultimate authority.

CH Yeah, I think our collective superego is growing more and more oppressive, and technology has become the vessel for the superego. It's only by dropping out of the collective superego that you regain connection with your own private desires. I was very intrigued by something that the director of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, said: "If there's something you don't want people to see on Facebook, maybe you shouldn't do it."

MB It doesn't sound like he believes in private desires.

CH It was a total negation of the idea of privacy! It was like saying things that are intimate have no value and that they are bad. It was a moral judgment. That you should be ashamed of immoral and private things.

MB Facebook derives its power from its ability to pass judgment. You "like" things. You used to be able to say that "maybe" you would attend an event.

CH That's why I think it's nothing but a big superego. It destroys the ability for individuals to be happy on a deeper level. I think it also stymies people's ability to be creative and autonomous.

MB It worries me how distracted the human race is becoming.

CH I have hope. Because I think that everyone feels the need to disconnect at some point. I'm optimistic. I believe we all want to defend our individuality and our interior world. The interior world will win!