I’m good, you?

Amy Cunningham
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Introduction:

Impatiently buzzing in our pockets, or fused to our palms, exists a mobile device capable of transmitting all of our idiocies; preferably in 140 characters or less. We have been gifted with unprecedented modes of communication unlike any generation before us. Thanks to text messaging, we now have the ability to facilitate needless, prolonged conversations without interrupting our daily tasks. We can share a trivial thought with hundreds of friends, instantaneously. We can post images, reblog funny anecdotes, and disseminate our comments and beliefs across a variety of platforms with a negligible amount of effort and time. In today’s technologically overwhelmed world, there are ever increasing modalities in which to contact and communicate with one another, and to share information throughout cyberspace. With so much capacity for conversation, why then, are our interactions so futile? We say so much, and yet we say nothing at all.

My work illustrates the absurd truth. Our current attempts at meaningful communication are deplorable. Besides running our mouths and fingers with hollow words, we also have the tendency to entirely avoid sincere relationships not only with others, but also with ourselves. Our desire for connection, yet our aversion to form significant relations, provokes my work. By utilizing deadpan and satirical humor, I am able to more easily invite the viewer into this undesirable subject matter: avoidance.

My thesis exhibition, *I'm good, you?*, facilitates multiple facets of audience interaction by incorporating foam sculptures, manipulated found objects, motion activated sculptures, and a responsive sound installation. This work both literally and
metaphorically speaks to the viewer, and to the presently archaic notion of meaningful face to face interactions.

**The Pseudo-Modern:**

According to Dr Alan Kirby, British cultural critic, the vapid cultural exchanges we are experiencing are due to the death of postmodernism, and the rise of what he refers to as “pseudo-modernism”. Rather than observing the spectacle, as was postmodernism, the viewer of pseudo-modernism is now a part of the creation of the commodity. “By definition, pseudo-modern cultural products cannot and do not exist unless the individual intervenes physically in them” (Kirby). Kirby uses reality television, in which viewers must phone in to vote contestants off of the show as an example of this phenomenon. In this instance, the viewers are given a sense of control in a way that they have never before experienced, and this sensation is materializing across many new modalities. The internet provides the user with a similar illusion of control, and disregard for the significance of authorship:

Its central act is that of the individual clicking on his/her mouse to move through pages in a way which cannot be duplicated, inventing a pathway through cultural products which has never existed before and never will again. This is a far more intense engagement with the cultural process than anything literature can offer, and gives the undeniable sense of the individual controlling, managing, running, making up his/her involvement with the cultural product (Kirby).

Kirby states that pseudo-modern media, by nature, is temporary and rapidly obsolescent, and he does not hesitate to criticize:

Non-reproducible and evanescent, pseudo-modernism is thus also amnesiac: these are cultural actions in the present moment with no sense of either past or
future. The cultural products of pseudo-modernism are also exceptionally banal, as I’ve hinted...Much text messaging and emailing is vapid in comparison with what people of all education levels used to put into letters. A triteness, a shallowness dominates all. The pseudo-modern era, at least so far, is a cultural desert (Kirby).

My own personal distaste for this “cultural desert” fuels my research. My frustration compels me to constantly gathering information via the internet, word of mouth, and personal experiences regarding the absurdities of daily human life. Because of the rapidly changing cultural landscape, I find the internet to be the most suitable tool for keeping up to date on the communicative developments, and devolutions, of our time.

Self-Editing:

The new forms of technology used to produce the cultural products of the pseudo-modern world do not only effect mass media. Sherry Turkle, Professor of Social Studies and Science of Technology at MIT, believes that we have “Sacrificed conversation for mere connection...in the silence of connection, people are comforted by being in touch with a lot of people - carefully kept at bay” (Turkle). She states that we are able to keep others at a carefully controlled distance, and therefore can manipulate our facade to achieve our desired effect. “Texting and e-mailing and posting let us present the self we want to be. This means we can edit. And if we wish to, we can delete” (Turkle).

Social media is an obvious facilitator of self-editing. We have the ability to carefully curate our digital identities, and in some cases, our second lives. We can share the photos and updates that give us the appearance we strive for, and in addition,
we can delete the items that do not nourish our constructed identity. Dr Larry Rosen likens this use of social media to Professor Erving Goffman’s notion that we are constantly monitoring the presentation of ourselves and adjusting accordingly, so that we always appear our best to all people (Rosen 34). This is made incredibly easy with the anonymity that digital media provides. Not only does hiding behind screens allow for unseen editing, they can prove to be valuable for those reluctant to share in person (Rosen 128), and gives more time to choose the right words and craft the perfect responses.

Rosen breaks down e-communications into five features that differ from the ways we communicate face to face. The third and fourth features are: “3. They make us feel as though we are anonymous since nobody can see us. 4. They exploit the fact that any communication without physical cues allows us to feel unencumbered and unconcerned about the impact we are having on the human being receiving our message” (Rosen 9). I would argue that as we connect digitally, we become further distanced from ourselves and others. Online we can live in a false reality. We can communicate with others without care for the effect of our words, and we can hide behind screens to avoid our lives in the real world.

**Extended Avoidance:**

Turkle believes that our tiny interactions through social media and texting, do not even begin to substitute what is gained from a face to face conversation. Conversation is where you learn to understand one another, and requires patience and listening. Text messaging is more fast paced, and we adjust our content to satisfy this. Turkle states
that “As we ramp up the volume and velocity of online connections, we start to expect faster answers. To get these, we ask one another simpler questions; we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters” (Turkle). However, it is not just our conversations with others that is suffering: she states that our ability to self-reflect is a skill learned by communicating with others (Turkle), meaning that we have dumbed down our ability to communicate with ourselves, as well.

In 1967, Marshall McLuhan, a pioneer of media studies, coined the phrase “the medium is the message”, meaning that the method through which the message is transmitted contains the content, rather than the message itself (McLuhan 19). He goes on to say that the function of the media was the extension of man: the radio extends our hearing, our clothing our skin, etc (McLuhan 4). This notion compels me to question this expansion of man in today's world. If our technological communication is serving as extensions of ourselves, is this the root of the pseudo-modern cultural desert that Alan Kirby condemns? Is the vacuum in which we choose to reside; the place where self-connection is avoided and self-reflection unachievable, the place from which we extend ourselves? I suspect it is. We can only extend that of which we are, so ultimately, our avoidance and shallow connections are what is projected.

The title of the show, I'm good, you?, stems from my personal experience with this deep rooted avoidance. Despite my own disapproval, I often find myself reciting some version of “I'm good, you?” when asked how I am doing. I have found this to be quite commonplace amongst others as well, and it is as if this response has become a conversational reflex. It does not matter how we are actually doing, we conceal the truth, both from ourselves, and others, by uttering “I'm good, you?”, without hesitation.
This response is easily digestible and agreeable; it is not messy. It does not delve into anything to deep or potentially traumatic for the person to whom you are speaking. It smooths over anything troubling, and you are left with a conversation that is easily navigated. It “plays by the rules”, so to speak. Peculiarly enough, despite this dodging of certain aspects of ourselves and others, we still continually seek some form of connection, even if it does not come from another human being.

**Automated Assistance:**

A high school sophomore confided in Sherry Turkle that “he wishes he could talk to an artificial intelligence program instead of his dad about dating; he says that A.I. would have so much more in its database (Turkle).” As our interactions with humans crumble, we seek for alternatives. We long for a way for our voices and feelings to be heard. The brutal irony is, of course, that the human presence can be simulated, but never duplicated.

*We Need To Talk* is a responsive sound installation that encourages up to five individuals to congregate around a pentagonal kiosk. Rather than being able to engage in conversation with one another, the viewers are forced to interact with five emotionless mannequin heads, situated at eye level. The kiosk is all white, with battered white plastic mannequin heads; each flaw a failed attempt at presenting a notion of individuality and personification. Below each head, a blue LED lighted button glows, enticing the viewer to inquire. When a button is pressed, an automated woman’s voice, similar to that of Apple’s SIRI, teaches you a horrendous lesson. Each of the five sides of the kiosk addresses a different lesson in successful communication: Effective
Conversation, Emotions and Expressions, Gesture and Body Language, Tone and Inflection, and Avoidance. The information is absurd, utterly useless, and somewhat preposterous, but what does one expect when attempting to learn the art of human communication from an artificial being?

This piece serves to mock our gravitation towards the artificial to satisfy our most human needs, as well as exploit our disingenuous interactions with one another. The voice intends to be helpful, but the information presented is flawed. I wrote the content of each lesson by compiling a combination of personal experience and absurd guides to communication found online. Through the use of satire, the piece brings attention to our detrimental attempts at relationships, while physically obstructing the viewers’ potential to interact with one another; further perpetuating the problem.

Wasteful Babble:

What would happen if our ludicrous conversations suddenly became tangible? In two works, Small Talk (tl;dr), and Lol same., I’ve exploited the inherent wastefulness of paper towels by employing them as a palpable representation of our meaningless conversations. Small Talk (tl;dr), which stands for “too long; didn’t read,” is comprised of two paper towel dispensers hanging in the corner of the gallery. Janitorial, brown paper towels extend from each dispenser down on to the floor, where they tangle into a heaping pile. A typed conversation is printed onto the paper line by line, mimicking a conversation two might have through texting or a face to face interaction. The exchange is useless: nothing of any substance is shared. Ultimately, the piece mocks our propensity for pointless conversation, and prolonged, seemingly obligatory small
talk. The mound of paper on the ground, reminiscent of unkept public restrooms, serves as a visual reminder of the wastefulness of these interactions, and our gravitation towards talking just to talk without saying anything of real significance.

*Lol same.* is a responsive kinetic work that also utilizes a conversation between two paper towel dispensers. Hanging alongside one another, the two dispensers wait idly until activated by the viewers’ presence. A motion detector triggers small servo motors hidden inside of the dispensers to begin propelling a printed conversation in real time. One line of text is spit out at a time, with pauses in between, alluding to the lag in response time that occurs in between text messages.

The conversation reads as follows:

Hey!
Hey.
How are you?
I’m good, you?
Good.
What’s up?
Just hanging. You?
Lol, same.

At the conclusion, both sides of the conversation wind back up, ready to be activated again by the next viewer. This creates an endless cycle of repetitive uselessness, much like our compulsory, daily salutations. By personifying paper towel dispensers, I am able to further mock human nature by likening us to banal devices with limited functionality.
Impeded Gesture:

The technological screens placed between us and our lack of effort are not the only things potentially inhibiting us. There is much debate as to whether or not emojis, the “small digital images or icons used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication” (Oxford “Emoji”), are hindering our abilities. Computer scientist Scott E. Fahlman used the first emoticon in 1982 as a way for him and fellow scientists to indicate posts that were not meant to be taken seriously on an early version of an online message board (Gage). Emoticons are sideways faces that are created through symbols on the keyboard, such as the smiley face created from a colon, hyphen and parenthesis :-). These faces eventually evolved into the emoji images we recognize today, which originated in Japan. They became more popular in other areas of the world around 2011, when Apple included an emoji keyboard, readily available to everyone, on their latest version of the iPhone (Sternbergh). Soon after, data engineer Fred Benson published an emoji translation of Herman Melville’s classic *Moby Dick* (Shea). His book, titled *Emoji Dick*, contains each of Melville’s original sentences painstakingly transformed into lines of emoji, with the help of Amazon’s online Mechanical Turk, which pays small sums for simple online tasks (Shea). This absurdity was just the beginning. Only a few years later, emojis are now wildly popular. In 2015, Oxford Dictionaries announced emoji as their “Word of the Year” (Steinmetz), and as of February 2016, about 30,000 emojis are used each minute (Kurzius & Smith).

Numerous popular news sites post articles and blogs debating whether or not these fun little images are helping or destroying us. Many would argue that these cute
symbols representing facial expressions, hand gestures, food, animals, flags and more, are harmless, and help us to portray our emotions better when we are not face to face. Others have stated things such as: “Dumb used to be an accident. Now it’s a goal. No matter how complicated something might be, someone is reducing it to a tiny cartoon” (Smith). In my opinion, although they can be fun, emojis help to perpetuate our inabilities to speak to one another and express our emotions effectively. They can serve as another form of avoidance that may be further hindering us.

There are a countless number of websites dedicated to emoji. Emojitracker.com provides a “visualization of all emoji symbols used on Twitter”, which is updated in real time (Rothenberg). The result is an overwhelming grid of ever changing numbers beside each attributed icon, that really helps to show the magnitude of emoji use. My personal favorite of these ridiculous websites is Emojipedia.org. Reminiscent of Wikipedia, it is the official emoji search engine. It includes the most common definitions and historical information for every emoji.

My piece, *Emojipedia*, cites the definitions of emoji hand gestures from the Emojipedia.org website. The piece consists of a welded steel table, with a crisp white top. On the white surface, there are five white emoji hand sculptures, each with a corresponding plaque. I chose to make everything white to provide a cohesive sterility throughout the work. In addition, I purposefully chose hand gestures that should be easily recognizable in our physical world, such as a thumbs up, or a peace sign, which have existed long before emoji. The sculptures are made of carved and coated expanded Polystyrene foam; a process I am enchanted by. I am drawn to the way coated foam can fool the viewer. The smooth, sanded finish of a water-based product
called Foamcoat, creates a surface evocative of sugary fondant. I utilize the distinct synthetic quality of the foam and the coating to my advantage. I have created the emoji hand gestures from Apple’s current rendition of the symbols, however, I have modified them to exist in our tangible, three dimensional world. I enjoy the process of transforming a digital, two dimensional image into a physical form. Rather than merely existing on screen, these hand gestures now exist alongside our actual hands, muddling what is reality and what is mockery. Ultimately, the piece is meant to be absurd and ironic. The plaques, used to memorialize and inform, simply describe an already understood gesture, while the corresponding humanoid hand provides demonstration. The piece is inspired by interactive museum displays, and is meant to give the appearance that it will be informative, although it really is not.

**Unfamiliar Anxiety:**

The final piece of my exhibition, *Typing Awareness Indicator*, is another coated foam sculpture. On certain platforms, a speech bubble with an ellipses inside will appear on screen to inform you of when a friend is typing to you. This bubble is called the Typing Awareness Indicator, and although it does not exist in “real life”, it can cause a lot of real anxiety (Bennett). Writer Maryam Abolfazli describes the indicator as “quite possibly the most important source of eternal hope and ultimate letdown in our daily lives...It’s the modern-day version of watching paint dry, except you might be broken up with by the time the dots deliver” (Bennett).

As we continually shy away from face to face conversation, we attempt to have important conversations over digital platforms that obstruct our ability to fully
communicate. For example, rather than being able to read someone’s body language, you are forced to agonizingly wait for a reply, by watching the ellipses on your screen. In some cases, if someone keeps stopping and starting the draft of their message, the ellipses bubble will keep popping up and disappearing, creating even more unease (Bennett).

Similar to that of the emoji hands, I was curious what would happen if I turned this digital icon into a tangible object. While waiting for an important response, I have experienced my own annoyance with this Typing Awareness Indicator, and it is absurd to me that a tiny digital image can cause so much frustration and anxiety. Using coated foam, I enlarged the indicator to 33 x 18 inches and hung it at eye level. It is only about 2 inches thick; precariously existing in both a two-dimensional and three-dimensional world. I finished the bubble in a high gloss, so that it would still imply the sheen of a digital screen. I find the transformation from the digital to the physical world fascinating, and ultimately seek to blur the lines between the two. I see this as a visual representation of the confusion that is occurring within our relationships, particularly our increasing inability to manage ourselves both physically and digitally.

Conclusion:

I believe that our ability to form and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships is deteriorating more rapidly than we think. A sixteen year old boy who relies solely on texting told Sherry Turkle: “Someday, someday but certainly not now, I’d like to learn how to have a conversation” (Turkle). Although I applaud this boy’s honesty, it is statements such as this that are truly frightening. As we continue further into today’s
pseudo-modern wasteland, I believe that our ability to seek balance will become more and more difficult, and maybe even lost entirely. The media created today is spawned from yesterday’s vapidness; a never-ending cycle of decay. The extension of man begins from the avoidance of self-reflection and true connection. We fabricate ourselves online: carefully curating false identities from which we expand out into the world. We use tiny cartoon images to communicate rather than spend quality time with one another. Further, we have become so engrossed in these new modalities, such as stressing over ellipsis bubbles, that we lose sight of reality and what is truly important.

My thesis exhibition serves as a contemporary visual and interactive representation of this deterioration. My decisions to keep the work neutral in color and crisp in presentation creates an aesthetic that feels sterile and devoid of human presence. Through the use of satire, I have invited viewers into this strange environment to experience my perspective of today’s current state of communication. Ultimately, my desire is that through laughing at ourselves, we will acknowledge our avoidance, and begin working towards regaining healthy connections with ourselves and with others.
Bibliography


We Need To Talk. Sound, mannequins, microcontrollers, metal push buttons, MDF, latex paint. 2016.
We Need To Talk (details). 2016.
Small Talk (tl;dr) (detail). 2016.
*Emojipedia.* Expanded polystyrene foam, foamcoat, joint compound, plexiglass, steel, MDF, spray paint. 2016.
Victory Hand
Most commonly known as a peace sign.
Two fingers held up on one hand
making a V sign.

Also Known As:
Air Quotes Emoji
Peace Emoji

I’m good, you?

Amy Cunningham
MFA Thesis Exhibition

Opening Reception
Friday May 6th, 2016 from 5-7 pm

Exhibition Hours
May 6th - 10th
11am - 5pm

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY 12561

amyleighcunningham.com
amy.leigh.cunningham@gmail.com

Showcard (back)
Artist Statement:

I am enchanted by the absurd and the asinine. My work inhabits the precarious space forged between reality and mockery; this is the intersection from which I create. Utilizing a blend of the real and the satirical, I am able to create work that distorts the viewer’s perception by blurring the distinction between what is factual and what is parody. I create absurd, yet relatable situations that invite the viewer in for a chuckle, but also promote deeper self-reflection. I am intrigued by the trivial aspects of human life. Personal observations within the cultural and social influences of the modern world spark my research. My current body of work creates an experiential representation of the evaded issues of modern communication.

I prefer to use a variety of methods and media. I have used styrofoam to transform virtual phenomena into tangible forms, sound to charm yet brainwash, manipulated found objects for familiarity but disturbance, and installation to integrate these multi-faceted experiences.

Biography:

Amy received her Bachelors degree in Sculpture and Drawing/Painting from Ramapo College of New Jersey, where she worked as a Gallery Assistant and became involved with the cast iron community. While at Ramapo, she also received the Award for Outstanding Academic Achievement in the Visual Arts program, as well as “Best in Show” for her Senior Thesis exhibition. Subsequently, she spent time as a work-study artist for Sculpture Trails Outdoor Museum, in Solsberry Indiana. She aided in the foundry and museum operations, as well as produced a sculpture that is on display at
the museum. Amy has recently completed her MFA in Sculpture at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where she has taught Introduction to Sculpture courses for undergraduates. She has worked as a studio and project assistant for multiple accomplished artists, and has shown her own work in a variety of venues. Her mixed media sculptural work examines the absurdity of human nature. Through the use of humor, her artwork provokes the viewer to reconsider this asinine way of life. Amy currently lives and works in the Hudson Valley of New York.