

# Ping! The Reflectively Nostalgic Telephone Call

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The inspiration for the [ *Fone* ] series derives from a 12 x 18 cm collage. Two elements dominate the tiny rectangle: a white rotary phone and, below it, a similar sized clipping of the word “ping,” framed by a green strip on the left and a red strip on the right. Jonna Pedersen made this work for Artmoney, a concept to have artworks in a single compact format serve as a global alternative currency. In Pedersen’s collage, the white rotary phone with its black digits is stylized, almost iconographic, while the word “ping” reminds us of the technology’s close link to alarm systems like doorbells and fire alarms, and of the powerful demand for action and response that a ringing landline phone represents. Pedersen’s Artmoney collage heralds two themes that would later be central to the works in the [ *Fone* ] series: communication technologies as an aesthetic form and the role they play in the social arena.

There is a striking correlation between Pedersen’s [ *Fone* ] series and a milestone in the history of the telephone: after decades of increasingly inexpensive landline phones and calling rates, and later the spread of mobiles and smartphones, phones today are inexpensive and ubiquitous. However, around 2017, when the phone call seemed to reign supreme as a channel of everyday communication, the number of calls actually declined for the first time in the history of the telephone.

A short version of the long history of the telephone may serve to illustrate the extent of this disruption. The telephone was invented and first used for private, long-distance calls in the late nineteenth century, though it was originally marketed as a business technology and a competitor of the telegraph because it made it easy to place orders and make deals. Expensive to purchase and use, telephones at first were mainly owned by the upper classes and people in business. But over the course of the 20th century, as telephones became cheaper, they penetrated to all levels of society, and their importance, including as a social tool, gradually grew. The telephone ended up replacing not only the telegraph but also the written letter as our preferred instant and interactive means of conveying news and keeping in touch.

From day one, the telephone was subject to criticism. In particular, there was concern that the switch from text to speech, as phone calls replaced letters, would lead to superficial and rash communication. For many years after World War II, the Danish telephone network had limited capacity. To avoid big bills and overloading the system with frivolous chatter, it was a common rule in Danish homes that the telephone was for short messages. But that did little to stem its popularity. By the late 1960s, the telephone had become an indispensable technology in every home. More rooms, even kids’ and teens’ bedrooms, were equipped with sockets and their own phone sets. In the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, with the arrival of mobile phones, the telephone increasingly morphed from a shared household technology to a channel of private conversation with friends and family, portable and customizable according to the owner’s desires.

With mobile technology, however, the telephone also gradually acquired functions that competed with conversation – texting, music, picture messages and the internet.

The works in the [ *Fone* ] series were painted between 2018 and 2020. In a time of disruption, as we take stock of the telephone as an everyday conversation technology, we are seeing the outlines of the technologies that will partly or entirely replace it in the future: e-mail, texts, group chats, social media and, not least, video calls, whose popularity has grown dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic. The social space in which, out of need or interest, we reach out to each other across distances, framed by changing communication technologies, is what interests Pedersen.

I am a scholar of the history of technology. Since 2015, I have particularly studied the cultural history of telephony. Jonna Pedersen contacted me after reading a newspaper article I wrote in 2018 on the ramifications of decreasing phone-call frequency. Since then, we have met several times and continued a conversation based on our shared interest in the changing role of the telephone in interpersonal relationships. Viewed through the lens of technology history, Pedersen's art is an important contribution to the new narrative of the phone call that is being written today in light of the shrinking relevance of the telephone. It is a modern narrative, as well, replacing past reservations about the superficiality of the phone call with an appreciation for the qualities of verbal exchange.

In the [ *Fone* ] series, the telephone is an often nostalgic and wistful representation of forms denoting a time when phone calls were key. Moreover, the artist's universe is funny and counterfactual, showing landline phones as they never really were. Into the 1980s, Danish landline phones were available in a very limited selection of models in carefully regulated shades, generally black and gray. [ *Fone* ], on the contrary, features graphically compelling rotary phones and individual handsets in green, dark blue, pink, claret, yellow and turquoise. The phones in the paintings are emancipated aesthetic icons, retrospectively looking much more whimsical and colorful than telephone companies in the heyday of phone calls would ever have allowed.

Pedersen's play with shapes and colors from the past can best be described by "reflective nostalgia," a term introduced by the cultural theorist Svetlana Boym (Boym, 2001). Unlike Boym's companion term "restorative nostalgia," reflective nostalgia does not seek to rediscover and recreate a lost past. Instead, it points to the elusive now by depicting details of an irretrievably lost historical and individual past. The reflective nostalgia of Pedersen's works is ripe with longing for lost moments where the phone call was an inevitable link between people. But this is not manifested as reverent iconography or a fixation on the past. Instead, the ground is cleared for idiosyncratic, colorful technologies, irony and humor that never contradict the emotional memories that the series also embraces.

The [ *Fone* ] works reference other forms of communication, as well. Pedersen likes to play with forms of communication technology, while still referring to familiar figures. *2 zones* (2019) shows a classic stamp of Queen Margrethe and the three lions symbolizing the union of Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Expanding on the idea, the stamp in *Danmark 50 øre* (2020) contains the artist's own design, a white landline handset outlined on a blue background, the same symbol that is used to denote phone calls on today's less recognizable, rectangular

smartphones. In works like *Let's Break Up* (2020) and *Pull Yourself Together* (2020), rectangular text-message balloons relay words of breaking up or concern.

Indicating a shift in our understanding of the telephone as an everyday technology, the [ *Fone* ] series puts the telephone in the place that used to be occupied by the letter as an authentic and respectful way of communicating. Pedersen says she hopes these works will “make the viewer contemplate the ways in which we communicate with each other, and whether they are the most appropriate ones.” An image like the one in *Muscle Churc* (2018), showing Grandma Duck on the phone with Daisy Duck, who asks her how she is doing, reminds us that the telephone is a technology of care, and that women – despite being shamed for yakking on the phone – have been instrumental in driving the important social function of the telephone today. Highlighting the contrast to alternative technologies like text messages, Pedersen’s art reflects on the losses that could potentially arise from the disruption we are witnessing today, when communication is moving from phone calls to messages, and difficult statements and concerned inquiries become short texts.

The [ *Fone* ] series insists on keeping our attention on the physical manifestations of how we choose to communicate – postage stamps, landline phones, text messages. In this insistence, we recognize art’s ability to translate both great universal and small individual experiences of the passage of time and what is inexorably lost to the past: the physical communication infrastructure that is becoming outdated and replaced, and the specific routines of long conversations on landline phones that are being replaced by short messages. Jonna Pedersen’s works aspire not to return us to an ideal past but to create a reflective nostalgic space with room to recall what we have left behind. In that space, the contrast between past and present can remind us of the delicate importance of the moment.

#### Bibliography:

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic, 2001