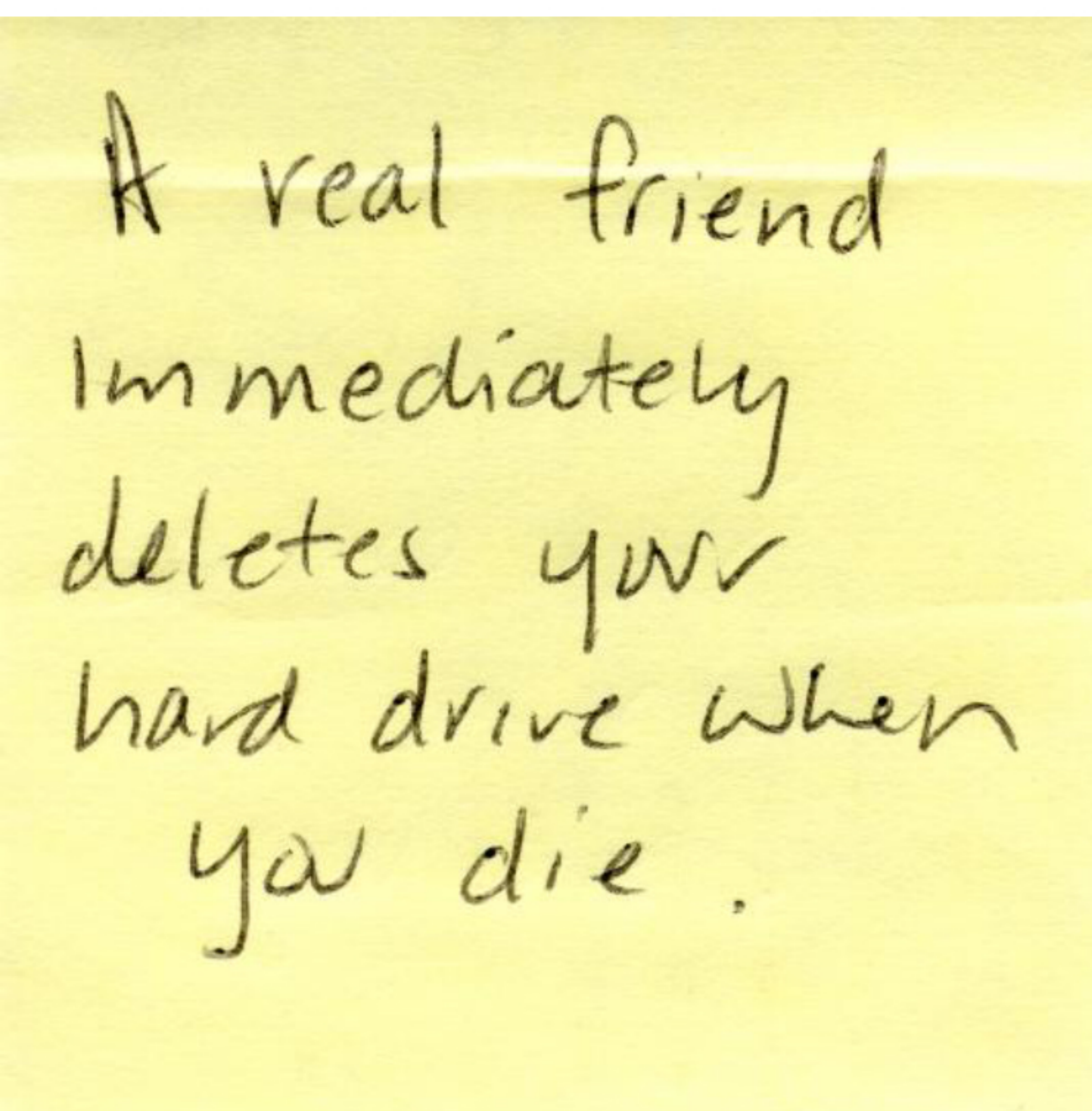


How Authentic Is a Facebook Friend?

A photographer set out to meet all of her Facebook “friends” IRL and wound up rethinking friendship altogether.

By Rebecca Bates (@re.beccabates). Photography by Tanja Hollander and courtesy of Mass MoCA

How Many Facebook Friends Is Too Many?



Artist Tanja Hollander asks viewers to answer the question “What is a real friend?” on a Post-it.

I have 795 Facebook friends. Some have been in my friend roster since the summer of 2005, when the platform was still in its infancy and incoming college students added one another with wild abandon and a hope edging into naïveté. Some are people I see regularly. Some I’ve met once, at parties or readings or weddings.

Still others I’ve never met; we’ve connected somehow, and now we share digital social circles and the occasional timeline banter. Which ultimately leads me to wonder, who the hell are these people?

What Would Happen If You Met All Your Internet Friends?



Tanja Hollander, “James Pettengill, Hinsdale, New Hampshire,” 2014.

What would it mean to try to turn an internet friendship into something that existed in physical spaces? In other words, what would it be like to meet every one of your Facebook friends? These are questions artist Tanja Hollander attempted to answer when she began the project *Are You Really My Friend?*, debuting in its entirety at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art on February 18.

“It started New Year’s Eve of 2010,” Hollander explains. “I was home alone, writing to a friend who was deployed in Afghanistan and at the same time instant messaging a friend working on a film in Jakarta. It was crazy that I was on Facebook on New Year’s Eve, but awesome at the same time, that I was connecting to somebody so far away. I spent the next couple of months thinking about how Facebook has changed friendship. Although there are all these images on Facebook, is friendship something that is photographable?”

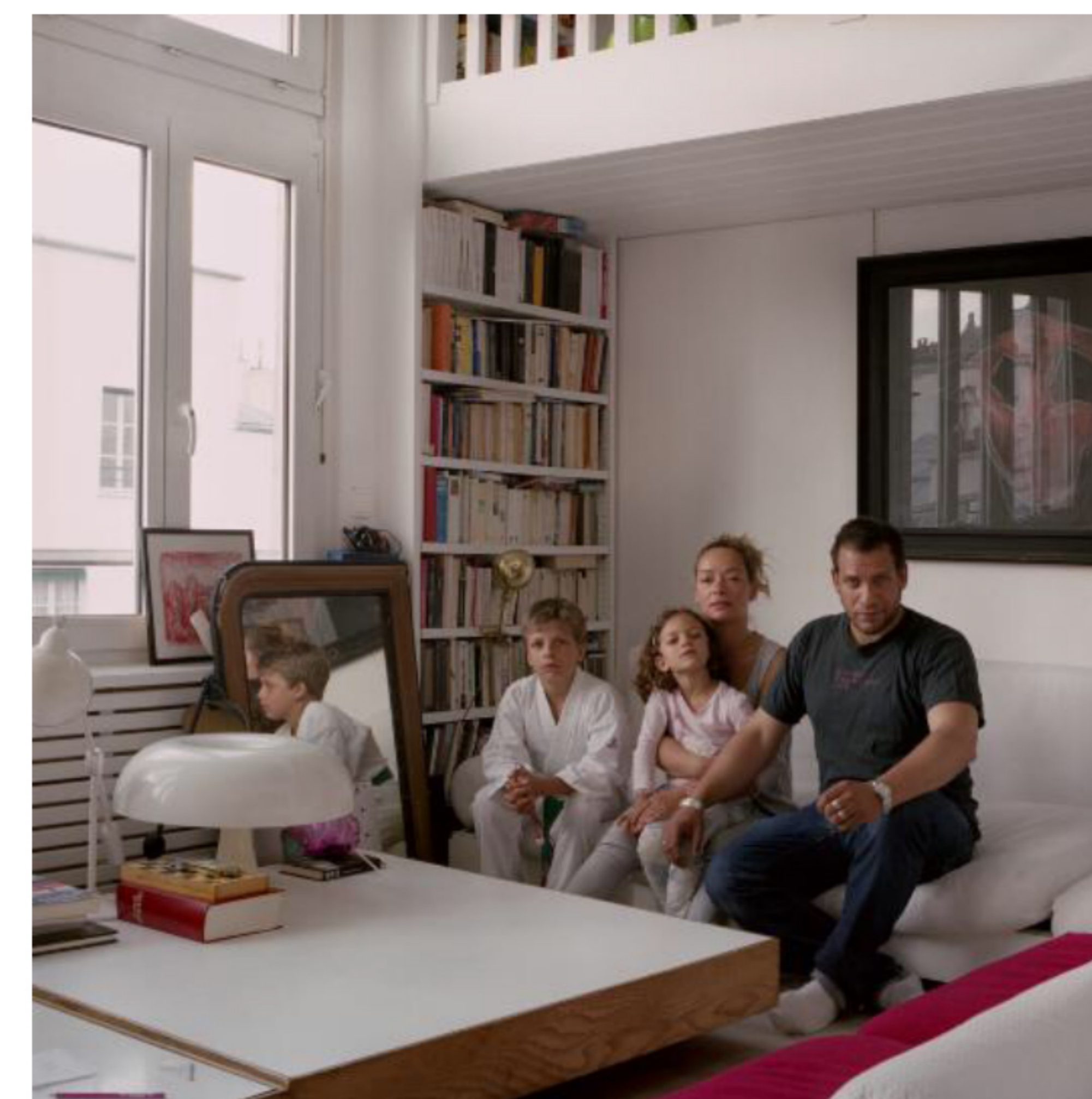
Hollander committed herself to the behemoth task of traveling the world to photograph all of her Facebook friends in their homes. This domestic element, capturing her subjects in their natural habitats, was crucial to the project. “If I was going to try to photograph friendship,” she says, “what were the important things to me? I decided it was sharing meals and getting into arguments about art or politics and drinking too much red wine, but still being friends in the morning.”

For the first few months—the series would eventually take her five years to complete—Hollander admits that when she reached out to her Facebook friends asking to shoot them, her potential subjects thought she was insane: “They just could not understand it.” But as the project picked up steam, she found herself welcomed into the homes of more and more Facebook connections.



Tanja Hollander, “Jenny Ewing Allen + Grady Allen, Shepherdstown, West Virginia,” 2013.

These were formal portrait sessions, shot with film and a long exposure, requiring the subjects to sit as still and unsmiling as possible. The final images are classical in their composition, families posed in their most inhabited rooms, the occasional mirror reflecting the sitters in profile or even the photographer herself.



Hollander, “Mike, Fanny, Martin + Maya Ladd, Paris, France,” 2014.

Despite the seriousness of these photographs and the potential awkwardness of essentially closing Facebook chat and stepping into the house of the person you were just chatting, Hollander found shooting each image felt more like simply visiting with friends. “I’d go to somebody’s house and sit down where it’s most comfortable,” she says. “Usually that’s the kitchen or the living room. Then we would chat, and they would usually offer me something to eat or drink. Then I would just kind of take myself out of the picture, wherever we were sitting.”

What If You Stopped Calling Them “Internet Friends”?

After years of this, Hollander realized that the line between online friendship and authentic friendship can be whisper-thin. The very words that we use to define the boundaries of friendships both on the internet and off no longer made sense. “I want to be really careful using ‘internet friend’ versus ‘real-life friend,’” she tells me during our conversation, “because I feel like sometimes there isn’t a huge difference.”

It’s true. At this point, when it comes to determining whether a relationship exists on the internet or IRL, what is the internet if not “RL”?

[Tanja Hollander’s *Are You Really My Friend?* opens February 18 at Mass MoCA. For more information, visit \[massmoca.org\]\(https://massmoca.org\).](https://massmoca.org)