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Cécile B. Evans

BY MATTHEW MCLEAN

Hyperactive links



'It's the 21st century', a voice bluntly observes in Cécile B. Evans's video installation *Hyperlinks or it didn't happen* (2014), shown at Seventeen Gallery in London in October last year. 'It's the 21st fucking century', another voice offers in reply. Like the narrator of the Berlin-based artist's film *AGNES (The end is near)* (2014), an artificial intelligence neurotically fixated on her own impermanence, Evans's characters are often unable to describe their predicaments, shaped by larger forces they can't comprehend and choices that weren't their own.

Evans's video installation *How happy a Thing can be* (2014) shown at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge in 2014, includes a pair of scissors, a screwdriver and a comb placed on clear Perspex rods. Installed alongside an animated HD video, the objects' weirdly smooth surface reveals them to be 3D-prints. The

contemporaneity of their mode of production jars with the timelessness of the objects' designs, as does the work's title, drawn from Rainer Maria Rilke's 9th *Duino Elegy* (1923). The future is here, the work seems to say, but it's one in which the past is oddly present. Conceived in tandem with the installation, the film of the same name follows the strange private lives of computer-animated versions of the same three objects, bored and hysterical, like celebrity recluses. The scissors take a bath in an upscale bathroom, and when the soundtrack turns ominous, blood streams from its handles. When a voiceover announces – apropos of nothing – 'it's time to dance', the scissors begins a sweeping dance solo. But this is as much an emotional breakdown as a dance break – not virtuoso spectacle, but an eruption of untamed feeling.

Feelings are facts, as Yvonne Rainer put it in the title of her 2006 memoir, and for Evans too, emotions are a stubborn truth of experience, both easy and difficult to say anything about. Evans studied acting before making art, and physical gesture seems sometimes a way to get hold of emotions when language alone can't quite reach. At the same time, gestures can communicate no less arbitrarily than words: as when *AGNES*, the hand-shaped chatbot Evans installed on the Serpentine Gallery website in 2014, asked me how I'm feeling and allowed me to respond only by selecting between three pictures of differently posed hands.

The 3D video *The Brightness* (2014) further explores the gap between the verbal and the physical, opening with the artist conversing with a phantom limb specialist, uncannily named Dr. Cécile B. Evans (she really exists; I googled her). To play Dr. Evans, however, the artist has hired a pretty, chic actress, lending the scene the glossy unease of an infomercial. It segues into an animated sequence featuring a troupe of teeth – what body part is lost more often? – dancing a kaleidoscopic Busby Berkeley number, followed by a routine reminiscent of sign language by both Céciles. When Dr. Evans begins talking again, her lips don't move at first. 'Your voice is out of sync', artist Evans tells her, before her own image blurs out of focus. Between absence and presence, ghost and shell, it seems, neither ever manages to be quite herself; no one self ever stays in one place or in one piece.



Hyperlinks ... revolves around another phantom, PHIL, a digital rendering of the late Phillip Seymour Hoffman (it was reported after Hoffman's death in February 2014 that he would be digitally rendered for completion of the upcoming *Hunger Games* film; its director would later call this proposal 'a horrible, horrible thing'). Like the spectres in Tarkovksy's *Solaris* (1972), PHIL occupies a kind of eerie half-life: like an original he is utterly removed from. The film leaps back and forth between a cast of other lost technological souls: an agoraphobic YouTube star; Yowane Haku, an anime hologram 'living' in Dubai; an Invisible Woman permanently painted for green screen; a man narrating (with words the artist found in a Reddit thread) how his dead girlfriend still posts on Facebook. Packed with factoids (who knew that the first image posted to the web featured Les Horribles Cernettes, a joke pop group formed of women at CERN?), watching the film is like falling into a 'Wiki-hole', fascinated and never satisfied, endlessly drawn from one article to another.

At Seventeen Gallery, a rug placed in front of the film monitor was strewn with print-outs, from stills of Kim Kardashian to quotations from Philip K. Dick – a record, it seems, of the even greater quantity of references with which Evans wanted to stuff the work, but which would not cohere. At one point in *Hyperlinks...* AGNES accuses PHIL of stretching a comparison too far, and he admits: 'I'm not sure where they fit in, but I just can't stop thinking about them'. It's as if each of Evans's works contains the germ of something untellable, a thought which will never finish, a process of enquiry which can never quite keep up with its material. As the artist tells me via Skype: every time an electronic file is copied, it mutates.

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