You recognize his type: the tidy arrogance, the jet-black turtleneck; the slight sneer that lingers even when he attempts a neutral face. He’s posing in front of his pedestal desk, individual pieces of stationery spread all-too-precisely across it. His first words to the camera are ‘how do I do it?’ and he lingers upon the ‘how’ as if it were the first time he’d asked himself.

This is Amos and he is an architect. He’s also a wooden puppet, created by the American-Belgian multimedia artist Cécile B. Evans, and the central figure in her three-part video series ‘Amos’ World’ (2017–ongoing). The world of the title is Amos’s creation, a ‘socially progressive housing estate’ in the form of a building designed to be self-sufficient. We’re told about its solarium, fitness centre and colony of honeybees; high-tech systems, Amos boasts, control the whole complex and furnish each tenant with ‘their own world’. Communal living will breed collective life. The project sounds too familiar; it’s an amalgam of several architects’ dreams: the municipal behemoths of Moshe Safdie (Habitat 67 in Montreal, 1967), Alison and Peter Smithson (Robin Hood Gardens in London, 1972) and, before the brutalist wave, Le Corbusier’s Unité d’habitation (1952). The audience watches Evans’s work, appropriately, from a modular structure: eachviewer sits alone in an open-faced box.

The title, ‘Amos’ World’, announces Amos as the star—and, in his mind, he is. But hubris only leads one way. As Episode One begins, the building is already slipping from its architect’s grasp and its tenants seem to be struggling to manage their lives. An actress called Gloria and her mother haven’t left their apartment for days. The building’s manager has been seriously injured by a machine in the fitness
Given the tightness of its setting, 'Amos’ World’ seems, at first, like a new direction in Evans’s work. From The Brightness (2015) to What the Heart Wants (2016), her video installations are usually hyperlinked narratives unanchored from one local place or time. They spin through a tangle of plot strands, windows and text boxes just for space; there are cel-shaded people and dancing CGI objects. The protagonists are composite beings, quasi-human, sometimes with faces and sometimes not. AGNES (2014) was a spambot who lived on the Serpentine Galleries’ website, responding to visitors and absorbing their emotional range. PHIL, from Hyperlinks or It Didn’t Happen (2014), tells us he’s ‘a digital replacement of a very famous actor’. What the Heart Wants leaps forward to the vague future point ‘25K’, where HYPER ‘the ultimate posthuman’, in Evans’s words has evolved from a dominant social network into a system with transnational power. Now, she not only operates ‘Chinese Nigeria’, but AGNES and PHIL as well. Yet she still takes the form of a single woman and, at one point, her voice almost cracks. ‘Please help. It’s so hard.’

What Evans investigates – in her briefest summary – is ‘the way we evaluate emotion in contemporary society’ and, in particular, ‘how digital technology impacts the human condition’. She can’t stand the word ‘virtual’ and sees no distinction today between offline and online worlds. ‘Emotion’, she tells me, has weight, just like data’ when you feel empathy during an interaction on the web, there’s no sense in which that experience isn’t real. Her videos explore how this new arena of emotional life is shaped by its hyperlinked structure; the occasional obscurities of her plots owe much to her refusal to be tidy. The internet, after all, is not a tidy place. Take Hyperlinks or It Didn’t Happen, which weaves the bittersweet portrait of an ‘invisible woman’ into the chilling tale of a man whose dead girlfriend gets in touch via Facebook. Evans moves easily between them, toggling from mood to mood; it’s so disturbing, so abrupt.

But life online is like that: unpredictable, inconsistent, full of communicative gaps. It’s so different to the mess we make of life offline. The critic Gene McHugh suggested in 2015 that we’re adapting slowly to our emotions entering a digital realm; society, he wrote, still both ‘laughs at the internet for the past ten years’; she adds, gesturing to the internet, ‘to understand how it works.’ ‘The predominant feeling of possibility of online intimacy’ and ‘is deeply paranoid about the internet, all of retaining them,’ the verbs echo Le Corbusier’s words on the Corbusian ‘urgent task’ to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected the dark arts of the Corbusian ‘urgent task’ to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media: corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected corporate power to the logic of social media.
“Evans’s work can pull you in contradictory ways and, in your small moments of indecision, you find its disquieting beauties.”

Cal Revely-Calder is a writer and editor based in London, UK. In 2017, he was the recipient of the Frieze Writers’ Prize. He is working on a book about art and embarrassment.

Cécile B. Evans is an artist based in Berlin, Germany, and London, UK. In 2018, she has had solo shows at Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy, and mumok, Vienna, Austria, and has performed Amos’ World Is Live as part of Art Night, London. Her work is on view in ‘Public Body.03’, Artspace, Sydney, Australia, until 28 October and ‘Zeitspuren: The Power of Now’, Kunsthalle Biel, Switzerland, until 18 November and will be shown in ‘Low Form’, MAXXI, Rome, Italy, from 20 October to 24 February 2019. Her solo show at Tramway, Glasgow, UK, opens on 23 November.

1 Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, Basic Books, New York, 2011