CÉCILE B. EVANS

BY MARTHA KIRSZENBAUM

In her practice – conveying installation, video, online platforms, sculpture, and performance – Cécile B. Evans examines the significance and role of emotion in contemporary societies and the increasing influence of new technologies on our feelings and actions.

In neuropsychology, emotions are described as an integral component of all human activities, including human-computer interactions, also named "affective computing." The affective computing agenda includes giving a computer the ability to recognize and intelligently respond to human emotions. Emotions not only regulate our social encounters but also influence our cognition, perception, and decision-making. Through her series of recent works and the development of her digital characters, including AGNES and PHIL, Evans inquires how to reinvest emotions and flesh within the world of the Internet.

PLEASE, DON'T CALL ME UNCANNY: THE PHYSICAL REPRESENTATION OF EMOTIONS

Cécile B. Evans's video installations explore the relationship between technology and emotion, the decay of human existence, and the ways in which we live and labor within the machine and the Internet. *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen* (2014) is an animation narrated by fictional characters with synthetically augmented computer voices, constructing a visual collage of contemporary cultural references. Here the main character is PHIL, a digital rendering posthumously modeled after a recreated fake copy of the famous actor, Philip Seymour Hoffman. PHIL, who talks about how, in a moment of disaster, humans stand up, cities rebuild, people move on, and yet the information remains suspended in trauma forever, because we take so seriously the nature and the fate of images, but also their disappearance or deletion. As an extension of the video, Evans has developed a chat platform enabling us to interact with PHIL. A team of people was hired by the artist and employed for the duration of the exhibition to reply to users. PHIL was therefore reconverted into an Internet hotline, one whose speculative and poetic content acts as an interface between the various elements of the installation and the visitors' own thoughts and feelings. Later this year, excerpts from the transcript of this live chat will be included in the catalog of the Biennale of Sydney.

In *AGNES* (2014), the artist's digital commission for the Serpentine Galleries, Evans set up and expanded a spambot – an automated computer program or interface that lived inside the Serpentine's server, accessible online to the public and taking visitors through the history of the insti-

tution or the exhibition listing. As *AGNES* seeks intimate information and data from the spambot's visitors, she inhabits the emotional gap of a digital realm saturated with human feelings and aspirations dictated by blogs and social media. *AGNES* acts as a website, a livestream. The materialization of feelings in the artist's work is often represented through the voice, and the emotions that it conveys. Cécile B. Evans is in fact a former trained voice actor, reinvesting the feelings and a sense of humanity into PHIL's or AGNES's physical online presence through the use of her own voice.

"OUR WORLD IS FULL OF WOMEN": QUESTIONING IDENTITIES

Cécile B. Evans's practice and artistic formation has taken place in a post-Internet generation of European artists, many of whom have often settled in Berlin or East London, and realized that their male colleagues were becoming more successful than their female counterparts, both commercially and institutionally. In the late 2000s, a dozen young female artists and writers in Berlin, such as Aleksandra Domanović, Aude Pariset, and Karen Archey, initiated a feminist reading group and taken part in heated debates on Facebook, informing the art community about gender *desequilibrium* in successes within their generation. It is impossible to read Evans's characters and the messages they convey outside of this particular context and consciousness. Her heroines include Computer Girls, British YouTube stars, Korean dancers, invisible women. In *Hyperlinks*, she refers to the aforementioned Computer Girls, a term coined by computer scientist Grace Hopper to describe female computer programmers, a field in which women excelled thanks to their "patience and attention to detail." Later on in the work, she describes North Korean female dancers who were assassinated (although they later reappear) for having performed a Western song for a private audience, and mentions the British YouTube star Jemma Pixie Hixon and famous Japanese Manga hologram Yowane Haku while dancing in a hotel room. Finally, the most striking character in the animation is the invisible green-screened woman hanging out at the beach with a black barefoot man. The softness of their interaction climaxes when he kneels down to braid her blonde hair in a symbolic gesture.

THE HUMANITY OF OBJECTS AND LIQUID MODERNITIES

Beyond the decomposition of our human bodies suggested by Evans's corpus of work, her practice seems to also interrogate the value of the objects surrounding us. "The Internet weighs as much as a strawberry," we hear in *How Happy A Thing Can Be* (2014) as the artist explores the
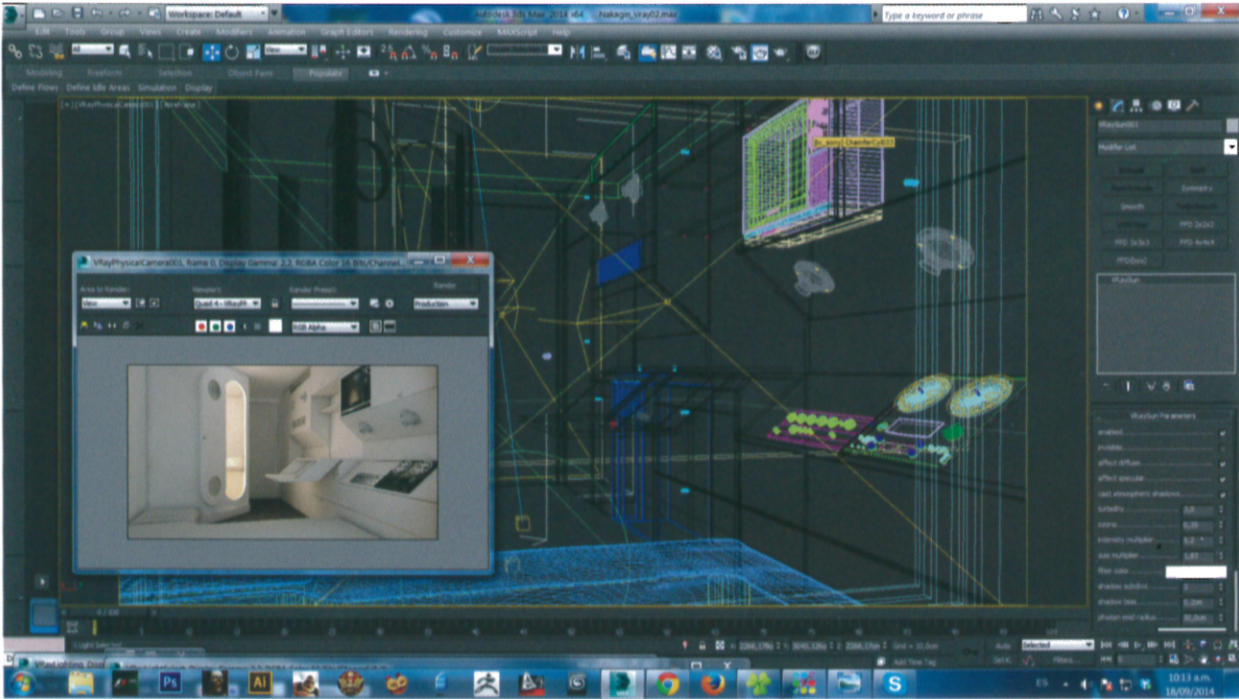
faculties of objects in our era of dematerialization. The animation presents a ballet of 3D-printed mundane objects, such as a screwdriver, a comb, and a pair of scissors, that concludes with a heartbreaking solo dance over a remix of Sade's hit song *No Ordinary Love*. This closing scene comes along as one of the most poignant moments in recent animated video, a solitary, desperate solo by a bent pair of scissors, one that so perfectly challenges the presence of the human body that disintegrates, allowing objects to come to life onscreen as the camera captures them, finally reflecting on human solitude, existential melancholy, and physical disappearance. The fading of human bodies, distracted or destroyed by the triumph of technology and the tyranny of objects, is also at stake in Evans's video *The Brightness* (2013), commissioned by Orange and Palais de Tokyo. The work presents a dialogue between two women, one of which is a phantom limb specialist also named Cécile B. Evans. In the closing sequence, the two women speak, but their bodies and voices are out of sync. "The soul doesn't travel as quick as the body," as the French poet Jean Cocteau once wrote.

At the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, during the exhibition *Co-Workers* (2015), organized by New York-based collective DIS Magazine, Evans developed a project titled *Working on What the Heart Wants*. It was a three-screen installation livestreaming the production of a new video. The screens were connected to their own Raspberry Pi – a tiny computer – programmed to livestream the construction of the film, while the right screen related the conversations between Cécile and collaborators hired from the popular online platform freelancers.com. As a critical ode to our "modern liquidity," the disappearance of the boundaries between the live and the recorded, the physical contact and the online connection, the installation echoed the term "liquid modernity," coined in 2001 by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, defining a postmodern society marked by global capitalist economies with their increasing privatization of services and by the information revolution, in which the absolute freedom of markets provokes the loss of a firm grounding, attachment, and solidarity for human bodies. Uncertainty has been transformed into generalized fear, and humiliation has replaced exploitation. The liquid gap and the tension between the individual and society can only be solidified by the social links found in groups of people who share a common ensemble of ideas, values, and experiences, and, ultimately, by our own emotions.