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View of “Cécile B. Evans,” 2017. Photo: Georg Petermichl.

Cécile B. Evans

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Ask a robot, “What’s the weather like?” and you risk the response, “What’s the weather?” This punch line repeats throughout Cécile B. Evans’s growing oeuvre, which explores the psychological repercussions of the increasing encroachment of artificial intelligence into a terrain previously thought to belong exclusively to the human soul. Using videos, installations, holograms, and now what she calls an “automated play,” Evans questions our expectations regarding our relationships with machines as the latter learn to mimic us more and more, paradoxically gaining power through the simulation of human fragilities and failings.

As the weather punch line demonstrates, forging dialogue between man and machine can require finding more specific forms of inquiry: Evans has been experimenting with what she calls “hyperlinked narratives.” Taking a cue from online communications, this networked style of storytelling drives the artist’s *Sprung a Leak*, 2016, a three-act play that ran in continuous eighteen-minute cycles from October through March at Tate Liverpool. Its nonhuman cast was comprised of twenty-seven screens, an automated water fountain, two perky-looking humanoid bots respectively named A Plot and B Plot, and an animatronic dog called C Plot. The names give an indication as to how Evans imagines “hyperlinked narratives” to function. The simultaneous presence of alternate “Plots” implies options, as if a reality TV producer—or, for that matter, a viewer—could selectively zoom in and out on various details within the play: say, B Plot’s case of the animatronic blues or C Plot’s unrequited crush on a deified beauty blogger. In reality, however, all of the characters are animated by a single program

script, controlled by a master server. Viewers are offered only the performance of hyperlinks, rather than access to their content.

When translating *Sprung a Leak* into a gallery presentation, Evans drafted a new series of “Test Cards” (all works 2016), which suggest a retroactive storyboard, except that the events illustrated do not necessarily correspond to those of the play. Instead, each “Test Card” juxtaposes cartoon versions of the three robot protagonists against a backdrop sampled from one of the twenty-seven screens. Snippets of dialogue appear in speech bubbles, while the underlying captions are collaged from direct quotations from the script, more generalized plot summaries, and unscripted asides. For example, in *Test Card I*, the three bots stand in an empty airplane hangar, contemplating a fourth, unidentified humanoid, slumped to the side. “Who is that?!?” one Plot asks. “Your understudy,” another replies. A caption confirms that the computers struggle to process the enormity of this potential substitution: “What none of them had imagined was the possibility that one of them would simply stop working. Indefinitely.” The machine’s reflection on its own mortality channels another of Evans’s recurring characters, PHIL, “the bad copy of a famous actor” (evidently Philip Seymour Hoffman) from the artist’s 2014 video *Hyperlinks or It Didn’t Happen*. When asked about his own life-span, PHIL glibly reckons: “Eternity, if they don’t switch my server off.”

And what more time-honored format for the contemplation of one’s mortality, mechanical or otherwise, than a stage play? Evans emphasized the theatricality of the “Test Cards” by framing them in marquee-like, transparent server cases stuffed with LED-light wires and foam gauze. Mounted on Plexiglas stands, the objects actively occupy space rather than hang passively on the walls. Their placement within the room conjured a stage, while also emulating the relationship between a server and its network. A single “Test Card” greeted visitors in the lower entryway of the gallery. From this central origin point, a thick stream of electrical cords surged up the couple of stairs to the elevated portion of the gallery, where the other “Test Cards” stood in wait like a chorus. As with Tate Liverpool, visitors were invited to enter the space of the action, but only as spectators, with little to no ability to influence or interact with any “links.” In this regard, attending the show felt a little like asking a computer about the weather: The question might be apt, but the response could still use some clarification.

—Kate Sutton