

Interview: Amos, Cécile B Evans & co.



— Cécile B. Evans, Amos' World, Episode One, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna.

The videos and installations of American-Belgian artist Cécile B Evans are populated by an ensemble cast including computer-generated dancing teeth, artificial intelligence based on dead actors and anxious robots. Drawing on the conventions of cinema, television theatre and the internet, her work involves layered acts of ventriloquism and collage to give a pop-tinged and troubled portrait of contemporary life.

Her current body of work, a trio of videos under the title Amos' World, revolves around the various tenants of a decaying housing estate, including a Secretary on her own misguided Joan-of-Arc trip, a former actress known only as Gloria, and the titular Amos, the delusional architect of the project, a composite caricature of modernists like Philip Johnson, Le Corbusier and Alison and Peter Smithson. But in a manner typical of Evans's work, it doesn't stop there: the three episodes also include the Nargis, a trio of dancing CGI daffodils, and the interjecting voices of a time-traveller, the building's manager and, of course, the weather.

Here, the cast of Amos' World discuss the issues of design, desire and reality raised in Evans's work, in a conversation following a days' filming.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: The building, and its inhabitants, feel pretty self-contained: we see most of the characters alone, if we see them at all, staying in the confines of their apartments. Yet from the start of the first episode of *Amos' World*, it seems as if it's a foregone conclusion that the building, its aims and vision, are a failure. Is it the nature of such a scheme to fail?

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Time Traveller: I don't know of any human constructed systems that account for their own failure. Within the building itself, there seemed to be a longstanding denial of the problems early on, and eventually an acceptance that it was becoming a closed circuit. That containment was the main reason I felt I had to leave. I could sense people struggling to cope within the project. Could there be a system that accepts reality as spectral and shape-shifting, with an infinite amount of existences possible within its accepted framework?

Amos: I made the building so that it could contain people. They need structure, I shaped the building in the image of a person so that it would shape those within it. A building that would not only contain people, but retain them and their sense of a way of life. The building came with its own culture.

Time Traveller: What do you mean by 'image of a person'? Can you maybe clarify what single image that could be? This, and all of your good intentions, sounds like a projection of desires and abilities. It's no surprise that the people living in your building have a hard time attaining what you describe as a 'successful individual-communal life'. What is surprising is your insistence that this is all down to their inability to conform to the right behaviours, from buying the right garbage bags to avoiding the singe of a misdirected solar panel configuration.

Weather: Which you continue to insist on calling 'The Solarium'.

Time Traveller: This sounds so insane that it leads me to suspect that failure was part of the plan all along.

Amos: Why would I build something that would set people up to fail? Can't you distinguish between my good intentions, my work, and this reality you say that people are living?

Time Traveller: I believe that you make this distinction, and that you believe the success of your idea is independent from its execution. But you can't make expensive, single use electric cars and then pretend to change the world by talking about them as though they are municipal buses. Just like it's impossible to say people should live on Mars without first suggesting a remedy for the cancer developed from radiation absorbed on the journey there, or, for example, without talking about the history of colonialism.

Nargis Two: At what point, Amos, will you accept that your plan was a bogus one and there's a chance that someone else could do it better.

Amos: Now I'm the one who isn't clear. The building is already there – it's an artefact of my idea, a fixed object.

Weather: You said it would be revolutionary.

Amos: I meant aesthetically. I thought – and I wasn't the only one – that the right people would buy into these aesthetics, let them permeate culture, produce things that are also revolutionary, but of course, tied back to this artefact. Something we could all believe in. What's wrong with that?

Nargis Two: The context has changed. We actually want to do something with it.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: So, do we need to keep demolishing and rebuilding as we do, or is that merely another salvation complex, to presume that we can have a new, clean start each time?

Weather: It is possible for me to imagine an alternative. Such a structure would have to function the way I do, or how I presume a human body does, parts with varying similarities, differences, and microsystems that perform and interact according to each part's success or failure to keep the body as a whole in action.

Time Traveller: But the body has a built-in expiration date. There comes a point when all the parts shut down and the structure begins to rot. Everyone has accepted this and built rituals around it, including an incredibly prescriptive industry for replacing those bodies.

There's an inevitable point at which the difference between realities become vast and it feels impossible to agree on a solution. The option of a shutdown – of destruction, becomes very attractive. A total collapse feels more imaginable than agreeing on a dismantling process – a moment for everyone to look in the same direction and agree on what is happening. The anticipation of that end is an easy way out of the responsibilities for a building's slow decline.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: 'Knowing you are unreal is nowhere near as distressing as realising you are mortal', as the AI say in Matthew De Abaitua's *The Red Men* (2007).

Time Traveller: For those who are terribly aware of their mortality, a true end might feel like the only way out. But it is anything but easy and there remains an overwhelming desire for another way. Why is demolition the only end to the building?

Nargis One: We were wondering what a partial demolition might look like. We understand the impossibility of building an ideal structure from scratch that others will have to inhabit, will have to survive within. What can we take from the building's foundation? How can we use those salvaged parts as scaffolds, the skeleton for an organism that is in constant flux, with a turnover of hosts and ghosts. A never-ending work-in-progress.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: Something like the way that Rebecca Solnit describes having a pragmatic, realistic sense of hope: 'an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings.'

Weather: Maybe a little bit like the Sawada Mansion, where residents have permission to add and subtract from the building as they like. Or even Ricardo Bofill's Le Pavé Neuf, where residents have repurposed the massive courtyard as an open-air market to sell and trade food, crafts, and electronics.

Time Traveller: Yes, but even more so and with the acknowledgement that even those formats could become obstructive at some point.

Amos: That sounds super boring, what would we celebrate? Again, why would I put so much work into something that will never fully succeed?

Weather: You've done alright for yourself.



— Cécile B. Evans, Amos' World, Episode One, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: The three episodes document a series of changes for all of you. Was there an obvious beginning, a point beyond which your lives had clearly moved into another dimension?

Secretary: I needed young individuals to live with me so that I could apply for the family unit housing scheme in the building. I met the Nargis – three teenage flowers – through the system. From the moment they moved in, I felt myself becoming different. I felt bigger. Through them, I had access to information I never knew existed, other experiences but also the physical presence of their feelings. Even after they left to join the Rainbow Connection, those feelings stayed with me and became mine. By the time I heard the voice in my apartment, I knew I was a part of something. It was electric – instead of finding my self, I had split with it and had the potential to multiply.

Manager: The voice in your apartment was mine. I'm the manager of the building, the one who was crushed by the equipment in the fitness centre. I can't really move anymore, but because of my background in IT, can access the building's grid. I can confirm it was built to

proximities are formed. The problem is that the infrastructure itself, through which these encounters circulate has developed in such a way that although the tenants' context has expanded, they don't feel able to do anything with it. There are limits built into the expansion. The principle image of these individual-communal structures seems to be this: being alone together.

Secretary: I feel like I've joined the Rainbow Connection. It's thrilling.

Manager: Their pain gives meaning to your pain, which makes you feel better.

Secretary: Yeah, you already said that in Episode One.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: **The story is told to us as a series of monologues, like a confession or therapy. Any apparent dialogue could be interpreted as imaginary, a projection.**

Weather: A beauty tutorial on YouTube crossed my path the other day. The person was applying their makeup and appearing as a voiceover describing their actions as they were happening. Their relationship to their own image becomes visible. It occurred to me that a small space had opened between the image and the voice, and that was a crack that I could project myself into. The other tenants, except for Gloria whose voice is still rooted in her body, exist in a relationship with their own self – which they project onto whoever is witnessing. What they tend to forget, is that because of the visibility of that relationship, a witness can make their own projections back onto the self.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: **It's like the quote from the sham martyr, Mercer, in Philip K Dick's book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968): 'It is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe.' Though you seem to see this curse as a positive thing.**

Weather: Their perpetual identity construction contributes to a kind of world building. It is what it is.

Time Traveller: I don't have this privilege. I literally have to project my messages, which are love letters to Gloria, in the hope that they can reach her inside the building. She used to be an actress, which is a different kind of image building and distribution. She describes it as the experience of more people having a relationship to her image than to her. She does see these images as 'projections', but has always acknowledged that they are very much a part of herself. She does not deny their authenticity or the meaning they have for others. I haven't heard from her. I miss her and believe she has information that can help us.

Manager: I'm working on the connection.



— Cécile B. Evans, *Amos' World*, Episode One, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: In 'The Rainbow Connection', the song from the *Muppet Movie* from 1979 which perhaps gives the supposed terrorist organisation in *Amos' World* its name, Kermit asks: 'Why are there so many songs about rainbows and what's on the other side?' Why are there so many songs about rainbows? What is on the other side?

Amos: I've always identified with this song – (*sings*) 'the lovers, the dreamers, and me'. It's about my frustration with the dissonance between my vision and the impossibility of its materialisation, it's so sad.

Time Traveller: This is exactly what I said before, but in relation to other people. It's impressive how you've made that yours as well.

Secretary: (*sings*) 'Have you been half asleep and have you heard voices? I've heard them calling my name. Is this the sweet sound that calls the young sailors?'

Manager: (*sings*) 'The voice might be one and the same.'

Amos: There are so many songs about rainbows because we each believe we will get to the other side. It's a song about inheritance and longing for it to arrive. (*sings*) 'I've heard it too many times to ignore it, it's something that I'm supposed to be ...'

Nargis One: We don't think this song is about you.

Nargis Two: We don't think that what's on the other side is going to be perfect or even that we're the ones who will get there. We just want to go forward.

Nargis Three: We've accepted that there is no utopia and there won't be the satisfaction of a dystopia that we can easily oppose unilaterally. (*sings back*) 'Rainbows have nothing to hide. We want to move on.'

Chris Fite-Wassilak: A recurring theme in your creator's work is the notion of the vessel – ships, buildings with tenants, computer servers that hold bots and AI, meat bodies that hold brains and maybe souls. What might you consider is the ideal vessel?

Weather: I'll answer this because I can afford to be idealistic and wrong at the same time. I'm the Weather, it's my nature to change. The ideal vessel is the one that is just beyond everyone's control or even perceptibility. It's one that everyone knows enough about to navigate within it, but not enough to spoil the possibilities of its form. The ideal form could be reality itself, all the materials – perceivable or not – and perspectives able to fit within it. This might be why fiction is so successful, it's a tiny reality within a reality itself. It provides evidence of the possibility to work new shapes into existing vessels.

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