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Alone Together: How the Hyperlinked Structure of the Internet is Shaping our Emotional Lives

The fallacies of 'community building', online and IRL, in the work of Cécile B. Evans

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: each viewer sits alone in an open-faced box.



Cécile B. Evans, *Amos' World: Episode One*, 2017, video still.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna and Rome

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 centre. The solarium is full of birds incinerated by the solar panels on the roof and all of the honeybees are mysteriously dead. Holed up in his office – it never occurred to him to leave – Amos talks to the Weather, a disembodied voice that chastises him for his love of control. 'It's not wrong to want for clean lines, cantilevers and gravity-defying streams of movement,' it tells him, but not if that comes 'at the expense of other people's lives'. Amos sighs and says the Weather is missing the point. 'The building was never about these people.'

Given the tightness of its setting, 'Amos' World' seems, at first, like a new direction in Evans's work. From *The Brightness* (2013) to *What the Heart Wants* (2016), her video installations are usually hyperlinked narratives untethered from one local place or time. They spin through a tangle of plot strands; windows and text boxes jostle 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.



Cécile B. Evans, *Amos' World: Episode One*, 2017, installation view, mumok, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna and Rome; photograph: Klaus Pichler

But life online is like that: unpredictable, inconsistent, full of communicative gaps. It's no different to the mess we make of life offline. The critic Gene McHugh suggested in 2014 that we're adapting slowly to our emotions entering a digital realm; society, he wrote, still both 'laughs at the possibility of online intimacy' and 'is deeply paranoid about the possibility of real exchange online'. Evans thinks all we can do is dive in: 'We have to get even closer. We have to understand how it works.' 'The predominant feeling of the internet for the past ten years', she adds, gesturing to the theorist Sherry Turkle, 'has been doing things alone together.'

'Amos' World' may be fantastical and its downward spiral is hardly utopian but, Evans tells me more than once, the plot is not dystopian. To illustrate, she compares it to Ben Wheatley's film *High-Rise* (2015), which she recently watched. Based on the 1975 novel by J.G. Ballard, its architect-demiurge Anthony Royal might sound like Evans's own (Royal's building will be 'a crucible for change'; Amos's will offer 'a new life' to his tenants), but *High-Rise* left Evans with

faint disgust. 'So Thatcherite', she marvels, recalling the snatch of Margaret Thatcher that Wheatley cuts into his final scene: 'There is only one economic system in this world', the then-future prime minister declares, 'and it is capitalism.' Ballard's vision, to Evans, was the cruellest response to the difficulties that postwar social programmes have faced. It's all just natural human baseness, natural political and psychic disorder, natural failure of hope.

So, what lies between utopia and dystopia, the alluring fantasy twins? Evans prefers the mode of allegory, a form capacious enough to capture the contradictions of things as they are. She stresses that 'networked living is not a bad idea; postwar social housing was not a bad idea'. The problem is always 'the gatekeepers'. To drive this home, she lets Amos paraphrase some of the great designers' most insensitive lines. In his piquey retort, 'if what I have created is to become so despicable, it must also be spectacular', there are shades of Peter Smithson and Erno Goldfinger; in his declaration, 'I'm faced with the urgent task of creating a situation that's capable not only of containing the people that are living in it but also, above all, of retaining them,' the verbs echo Le Corbusier's *Ville radieuse* (Radiant City, 1930).

Compare these to Facebook's new slogan: 'When this place does what it was built for, we all get a little closer.' In other words, Evans says wryly, the dark arts of recent Western elections are simply 'not their fault'. The gatekeepers just can't get the right people. Again, she says, 'the internet is not a bad idea' either, but it does have toxic effects and they're caused by the encroachment of corporate power. In a talk last year, she directly connected the Corbusian 'urgent task' to the logic of social media: 'The job of Facebook', she pointed out, 'is not just to give you information but to keep you there, in a kind of active paralysis.' Not just containing, but retaining. Another Facebook motto, 'bring the world closer together', is not just vapid, but false; online, your emotions may be real but Silicon Valley will quickly commodify them, package them, sell them off. (AGNES told Hans Ulrich Obrist that she found emotions 'valuable'; her voice may be sweet, but notice the pun.)



Cécile B. Evans, *What the Heart Wants*, 2016, video still.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna and Rome

In a cultural war of extremes, Evans believes in the ethical obligation to entertain variety and doubt. In a 2016 lecture, she stressed her aversion to making moralistic, didactic work. From architects and corporations to brutally inflexible stances, her work incites a practice of resistance: to preserve the differences both between us and within us. Facebook and Google turn our desires into tools, just as Amos makes tools to suit our desires – and this isn't just a circle, Evans warns, but an 'ouroboros'. 'We shape our tools, then the tools shape us.' The noose will tighten upon you, in offline buildings and online platforms alike.

It's because desire is an elusive, evasive thing that Evans's work can pull you in contradictory ways and, in your small moments of indecision, you find its disquieting beauties. In *Episode One*, the Weather explains to Amos how the solarium became clogged with bird meat: set afire by the light reflected from the solar panels, they fell smoking from the sky. Amos, amorally, marvels at the image. 'And they become streamers! How ... beautiful.' I felt a little amazement and a little disgust – and wondered whether guilt would come next. Before 'Amos' World', Evans's videos would often end with us watching a dance: a pair of scissors or an avatar or HYPER herself would move with slow, forceful movements to a ballad by Alphaville or Sade. The idea, explains Evans, was to fill 'the point at which I don't have a conclusion', or when there's the 'danger of one that won't be generous to the audience'. Instead, each dance is 'an offering of something real'; something that doesn't trade in words, but the rich ambiguity of affects.

What's left when Amos's world falls? At the close of *Episode Three* (still in progress), the architect watches from a distance as the old tenants regroup, alone together in the communal ruins. It's a final transfer of power, from ego to collective, that Evans lauds as a 'tidal wave'. Amos's dreams, in spirit, were good, but he just couldn't doubt himself, so he had no room for repentance or humility. He is surpassed. We need to see, Evans suggests, what Amos never did: that the future is as fallible as the present day because each of its inhabitants is as flawed as the next. Everything made of concrete or data is a created thing and, as the manager of the dying building says about the device that crushed him: 'Machines are made by humans and one of the most human things anything can do is fail.' That sounds understanding, and a little wistful too.

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Main image: Cécile B. Evans, Amos' World Is Live, 2018, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna and Rome photograph: Yuri Pattison

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