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[DIARY](#) | [PICKS](#) | [NEWS](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [FILM](#) | [PASSAGES](#) | [SLANT](#)

IN PRINT



recent issues

- [February 2015](#)
- [January 2015](#)
- [December 2014](#)
- [November 2014](#)
- [October 2014](#)
- [September 2014](#)
- [Summer 2014](#)
- [Archive to 1962](#)

Cécile B. Evans

SEVENTEEN



Cécile B. Evans,
*Hyperlinks or it didn't
happen*, 2014, HD video,
color, sound, 22 minutes 30
seconds.

Cécile B. Evans's recent exhibition "Hyperlinks" centered on a roughly twenty-three-minute looped video, *Hyperlinks or it didn't happen*, 2014, which was shown in the corner of the gallery on a flat screen positioned in front of a carpet. The carpet was an invitation to sit down, put on a pair of headphones, and engage with "Phil," a digitally animated dead ringer for the late Philip Seymour Hoffman, who narrates a vast exploration of how grief is transmitted, circulated, and archived through digital culture. Donning the headphones felt like an act of connection in which the physical space of the gallery—littered with works that expanded on the video content, including a limited-edition copy of *Softness*, a beauty oil created by Evans and artistic platform Studio Leigh—was conjoined with a digital world that collapses time and space, not to mention matter and memory.

Hyperlinks functions like a giant flatbed picture plane on which digital avatar Yowane Haku—who is made with the same software and model parts as Hatsune Miku, the holographic singer who toured with Lady Gaga worldwide—perpetually dances to Beyoncé and Jay-Z's "Forever Young" and Billy Idol's "Eyes Without a Face" (she gyrates to the latter in a computer-rendered model of an underwater hotel with giant jellyfish swimming in the background). Within this state of hyperlinkage, Phil—who at times converses with AGNES, a spambot Evans created for the Serpentine Galleries website—is central to the video: a digital resurrection that embodies a consideration of what "happens when disaster is captured on film," or in other words, when trauma is crystallized (or historicized) as digital information. ("I will always be here, lurking somewhere on this drive until they drag me to another more climatized drive," Phil says.)

But Hoffman is not the only "ghost" in this narrative. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, whose condition was not physical but rather the result of people not seeing him, haunts the video, too. His female counterpart is a platinum-blonde wig and pair of sneakers representing the women whom history has likewise rendered invisible—a point supported by a reference in *Hyperlinks* to the "Computer Girls," a band of now-forgotten women identified in *Cosmopolitan* magazine by computer scientist Dr. Grace Hopper, who used the term to describe female programmers in the 1960s, when an attempt was made to define programming as "women's work." This statement on the position (or suppression) of women in society is only one of many focal points around which Evans weaves her exploration of absence and loss: a reflection on the infinite universe of information from which Evans draws. This was underscored by more than two hundred photographs scattered on the carpet in front of the video, including close-up shots of computer servers, a portrait of Marilyn Monroe, a fake On Kawara date painting for the day after he died, and screenshots of chats taken from a story posted on the sub-Reddit NoSleep about a man haunted by the ghost of his girlfriend on Facebook.

Amid this pile of images, there was one telling inclusion that encapsulated the many ghosts in humanity's machine: the reproduction of an archival print of the Mechanical Turk—an eighteenth-century chess-playing machine that was operated (deceptively) by a man encased within the apparatus itself. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin compares the automaton's deception to the "blind logic of history," which fails to consider how the past is often formulated as a chain of sequential events "like the beads of a rosary," retroactively. Evans takes the opposite approach with her hyperlinks: that of the historian who (according to Benjamin) grasps—or processes—a constellation of events so as to conceptualize "the time of now." That's the point about the specters that haunt us today. Ghosts do not shape our present conception of the world: We do.

—Stephanie Bailey

✉ PERMALINK COMMENTS

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