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The Atmospheres and Architectures of Cerith Wyn Evans

BY ERIK MORSE

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Installation view, "...no field of vision", Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo: Alex Yudzon.
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The filmmaker, sculptor, and light artist Cerith Wyn Evans belongs to a genealogy of 20th-century artist-writers like Raymond Roussel, Edward James, John Cage, and Marcel Duchamp who were intent on re-inventing the language and perceptions of the physical world while simultaneously transforming themselves through elaborate performances of self-invention. Although he is no nostalgic (in fact, Evans claims a strong affinity with Futurism), the artist's appreciation for fashion, conversation, and the occasional, ribald bon mot evokes the vanishing élan of the Edwardian dandy.

Born in the small village of Llanelli in South Wales, Evans developed a love of photography and clothing from his father at a young age. (He recalls with glee his mother's horror at his first haute couture purchase—a pair of Jean-Paul Gaultier trousers—only to have his father remark on the importance of high quality fabric.) He moved to London in the mid 1970s to study sculpture at Saint Martin's School of Art (later to become Central Saint Martins) and film and video at the Royal College of Art under Structuralist filmmaker Peter Gidal. During this time, he befriended other queer and punk artists in London; among them were Leigh Bowery, Derek Jarman, Michael Clark, Tilda Swinton, and Genesis P. Orridge, all of whom would contribute substantially to the art-punk aesthetic.

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Over the following years, Evans assisted Jarman on films *The Angelic Conversation* (1985) and *The Last of England* (1987) while contributing to music videos for post-punk groups like The Fall, Psychic TV, The Pet Shop Boys, and The Smiths. His own short films “Still Life with Phrenology Head” (1979), “Epiphany” (1984), and “Degrees of Blindness” (1988) (starring a young Tilda Swinton) were altogether more conceptual and obscurantist, merging Structuralist and phenomenological motifs with the narcotic eroticism of Aleister Crowley and Kenneth Anger. In this way, the young filmmaker was able to navigate between avant-garde, and often doctrinaire, art institutions like the London Film-Makers’ Co-operative and the underground pop and queer subcultures then emerging across England.

Throughout the 1990s and ’00s, Evans’s persistent fascinations with color, light, and “soft” architectures extended beyond the viewfinder and into the use of neon, spotlights, Murano glass, fire, plant life, mirror balls, and mechanical contraptions of his own making—although, like Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers before him, the concept and language undergirding the constellation of materials was of equal import. His work is, as he explains it, part of a larger “interrogation into the scopic regime.” Perhaps most recognizable in Evans’s catalog are his neon light sculptures, which vary widely in size and shape from wall-length fractals and starbursts to small, minimalist grids. Their employment of negative space, layered light, and subtractive, natural light recalls Frank O’Hara’s droll line about Times Square: “Neon in daylight is a great

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pleasure.” Sometimes accompanied by minimal or process scores composed by Evans himself, they also emphasize the evanescence of atmosphere over *thing*-ness, rendering an emotional as well as speculative experience that feels nearer in spirit to Lucio Fontana’s midcentury light environments than most contemporary installations from so-called “neon artists.” (“You walk through these things—you don’t just look at them,” he instructs me with a professorial trill.)



Photo: Alex Yudzon. Copyright: Cerith Wyn Evans

His new show “no realm of thought...”/“...no field of vision” at Marian Goodman Gallery is split between simultaneous exhibitions in Paris (“no realm of thought...”) and New York (“...no field of vision”), and represents what Evans calls “two chapters” of the same work. Among the pieces on display are a collection of neon grills shaped like theatrical backdrops and inspired

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by Frank Stella's genre-defining *Black Paintings* series; the neon tubes' arrhythmic throbbing and the perspectival latticing of light upon light is hypnotic and disorientating. In Paris, they are presented alongside lighted columns that suggest the psychotropic dream machines of Brion Gysin, as well as several hanging mobiles of cracked windshields (part of Evans's ongoing interpretations of Duchamp's mammoth Dada installation, *The Bride Stripped Bare by his Bachelors, Even*). Taken together, these pieces offer an alternative vision of numerous, modern masterworks as well as an archive of light that casts itself over the previous century.

In a recent conversation, the Welsh artist and bon vivant discusses his personal history with cinema and light, his place in British experimental film, and the role of the dandy in art and death. By turns voluble and wryly self-effacing, Evans frequently speaks in riddle and seems happiest to make the underlying topic of our conversation the art of the conversation itself.

Vogue: I must admit that I'm a bit torn between asking the sorts of abstract or conceptual questions that your artwork tends to provoke and—

Cerith Wyn Evans: ...And the bitch who needs to make some money to pay the rent and needs to ask the dumbed down questions, right? Oh, come on, it's fine. There is no difference and we both know that. I think all we have to do is measure the temperature of the occasion appropriately. That's it. We'll all be happy for the exposure.

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What I'd really like to talk about is how your work fits into a general theme of atmospheres and soft architectures.

That's a big question and one that gets at what kind of space my work occupies, or what it defines itself as or is affiliated with. As soon as you begin to make sculpture in relationship to architecture, then you begin to invoke those, for want of a better term, atmospheres. The only thing I can say about this—despite you only giving me four words and then me jumping in with two hundred—is the fact that this is the subject matter that I'm exploring: the tendency to be in a space which is under severe interrogation of its propensity to hold its room or be its space. Or change its identity or transmogrify into a different social function of a space. Or how a light falls in a space. It's the conditional of the spatial that is at stake.



Photo: Alex Yudzon. Copyright: Cerith Wyn Evans

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I was curious about the use of ellipsis in the title of the shows, “no realm of thought.../...no field of vision.”

There's a way in which [the ellipsis] transforms. The full stop isn't especially gratifying because it doesn't allow you to allude to things. Desire doesn't really have full stops when it's transmogrified into literature. The whole notion of syntax melts. So, when you have something like “dot, dot, dot,” it implies that something is yet to happen or continues or is unsteady, all of those things which I suppose I identify with the way that I get it on.

I think the ellipsis also applies to a larger gesture of doubt, which is the unique domain of conceptual artists like yourself, or others like Marcel Duchamp or Marcel Broodthaers. What interests me about conceptual art is how doubt or the consideration of failure can become central to the work. Not just if the work is good or bad, but does it have meaning or sense.

The meaning *of* sense is about natural progression. It requires rational thinking. This is language's control over the world. So, when I have a haptic doubt about these things, I introduce a whole other capacity where people maybe identify with the doubt or stammering. Cubism did this too. I would even say Cézanne did this. It goes back a long way. You fall in love with this “it ain't necessarily so” principle. Do you remember when people had CDs or records and they would skip? It would get

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caught up in its little micro-revolution...when there's a glitch or you have to wait when something is buffering, or you don't have sufficient speed in order to download something. Looking at those spaces of discomfort becomes part of the work, part of the scenario.

Another important aspect of this question of doubt is that your work—and that of Duchamp—tarries in this unique place between the optical or retinal and the conceptual. We tend to think of the experience or materiality of light as inhabiting an ecstatic space where language stops or falls silent. This becomes a space of epiphany or pure illumination. But your work has always attempted to merge the optical and the rhetorical, light and speech.

Well, I think that's very generous of you to think that through. In a way, I'm largely with you there. That's a territory I recognize. Now, if we look at Marcel Duchamp, there's very little that he made that cast a light onto anything. There's all kinds of references in his work to light, but rarely did his work cast a light *on* something. But a lot of his work somehow is interested in this idea that visual art needs a light to make it exist or be visible.

I think your work has also always attempted to create a language or history around light by forming it into an atmosphere.

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Well, I can't help myself. I don't set out to do this. I don't really go out of my way to go, "Okay, this is what I'm trying to do now." I feel it's always been much more instinctive. I'm just trying to improvise in this territory. I don't think in light. My dad was a photographer. So, when I was age one, I didn't think, "Why is my dad a photographer?" It was given to me. *Étant donné*s. It was a given that my dad had a darkroom in the garden where he made photographs. I didn't have to get to a point where I started thinking it was a good idea to work with light. I was born with that.



Evans in 1980. Photo: Getty Images

In the late 1970s and '80s, you attended Saint Martins and became part of a group of quite famous British experimental filmmakers. At what point did you become associated with figures like Derek Jarman?

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Derek just lived next door to me, so you would bump into him on the street. It wasn't like being affiliated. You couldn't help it—he was just there. And he was very sweet to me. And we ended up having a talk and became friends. It was very organic. You didn't think these things through. It was just on your doorstep. They were your neighbors, they were your friends.

Did you have a similar relationship with John Maybury, Sally Potter, or Peter Greenaway?

I didn't have any relationship at all with the more conventional filmmakers. I've never met Peter Greenaway or liked his films. Never met Sally Potter or any of those people. I was an experimental filmmaker. I even looked down on Derek because I thought he was too straight. My real favorite filmmaker is Peter Gidal, who was my tutor at the Royal College after I left Saint Martins. Peter's films are very, very different from the kind of queer nostalgia that Derek represents to a certain extent. Peter is my hero. Derek, as wonderful and gorgeous as he is, I couldn't bear to look at his films. They're awful. I hate them.

All of them?

They're tacky. They're kind of queen-y, hippie. He was so full of himself. And I helped him make them, and I edited the lot of them. But it's a constant source of shame for me. It's hard for boys like Derek to fight against the pressure that his ghastly bourgeois family put on him. So, he had to rebel. But his rebellion was really quite

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measured. It wasn't experimental. And then, when the most terrible thing in the world happens and Derek is dying because he got HIV—and they didn't have the stupid drugs at the time that could keep him alive—then the real pain happens, and Derek dies. And it's horrible, it's the worst fucking thing ever. I don't rate Derek being good at all, actually. But he was kind to me, and I will always consider him to be a kind and marvelous and wonderful friend. Now, everyone assumes we were this big happy family, but it wasn't the case at all. There were all these distinctions we made between each other at that time. I suppose we were all just working through it. The people who became my friends—I was desperate to find them, coming from south Wales, from a very conservative, Christian family. So I fell in with these people, and it was never thought out.

I want to ask a bit more about the relationship between music and filmmaking. Your work, along with Jarman's, Maybury's and others', moved between art film and pop music, and you collaborated with groups like Psychic TV, The Smiths, The Fall, and The Pet Shop Boys on their music videos or video projects.

Well, when you leave art school you need to make a living, and you're not just going to work in the shop. So, you have to enter into that negotiation with the music business or fashion or whatever it is, where there's money and people are kind. And they appreciate what you're trying to do. So you start to make applied art in a way. At the time, one of the things record companies wanted to do was to promote their artists with short films. There's a

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long history with all of that. And for many years that paid my rent. It allowed me to do other things. It's always been the case. When artists needed to make money, they leaned into the business side. And a lot of these people were really lovely, and you were friends with them anyway. It didn't feel like there was this distinction between one thing and the other. It was quite a soft subversion moving across. You didn't think, Oh, now I'm doing money work, and now I'm doing proper artwork. It was never that. And you'd find that across the board, because collaboration was quite welcome and productive. Now, when you think of collaboration, it's this big blah-blah-blah with some multinational institution. But it wasn't like that at the time. It was more organic and softer and sweeter.

Some of the new neon works make formal reference to Frank Stella's *Black Paintings* series. It's sort of incredible that Stella became an art celebrity overnight for these paintings.

They were also made in the year I was born, as was Lucio Fontana's Spatial Concept Manifesto. So in a way they are a springboard for me.

Stella did those paintings in his very early 20s, and I'm curious if there was something in your celebration of them as signs of the impetuosity of youth.

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It is that. You are absolutely right. And you'll have to come to New York in order to see what I do with them. They can exist in a photograph and as a citation from the original, but you'll have to come and see how they work in the space, because since I did them in neon they are transparent and you can see through them. It's radically different.

What was the significance of choosing these particular paintings?

There's no significance. Think about what Karlheinz Stockhausen does with Haydn, for instance. So, music is a huge influence on what I make. And to a certain extent, I think of the Stella originals as some kind of score that I'm playing by transcribing it into another visual and spatial register. They are stepping stones. It's like when John Cage says to Morton Feldman, "Just take a note, Morty, and use it as a springboard to the next note." It's like that.

I want to close by asking you briefly about the style of the dandy and how sartorial invention has permeated all of your film, video, and light work.

I was born like this. It's really rather straightforward. I inherited this. My grandfather once convinced my grandmother to convert her gold earrings into cufflinks for him. My father was a tailor. End of. I adore tailoring. I have my clothes made. I worship the art of tailoring, it's phenomenal. I went to school with John Galliano, Stephen Jones, all these people. Stefano Pilati cited me

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in *GQ* magazine as the best-dressed man in the world. And I'm flattered. And every single day, some old lady or some kid comes up to me and says, "I love the way you look." And I say, "Well, I love the way you look, too." I was in Paris and the head of Comme des Garçons came up to me and said, "You look fabulous, darling." That happens to me all the time. It's great. I love the attention, I love swanking about in funny clothes. I've always had, since I was a baby.



Evans in 2018. Photo: Getty Images

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Is there some implicit fantasy to the dandy?

There is no fantasy, really. It's just how you feel about yourself. I suppose growing up in Wales I was beaten up as a child, and I was frightened. People would pick on me, because I was, I suppose, naturally not conventional. Because I wore funny clothes. But those funny clothes weren't designer clothes, they were clothes that I would make myself. Then you grow up and identify with looking just slightly different.

Do you see some connection between your fascination with invention and these literary dandy figures from the past, like Raymond Roussel, Alfred Jarry, or Duchamp?

We know from someone like Raymond Roussel, he was very self-aware. He was painfully self-aware of his own status in the world. He had the means to be very particular and brilliant about the way he could order his clothes, because people who had money would do that. The dandy is a very commodified figure who emerges in the 18th century in Western Europe, and is linked to narcissism and wealth. And the working classes embraced dandyism enormously through subcultures like with music, et cetera, et cetera.

But what intrigues me is this shared fascination between dandies like Roussel, Jarry, Duchamp, and yourself with self-invention.

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Of course there is. And there is a kind of mythic organization. That's true of Kenneth Anger, also. Before this interview I rewatched *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* by Kenneth Anger. I know Kenneth Anger—he's still alive, thank God. He saw a film of mine and told me, "You are a fellow traveler." He sent me a birthday card on my birthday—I nearly died. It was so exciting. I was just going out of my mind. But in a way we've all had to construct our identities, and one of the ways to do that is to control your performance and appearance in the world. Part of me thought I wasn't properly dressed until someone was horrible to me every day. You'd put something on and then someone would yell at you, "You fuckin' poof!" You'd get abuse. I'm telling the truth. You'd get shouted at from across the street and you think, "I must be doing something right."

At some point, the dandy's fascination with self-invention also becomes a fantasy of world invention, where you begin creating these fantastical objects, these contraptions as part of your work.

It is also a way of contravening natural history. Because pretty much anyone who is switched on kills themselves—like Roussel. If you really want to be that much in control, then the ultimate thing to do, the ultimate dandy's role, is death. It's that beautiful, it's that simple. The dandy sees the world as not enough. All right, my darling, nice speaking with you!

This conversation has been edited and condensed. "...no field of vision" is currently on view at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York.