

DEATH DRIVE

Mathieu Malouf and Jeffrey Kastner on Michel Houellebecq

MATHIEU MALOUF

IN HIS 2016 BOOK *Mémoires d'outre-France*, Gavin Bowd, a lifelong Marxist and close friend of Michel Houellebecq, reminisced about a night spent drinking with the novelist in Paris's thirteenth arrondissement. "I will give an interview in which I call for a civil war to rid France of Islam!" Houellebecq exclaimed. "I'll tell people to vote for Marine Le Pen!" The mini media scandal that ensued following the book's publication was hardly unprecedented in France, where Houellebecq is known for incendiary declarations. He has also spoken out against a proposed law to fine the (male) clients of prostitutes in France (also protested by other Gallic public figures, who signed "Don't Touch My Whore!", a "manifesto of the 343 bastards"). Here in America, many of Houellebecq's over-the-top right-wing splashes in the media are lost in translation. Instead, he arrives blended into a smooth, semi-marketable image of a tortured French writer who smokes too much, potentially hates women, and drinks a lot, while his politics remain always a little too idiosyncratic to really juice a good story.

Like Marcel Broodthaers, another poet who became bored with writing late in life, Houellebecq recently decided to begin making exhibitions. Other than a few prior instances of direct contact between the author and the American art world—such as a chaotic 2005 lecture at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles featuring a pole dancer with dwarfism—"French Bashing," at Venus (formerly Venus over Manhattan) in New York, was his first proper introduction as an artist. On the invitation of gallerist Adam Lindemann, Houellebecq built on a wildly popular (and by many accounts "atrocious") exhibition he'd staged at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2016, which he used, so the rumor goes, partly as an excuse to clear out items cluttering his Paris apartment

(among them a tombstone bearing his name).

The Venus show, by contrast, was mostly free of sculptural works, aside from a massive desk that literalized the existential burden of working an office job, a focus of Houellebecq's first novels and of the spleen of his poetry in the early 1990s. The exhibition took the form of an installation of recent photographs split



Michel Houellebecq, *Tourisme #002*, 2017, ink-jet print, 39 1/4 x 55 1/2".

thematically between two galleries: one dedicated to suicidal depression, with the imminent downfall of France and Europe looming in the background, the other to the joys of tourism.

In accordance with his deep and well-documented admiration for Arthur Schopenhauer and Auguste Comte, Houellebecq says that his visual art, like his novels, is an attempt to "tell the truth about the world." Once past the almost complete absence of ambiguity in his work, the viewer may find something very refreshing in his overbearing earnest, intently reactionary craft as an artist, which serves as a severely executed exten-

sion of his poetry in the visual realm. The photographs of crumbling highway exchanges, rotted-out monuments, and monumental office towers in Houellebecq's visual art become fully sincere Baudelairean signifiers of a European civilization in decline, expressions of a soul in deep pain and in search of meaning; he has referred to their effect as "visual electricity."

The first gallery of "French Bashing" was lit only by framing projectors illuminating individual aluminum-mounted digital prints. A lot of what was on display here looked like badly plotted airport ads, but the presence of these works in a gallery setting evoked that strain of contemporary art in which Photoshop looms large, Simon Denny's mass-produced canvases being among the most obvious examples. *Mission #001*, 2016, reassembles an oversize printout of a Tumblr meme dripping with teenage angst. *VOUS N'AVEZ AUCUNE CHANCE* (You don't stand a chance), reads a sentence superimposed on a grim, grayscale view of a small town

from a plane window. *CONTINUER?* Underneath, a solitary OS X-style "OK" button seals the deal. Life must go on despite the fact that it is painful, albeit less painful than finding the strength to kill yourself.

Through a thick curtain, the exhibition continued in a brightly lit room whose floor was scattered with plastic place mats from tourist destinations from the South of France. In keeping with the narrative established earlier, this metaphorical space represented salvation and escape from reality for the ur-Houellebecqian hero: a white, thirtysomething, sexually frustrated, suicidal

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Left: Michel Houellebecq, *France #014*, 2016, ink-jet print, 39 1/4 x 57 1/2". Below: View of "Michel Houellebecq: French Bashing," 2017, Venus, New York.

IT guy. In *Platform* (2001), salvation comes in the form of unlimited sexual tourism and, later, true meaningful love. In *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), adapted into an amazingly hard-to-watch Bergmanesque movie in 2008, the main character joins a Raëlian-like sect and enjoys the unlimited benefits of human cloning, eternal life, and mass orgies. At Venus, the fun was a little bit cleaner and perhaps better suited to the politically sensitive climate of New York's art world in 2017—no prostitutes or aliens in sight.

A high point of the exhibition, *Tourisme #002*, 2017, was a photograph of a mural encountered somewhere sunny and fun—a wall painting of a jubilating, open-mouthed man with circus performers and tigers reflected in his aviator sunglasses. The picture, a very straightforward depiction of joy, delivered a rare dose of unfiltered emotion—universal and immediate—that mirrors the simple pleasure of being amazed by a great show (this one?). But the photo is also a very unconvincing *trompe l'oeil*: Images lie, and standing in front of such an oppressive effusion of manufactured glee, it was difficult not to think that happiness, too, is false.

"I hate you, Jesus Christ, for giving me a body," Houellebecq laments in *La poursuite du bonheur* (1991). Supposing Jesus was, in fact, listening (or in this case looking), this exhibition certainly managed to serve a generous-enough portion of human suffering, one that might even have made our savior feel a little bit of jealousy—or hope?—seeing that someone down here is trying so hard to die for the sins of man.

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JEFFREY KASTNER

THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY, Michel Houellebecq's Prix Goncourt-winning 2010 novel, takes its epigraph from the fifteenth-century nobleman and poet Charles d'Orléans: "The world is weary of me, / And I am weary

of it." The sentiment will be instantly familiar to anyone acquainted with the celebrated, controversial French author's work, which teems with an apparently inexhaustible array of sad sacks and misanthropes—the damaged, the soul-sick, the emotionally stunted. Among other things, *The Map and the Territory* is the story of an artist and a satire of a particular kind of cosmopolitan artistic milieu; it name-checks such boldface figures as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, and features a Famous Writer (one "Michel Houellebecq") who ends up the victim of an exceptionally gruesome murder. For all this, however, the book is actually among the least jaundiced of the author's creations: It's relatively free of the sexual miserabilism, reactionary political disquisition, and misogynist provocation that (too frequently for many)

garnish his storytelling. And its moments of lyricism, many of which gather around descriptions of artmaking and artworks, suggest a genuine affinity for the practice, if not necessarily the company, of visual artists.

In summer 2016, Houellebecq—who, alongside his writing career, has been taking photographs for many years—was formally inducted into the society of "artists" himself when he was invited to create his first-ever exhibition, at Paris's Palais de Tokyo. "*Rester Vivant*" (To Stay Alive) was a sprawling affair, featuring not only the writer's photos but also a variety of installations spilling across eighteen galleries. This past summer, New York got its own taste of the author's crossover bid, with a recast tidbit of the Paris show taking up occupancy at Venus on the Upper East Side. "French Bashing" consisted of thirty-odd photographs split between two visually contrasting, if similarly mordant, areas of the gallery. The works on view—and the installation itself, which included a pair of corresponding low-volume soundscapes created by Raphaël Sohier—not surprisingly engaged with topics familiar from the author's books: physical and affectual marginality; a kind of garish forced happiness that papers over fundamental anomie; authenticity of all types (especially of the French cultural sort) devolving into speciousness.

The first of the exhibition's two rooms was dark, save for spotlights trained on a series of midsize photos. Shot in color but desaturated into browns and grays, they most often focused on peri-urban zones, places at the edges of metroplexes marked by anonymous and dour housing compounds and various species of bureaucratic and infrastructural bodies—rail lines and highway arteries, toll booths and train stations, fences, towers, pipes. Several of the images were aerial shots—of bland suburban apartment blocks

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