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JOHN KELSEY ON MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ AT VENUS OVER MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

Michel Houellebecq, “France #002,” 2016

On a return trip to a five-star hotel that served as a location in his novel “The Map and the Territory” (2010), Michel Houellebecq took advantage of the escapades amoureuses on offer and signed up for a recommended balloon ride to survey the sprawl of hospital complexes, hypermarkets, and parking lots amid the rolling hills of otherwise bucolic Bourgogne. Here is where, in the book, the novelist has Olga, the beautiful publicity agent for Michelin Guides, end her relationship with art star Jed, announcing her return to Russia between brutally precise reflections on the decline of regional cuisine under the pressure of Chinese tourism and its more sausage-oriented metabolism. A good tourist himself, Houellebecq, too, prefers the recommended routes of Michelin’s oriented experiences, sticking to the bus-loaded vectors that have transformed France into a drably efficient transit zone for lonely, horny neohumans. And ever since his early poetry, photography has coincided

neatly with Houellebecq's -writing process, framing the postindustrial desert of Western Europe both for descriptive purposes and as a means of isolating blocs of space-time to summon characters and their feelings. In another scene, Jed flips through the user's guide for a Samsung ZRT-AV2, meditating on the brochure's lyrical optimism as it welcomes and congratulates its new user, but noting that "at the end of the day, this camera was perhaps not made with him in mind." Freeways and photography offer special access to the metaphysics of disappearance, because, as with the characters in Houellebecq's books, it's only by barely existing that contemporary users can fully participate in the systems that include and atomize them. Tourists and photographers are interchangeable anybodies at the frontlines of the gentrification of experience.

Michel Houellebecq, „France #104," installation view

Like a miserablist ad campaign for the decline of the West, the French author's bloodless photos of depopulated highway rest areas, wastelands along fenced-off commuter train routes, exurban housing developments for the commuting unemployed, heavily policed non-places mushrooming in the wake of engineering feats such as Euro Disney and the Chunnel, as well as crepuscular views from his own high-rise apartment block at the edge of Paris, are sometimes superimposed

with taglines taken from his novels and poems: “I had no more reason to kill myself than most of these people did.” Thirty-some of these images constituted the whole of “French Bashing,” Houellebecq’s solo show this summer at Venus Over Manhattan gallery in New York. In interviews published on the occasion of “Rester Vivant,” his 2016 exhibition at Paris’s Palais de Tokyo (where this work was first shown), the author speaks of his preference for 45mm focal lengths and a 30–45 degree angle in relation to his bleak vistas – the former to replicate normal human vision, the latter to simulate views experienced in his own recurring dreams of flying. Houellebecq seems to be in search of the déjà-vu, or the wastelands of his own unconscious, frequently comparing photography to the poetic process whereby a world or an image arrives whole and complete unto itself, with no breathing room and no out of frame. Meanwhile, the same security fences around the Chunnel entrance that once served to prevent local suicides now block the passage of non-Western refugees to England. Even the entrance to a popular nudist beach feels concentration camp-like. In the New York exhibition, the first room was darkened, with only the artworks illuminated edge to edge by spotlights, sometimes casting the viewer’s own shadow over an image as it was approached. Ambient recordings of passing trains and other melancholy sounds were piped in from overhead speakers.

“Michel Houellebecq: French Bashing,” Venus Over Manhattan, New York, 2017, installation view (floor)

The show's second room, by contrast, was brightly lit and its floor brightly tiled with souvenir placemats advertising popular vacation spots in France and Spain. The soundtrack to this section was sunny too, with children's laughter and a faint saxophone probably recorded at some seaside breakfast area. Here, Houellebecq's photographs are more amped and colorized, focusing on garish, folksy imagery printed on the sides of tour buses and sun-drenched zones where wild nature and sweeping dunes abut the abstraction of signage, mass transit, and consumption. In one image, taken from the preferred hot air balloon/flying-while-dreaming angle, the geometry of a Leader Price box store seems to have crash-landed into a lush green hillside. Tourism, like video gaming, triggers hallucinations of the end of humanity, setting up dreamy interfaces with emptiness and non-presence. In Houellebecq's novella "Lanzarote" (2000), which narrates a lonely guy's holiday in a landscape more lunar than earthly, the protagonist, hoping to avoid a depressing New Year's Eve in Paris, finds himself adrift in this other, Southern void, wondering if he'll hook up with any of the other tourists … maybe the German lesbian couple. This book includes images of desert rock formations and petrified mudslides shot by Houellebecq, organizing a direct encounter between tourism, photography, and writing – a hybrid mode he would push much further in his exhibition at Palais de Tokyo, where these and other activities were repackaged as an oriented, mood-lit, heavily designed, and immersive promenade through the museum's galleries, ending in a multimedia memorial – narrated by Iggy Pop – to the author's dead dog.

Houellebecq has compared authorship to the terrifying yet marvelous experience of hydroplaning in an automobile. On Madison Avenue, the author-in-transit is like a depressed Imagineer pushing a gloomy son et lumière poetics of nihilistic drift. In a couple of works, scribbled notes on the declining role of intellectuals in France are superimposed over desaturated views through windshields. Doodled in advance of a lecture in Brazil he says he barely remembers but probably didn't go over so well, the notes proliferate into radiating arrows and squiggled tangents, as if diagramming the ejaculation of individuated

destinies across a fatally horizontalized infoscape … "Balzac … Perec." Assuming that no New York museum was willing to host his Paris show, it's maybe appropriate that Houellebecq hydroplanes into this blue-chip swamp, far from the demand for peer-to-peer connectability that most new art is supplying today. Since the publication of "The Elementary Particles" (1998), he has continued to remake himself as an international icon of antagonism, working all the media channels (press, television, cinema …) to become as ubiquitous as he is unclassifiable: always somehow "other" within his chosen element. Contemporary art is one more way of feeding his inevitable haters and fanboys, and for the real haters he can always hire bodyguards.

Sliced from "Rester Vivant" and pasted into Manhattan's Upper East Side, "French Bashing" also performs the tourism of art itself, the derisory mobilization of bits of aesthetic experience between weakly attracted zones of consumption in demand of viewers and cash. The poem that wants to be written, here, is the neohuman one that comes after the eclipse of photography and the end of galleries, where images arrive as if hydroplaning in a dream, cruising in a vaguely elevated place, best-selling, solo, and disoriented at last.

"Michael Houellebecq: French Bashing," Venus Over Manhattan, New York, June 2–August 4, 2017.