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Michel Houellebecq. *France #014* (2016); pigment print on Baryta paper mounted on aluminum; 39 3/16 x 57 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.

Michel Houellebecq at Venus Over Manhattan

by Noah Dillon (Class of 2012)

On June 3, 2017, the day after writer Michel Houellebecq's exhibition, *French Bashing*, opened at Venus Over Manhattan, three Islamist terrorists killed eight people, and wounded 48 more, on London Bridge and in the nearby Borough Market. Almost all the victims were tourists. The attackers, three young men aged 22 to 31 years old, lived in suburbs of east London. Like the perpetrators of other plots in Europe since 2014, they were largely raised in Europe and familiar with its geography and culture. Houellebecq's show, which reworks two installations from his first ever exhibition, at the Palais de Tokyo last year, was almost inevitably spiked by such a millenarian and banally horrifying context of suspicion and suddenly dispensed violence in an urban center, coming from beyond its edges.

The allegedly misanthropic 61-year-old writer has explored at length social corrosion, especially as enacted by frustrated and impotent-feeling young men, in novels and poetry. *French Bashing* collects and frames photographs taken by the artist, which he often uses as stimulation for his writing, and some are displayed with selections of text from his written works. The images and text spring from this nexus of travel, violence, and middle class lifestyle, of ideologies and anxieties that appear to pervade both Europe and the United States.



Michel Houellebecq. *French Bashing* (2017); installation view, Venus Over Manhattan, NY. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.

The textual additions are maudlin and unnecessarily melodramatic when taken out of their original context. While his novels build like a knife held in a wound, here, the atomized bits of language read more like idle threats. In his 2015 novel *Submission*, the plot of which is catalyzed by a terrorist attack, suicide is invoked as a syllogism for Europe's failure to give its citizens something to live for. (That book, coincidentally, was published the day of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris.) The phrase "I had no more reason to kill myself than most of these people did," taken from *Submission* and used in the artwork *France #008–France #009–I had...* (2017), is an attempt at provocation that falls flat. Likewise, handwritten notes on some of the photos, as in *Inscriptions #006* (2016), don't inspire much interest.

But the photos themselves are curious, despite looking leaden and icy. Taken around France by Houellebecq, they're blown up and printed on fine Baryta paper, mounted on aluminum panels. The gallery has been made bleak: small projectors light each panel hung on black-painted walls, so that almost only the panel itself is illuminated, appearing to glow cinematically. Above, an ambient soundscape by Raphaël Sohier adds a little more grit to the show's texture. The installation can be hard to navigate, as the oblique angles of the projectors in relation to the images require one to move around and find a spot to examine the surface without one's shadow invading.



Michel Houellebecq. *France #012* (2016); pigment print on Baryta paper mounted on aluminum; 19 1/2 x 28 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.

The images appear mundane and offhand: mostly suburbs, waystations, highways, borders—not documentary of a particular phenomenon or situation, but a fog of transit, security, and capitalism. (In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, taking photos like these was sometimes regarded as suspicious activity, resulting in photojournalists and tourists being detained by police and accused of prospective criminality.) In many of Houellebecq’s images the color is bleached near absence. In *France #014* (2016), gray clouds, gray steel barrier wall, gray asphalt, gray cars, and a great gray concrete sign reading “EUROPE” resolve into a tastefully designed wasteland. (The sign, located at a shopping center in Calais, has subsequently been painted bright red.) Others show security installations, railroads, planned communities, shipping centers. These picture the backdrop of dull daily insecurity that hums behind much of the developed world since about 2001, and before—petite bourgeois anxiety and suggestions of violence. After the Borough Market attack, after so many small and crude and persistent terrorizing attacks in the past few years, it can seem, while walking around public soft targets—crowded, unguarded civilian sites such as subway platforms or plazas or concerts, etc.—it can seem mysterious that they are in fact rare, especially in the U.S., a country which heartily endorses easy access to firearms. Such mundane background architecture holds the latent potential to suddenly become activated by a maniac with a knife or a small gun or a car, an improvised explosive device. (The architecture of Paris’s civil space, where Houellebecq studied and where many of his books take place, was designed for easy access by military authorities in case of violence by the citizens.)



Michel Houellebecq. *France #017* (2016); pigment print on Baryta paper mounted on aluminum; 19 1/2 x 28 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.

Sites in Houellebecq’s photos are filled with such potential: the really average places where angry young men and other regular people live and shop and ride public transit. Tourists and terrorists seem especially likely, in the West, to come from the suburbs, places termed by Houellebecq as “peri-urban” feeders—neighborhoods that act as arteries for many people who’d prefer to pass through or get out. Following a bombing plot in New York and New Jersey last September, London’s mayor, Sadiq Khan, rightly noted that in much of the world, “Part and parcel of living in a great global city is you’ve got to be prepared for [terrorism].” Bomb blasts can fade into background noise, though some tourists so frighten some U.S. citizens that they’ve been banned from entry by presidential decree.

Behind a curtain at the Venus show laid an apparently opposing vision of the developed world: the destination vacation. Too brightly lit and brightly white and overwhelming after the spare, blackened gallery, the floor is plastered with placemats collected from vacation spots around the European continent, laminated to protect them from the viewers' feet. The smiling attractions and acid colors betray grimmer connotations under Houellebecq's blank and impassive installation. A placemat from the Basque region celebrates all the fun things to do nearby, but doesn't, of course, mention that a violent regional ethnic separatist group had waged a campaign of bombings and assassinations and brutality since 1959, and only disarmed this past April.



Michel Houellebecq. *French Bashing* (2017); installation view, Venus Over Manhattan, NY. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.



Michel Houellebecq. *Tourisme #002* (2016); pigment print on Baryta paper mounted on aluminum; 39 3/16 x 55 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.

Another placemat has an insignia of three connected spirals, a triskelion, in black on a white field. Formerly a neolithic image found around Europe, it has recently been repurposed by northern European right-wing traditionalists, and an abstracted form is flown by some fascists. It's also used to advertise Ireland, where a long-running armed conflict killed hundreds of thousands over the past four hundred years. On another placemat, picturesque images of Fort Boyard and Bretagne sublimate the history of non-stop Anglo-French wars that persisted for centuries.

The floor is more exciting to look at, but mounted on the walls around the room are colorful photos of scenic sites and hotels, an ad for Spain's Oasis Park zoo, and a photo of a painted billboard for Thailand's Sriracha Tiger Zoo (Tourisme #002, 2017), with a guy so overwhelmed by the entertainment that his mouth waters and images of tigers are shooting out of his eyes. He's reminiscent of the happy people enjoying a post-war-booming economy and history of catastrophic destruction on Jamie Reid's 1977 promotional poster for the Sex Pistols' "Holidays in the Sun." They share the deranged, happy, knowingness—oblivious in expanded horizons—"a cheap holiday in other people's misery."



Michel Houellebecq. *French Bashing* (2017); installation view, Venus Over Manhattan, NY. Courtesy the artist and VENUS, New York.

Despite the grimness of the modern world, it affords a lot, such as travel and cheap consumer goods and rising wealth and falling mortality rates and rapid transit and an international order that has maintained peace among the world's major powers for more than 70 years. But it has not, in Houellebecq's vision, provided so much of spiritual value. Not even the secular rites of travel and development can fill that emptiness. (They are used, however, in attempts to alleviate existential malaise: a 2015 English-language travel guide issued by ISIS, described by Mother Jones as "a Lonely Planet for would-be recruits" travelling to Syria to serve a spiritual mission of destruction, has tips for routes and evasion strategies, as well as what practical, inexpensive consumer goods to bring, such as Earth-friendly solar chargers, plug adapters, fanny packs.) Houellebecq's work suggests the systems of terrorism, tourism, and commerce are a contemporary heartbeat, and thrum.