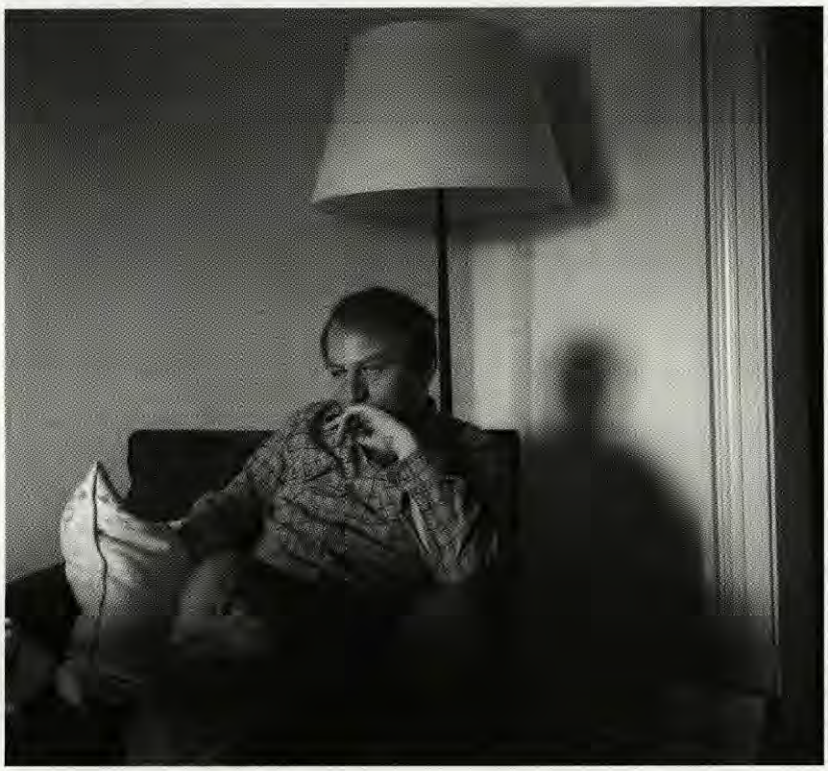
LOVE IN THE TIME OF HEDONISM

Michel Houellebecq's new novel

By Cristina Nehring

Discussed in this essay:

Platform, by Michel Houellebecq. Translated by Frank Wynne. Knopf, 2003. 272 pages. $25.



Of the two most inspected monuments in France, one belongs to the city of Paris and the other to Michel Houellebecq. Although appreciably smaller (it stands—when it stands—at approximately five inches), Houellebecq's commands indisputably more attention than the Eiffel Tower these days. This, in any case, is the impression one gleans from the controversy surrounding his books, all of which possess an unabashedly autobiographical bent.

He is an unlikely sex god—this slight, unfashionable, forty-five-year-old Frenchman—and an even more improbable celebrity. At book parties in his honor, he's the stooped figure in the yellow windbreaker, the guy in the corner slurping down drinks and studying his fluorescent Nikes, the man who leaves early, whose voice trails off when you ask him a question. Inviting him to a meal, according to members of the Paris literati, is like "asking the plumber to lunch." But you wouldn't want to bank on the docility of this plumber: taciturn as Houellebecq can be, he has galvanized global attention with his inflammatory statements to journalists as much as with his "willfully pornographic" fiction. The former have landed him in the French courts for "incitement to racial hatred"; the latter has installed him firmly on international bestseller lists.

It is with his second novel that Houellebecq seized literary celebrity. An earlier novel, *Whatever*, had provoked comparisons to Albert Camus but failed to propel its author to the attention of a larger public (he had also penned two poetry collections by that time, as well as a still overlooked biography of H. P. Lovecraft). Houellebecq remained a civil servant throughout it all, quietly debugging computers for the French ministry. And then, in 1998, came *The Elementary Particles*. The novel was not so much launched as "detonated," in the words of one reviewer. Packed with graphic renditions of variably transgressive sex—sadomasochistic, solitary, orgiastic, exhibitionistic, aquatic, pseudo-incestuous—it also bristled with offensive aphorisms about everything from women's liberation, racial equality, and personal freedom to individualism and the possibility of human intimacy. In many ways, it was one bleak book—"a deeply repugnant read," as Michiko Kakutani put it in the *New York Times*. It was also bracing, insistently thought provoking, and altogether original. It was graced, too, with a deadpan humor that provoked laughter in the midst of the most desolate depictions of human frailty.

What most critics emphasized in their reviews, though, was Houellebecq's "frontal attack on the generation of '68" and on the vices it presumably unleashed upon the Western world: promiscuity, spiritual humbug, hedonism, a cult of youth, the apotheosis of individualism. The two heroes of *The Elementary Particles* are half brothers abandoned, as Houellebecq was, into the care of reluctant relatives by hippie

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parents with no more patience for their children than for their revolving lovers. One brother, Michel, has turned into a socially dysfunctional scientist "faithful to his local Monoprix." The other, Bruno, is a sex fiend who spends most of the novel ministering to the insatiable needs of his genitalia. The lives of these brothers, we are left to infer, have been ruined by the values of their "idiotic parents" and the "liberal, vaguely beatnik movement" their parents represent.

Indictments such as these have earned Houellebecq—amid the scandal surrounding his book's sensational sex scenes—the reputation of a profound moralist and an author, as the *Wall Street Journal* intoned, of an admonitory and "brilliant novel of ideas." But how considered *are* Houellebecq's ideas? one wonders, as one reads *Platform*, his third and most controversial novel yet. He has been taken to court for them—or at least for his ideas on Islam, expressed, as they are, by several characters in the novel and closely echoed in his own interviews. He made a number of flamboyantly confrontational remarks to his judges that day: If the Koran was a joke, the Judeo-Christian Bible was "so boring" it made "you want to shit." If Islam was "the most stupid of all religions," *every* monotheistic religion was inherently abusive. Was he aware that his comments might violate the French Penal Code? "No," he replied to the delight of audience members. He hadn't read the French Penal Code; he suspected it had "many boring passages." He also made a more sober remark: He had never, he insisted, had a coherent idea in his life. Houellebecq's self-assessment is worth considering.

Platform begins with the hero—once again named Michel—contemplating the funeral of his father. The contemplation takes no very grave form—it is conducted on the Exercycle of the deceased, over a granola bar from his kitchen, in front of a television game show. As he pedals, Michel is aware of having made an "excellent general impression" at the ceremony:

> I'm always clean-shaven . . . and when I developed a bald spot at about the age of thirty, I decided to cut my hair very short. I usually wear a gray suit and sober ties, and I don't look particularly cheerful. With my short hair, my lightweight glasses, and my sullen expression, my head bowed a little to a Christian funeral-hymn mix. I felt perfectly at ease with the situation—much more at ease than I would have been at a wedding, for example. Funerals, clearly, were my thing.

Social interactions, clearly, are not. When a woman raps on the door, introduces herself as his late father's cleaning lady, and asks to retrieve her belongings, Michel freezes: "'Well . . . ,' I said, '. . . well.'" He barely manages a gesture "intended to be welcoming," waves her up the stairs, and collapses on the sofa, "exhausted by the confrontation." It's the same glum, distressingly awkward, prematurely balding hero whom we know from Houellebecq's other novels, and whom we know from his interviews. Even the hero's father—a mountain guide with nothing but contempt for his civil-servant son—closely resembles Houellebecq's own father—a mountain guide who abandoned his toddler son and watched from afar as this son became a civil servant.

Having come into a large amount of money and sympathy for his bereavement, Michel decides to take a vacation. Never a man to risk his creature comforts, he settles on a pre-arranged and pre-evaluated package tour to Thailand. "I was particularly fond," he confesses, "of the star-rating system, which indicated the intensity of the pleasure one was entitled to hope for." Once in Thailand, he "behaves like a typical tourist," taking a "timid dip," making dreadful small talk, masturbating to mediocre novels at night, and dutifully attending the cultural field trips. He also visits several Thai prostitutes and mounts a spirited defense of their profession and character. They are "good girls," he concludes, "who send money to their parents." Western women are unavailable, unappetizing, unsexual, or just too much bloody trouble. Between the dinners, entertainment, and sensitive interrogation required to woo them, it's a lot easier "to just stay home and wank," as the poet Philip Larkin (whose erotic temperament often mirrored Houellebecq's) once wrote. It is for this reason that Michel returns to France without so much as having attempted to seduce the one woman he fancies in the group: the "serious" brunette, Valérie.

It is not until Michel and Valérie are back in Paris that they arrange a meeting and fall immediately into each other's arms, beds, and lives. The seemingly retiring twenty-eight-year-old turns out to be preternaturally adept at the sexual acrobatics and endearments that Michel had believed the exclusive purview of Thai prostitutes, and even more open than he to erotic experiment. It is she who suggests they recruit other girls and other couples into their adventures; she who teaches him the Marmalade Trick, among others. She also turns out to be a top executive in the travel industry, a generous and warmhearted human being, and an enchanting conversationalist. What does she find in this "washed-up guy, not very sociable, more or less resigned to his boring life" that Michel knows he is? "I'm not particularly handsome," he acknowledges after their first night of love. "I'm not funny; I find it difficult to understand why anyone would find me attractive." She responds to his doubts in the most eloquent way he could wish: she initiates oral sex. "I got the impression she was going to say something, then she put her hand on my balls, brought her face toward me. Immediately I was hard again."

This becomes something of a refrain in the remaining three quarters of the book, a refrain greeted by the reader—at least by this reader—with an increasing admixture of fatigue. *Oh, no*, we find ourselves thinking after the seventeenth erection in a chapter, *not again*. Houellebecq prides himself on his skill at portraying sex scenes, and indeed he is better than many—better, certainly, than the awful Catherine Millet, his fellow Parisian, whose abominable erotic memoir, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*, fortunately lost its place to *Platform* on the French bestseller list. Yet serial penetrations get dull on the page, no matter how various the orifices enlisted and how numerous the participants. This is a problem, since Michel and Valérie live out a sexual

nirvana for the next several months, of which we are spared hardly a thrust. They also grow toward each other in other ways—becoming fast friends, adoring confidants, and even honorary business partners. It is in this last capacity that Michel suggests to Valérie's company a new option for their international resort packages: sex tourism. Forget those elephant rides in Marrakesh, he tells them, forget scuba diving in the Third World—most people travel in the hope of finding sex and romance, not sea anemones. After some initial inhibitions in the industry, Valérie and Michel are ferried to Bangkok to inaugurate the opening of the new—and already overbooked—"Aphrodite" club. Smitten by the atmosphere and Michel, Valérie proposes to quit her job in Paris to remain as resort manager with him. The vision of a new and gleaming life opens for the couple. And then it happens: the same grim fate that befalls many of Houellebecq's heroines. Only this time it is at the hands of Islamic fundamentalists, armed with explosives and irate at the prospect of another Western sex club defiling the East. Valérie is not the only one to go. But she is the only one who matters to Michel.

The hero at the end of *Platform* is a broken man. After lengthy bouts of amnesia, insanity, and treatment in French nerve clinics (where Houellebecq also served his time), he returns to Thailand to die. He holes up in the ugliest part of town, sees a prostitute or two, starts to write up the "few months" of life he has known, ceases to see prostitutes, finishes his notes, and becomes a recluse: the madman on the block who emerges only for his cup of soup. "When you give up on life," he says, "the last remaining human contacts are those you have with shopkeepers." If Valérie went with a bang, Michel Renault will go in silence, unnoticed; the locals will smell something in the air a few days later, that's all. "In this climate," he notes, "corpses quickly start to stink."

What to make of this book? This apologia for sex tourism, this love story, this broadside against Islam, this anatomy of banality, this indictment of Western relationships, this biography of disabuse, this fantasy of male wish fulfillment, this tale of a cock? It addresses everything—love, death, religion, the nature of the individual, the meaning of life—but is coherent on nothing. Julian Barnes has said Houellebecq "hunts big game while others settle for shooting rabbit," and Houellebecq does, in fact, go after the big quarry, the big quandaries, the big issues of his age. But he goes after these issues in so individual and honest and blithely self-centered a way that it is almost impossible for him to offer a consistent statement about them. He is full of contradictions on whatever subject he broaches. He laments the promiscuity handed down to us by the sixties, but it would be a morally gullible reader indeed (and there are many) who fails to see how he simultaneously exploits this promiscuity, how his protagonists wallow in it, and how he enjoys it himself. A passage from his first novel, *Whatever*, illustrates what critics have meant when they refer to Houellebecq's assault on the advocates of sexual liberation. "Véronique belonged," he writes of one of his heroines,

> as we all do, to a *sacrificed generation*. She had certainly been capable of love; she would have wished to still be capable of it . . . but it was no longer possible. A scarce, artificial and belated phenomenon, love can only blossom under certain mental conditions, rarely conjoined, and totally opposed to the freedom of morals which characterizes the modern era. Véronique had known too many discothèques, too many lovers; such a way of life impoverishes a human being, inflicting sometimes serious and always irreversible damage. Love as a kind of innocence . . . as an aptitude for epitomizing the whole of the other sex in a single loved being rarely resists a year of sexual immorality, and never two. . . . Extremely quickly, one becomes as capable of love as an old slag. And so one leads, obviously, a slag's life. . . . All that remains is resentment and disgust, sickness and the anticipation of death.

And yet Houellebecq's protagonists deliver themselves to this slag's life with unusual gusto and initiative, even inventing new and optimal venues for it with sex-club chains across the Third World. At least one London critic has suggested this celebration of sex tourism is a spoof—comparable to Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" for eating Irish children in an effort to satirize the callousness of his contemporaries—but this is wishful English high-mindedness, and it does the cheerfully low-minded Houellebecq an injustice. Even aside from any consideration of biography or authorial intent (Houellebecq spent several months exploring Thai brothels, and it's hard to think it was all sour duty), *Platform* abounds with glowing portraits of Eastern prostitutes and their affectionate clients; it also (in common with Houellebecq's other books) offers ringing indictments of Western lovers' lack of sexual "generosity" and loss of "animal instinct."

"'Suck me,'" Michel commands Valérie in the middle of a discussion about what has gone wrong with occidental sexuality.

> She looked at me, surprised, but placed her hand on my balls and brought her mouth toward me. "There!" I exclaimed triumphantly. . . . "That's precisely what's so extraordinary about you: you enjoy giving pleasure. Offering your body as an object of pleasure, giving pleasure unselfishly: that's what Westerners don't know how to do anymore. They've completely lost the sense of giving."

In a passage from *The Elementary Particles* that is often overlooked by those aiming to draw Houellebecq closer to some version of correctness, Houellebecq has Bruno's likable girlfriend, Christiane, express the wish that his fifteen-year-old high school student had offered similar favors when he dropped his pants one day after French class:

> "We need . . ." she said haltingly, "we need a little generosity. . . . If I'd been in that Arab girl's place, I don't know how I would have reacted. I think . . . well, I hope I would've consented to give you pleasure."

The point is couched in the same language of generosity and "giving" as are Houellebecq's other defenses of his sexual ideal. It is clear that we are meant to be moved by Christiane's argument; it is equally clear that Houellebecq is a hard sell to the conventionally moral and, moreover, that the "generosity" he so fervently praises is incommensurable with the model of "love as a kind of innocence . . . as an aptitude for epitomizing the whole of

the other sex in a single loved being" whose disappearance he passionately decries on other occasions. Romance and "generosity"—at least conceived, as it is here, as a docile willingness to render sexual services at any time to any person—are mutually exclusive.

To me, the sex scenes between Valérie and Michel are ultimately drab: amicable, inventive, good-natured, certainly not immoral, but drab. Consenting adults giving each other directions for what operation they would like performed on their anatomies. Monkeys delousing each other come to mind. But sexuality is at its most potent when it has some element of spontaneity and the sacred, some share of tension, mystery, and intuition; when it incarnates the unspeakable, not when it occurs in response to oral injunctions. Nonetheless, Michel and Valérie's relationship is increasingly remarkable for the devotion and force it inspires in both its participants. This devotion is the more surprising because neither Michel nor Valérie sentimentalizes sex, and either of them seems happy to have it with many different people. Yet their relationship revolves around sex. Michel hardly seems to have any knowledge of the personality of his lover when he decides, after their first night together, that they will "probably be happy together"; all through his Thai tour he assumed she was self-effacing and awkward, possessed, as he put it, of a "canine docility." Turns out she's an overachieving career woman—intrepid, ambitious, articulate, and full of initiative. He does begin to take an interest in her as their sexual liaison develops—to the point of sharing her work, her worries, and her childhood memories—but the mental always seems somewhat secondary to the physical. And since the physical seems so interchangeable, particularly to two people in the business of commercializing it, their loyalty to each other often appears perplexing.

But loyalty it is. Even when Valérie overworks herself and her sexual responses become "more muted, more restrained, as though muffled by a curtain of fatigue," Michel realizes he "loved her more and more." The great hedonist, the man who calls all women "sluts," gives voice to the most sweepingly romantic of declarations: Valérie has become all that matters. His work and his previous existence have shriveled to nothing: he is ready to abandon all to be her full-time support, even her chef. "I would never have believed that one day I would take pleasure in cooking. Love sanctifies," he marvels. "The very order of things had been upturned. Strangely, and without in the least deserving it, I had been given a second chance. It is very rare, in life, to have a second chance; it goes against all the rules."

And when those rules are violently reinstated? When Valérie is taken from him? Why doesn't he find someone else? A woman at the swingers clubs they attended together? His solicitous secretary? A marriageable Thai girl? But no; his life is over. He awaits his physical demise in exile, because "the absence of a will to live is, alas, not sufficient to make one want to die." He is already a member of the living dead.

Houellebecq, The Romantic? The Most *Unlikely* Romantic writing today? He is clearly more amorously idealistic than other celebrated writers known for their frank treatment of sex—more than Philip Roth and Milan Kundera; more than Catherine Millet or Virginie Despentes—and more, too, than many of the late greats—from Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin back to the Marquis de Sade. Relentless graphic sex has rarely kept company with romantic idealism. In Houellebecq, oddly enough, it does. If that seems contradictory, it is only one of many contradictions in his surprising *oeuvre*.

For more contradictions, we need look no further than his notorious rap on Islam, which deserves neither the invectives nor the defenses it has inspired. It is essentially casual, only partly in earnest, and overwhelmingly incoherent. How seriously can one take the remark, ungracious though it may be, that Islam "could only have been born in a stupid desert, among filthy Bedouin who had nothing better to do...than bugger their camels"? Placed into the mouth of an Arab scientist in *Platform*, the statement becomes the prelude to a religious argument that, though perhaps more thought-provoking, is equally specious: Islam is disparaged for being the "most radical monotheism"—monotheisms already being billed as incitements to violence and dampers on creativity. "Reading the Koran," claims the scientist, "one cannot help but be struck by the regrettable mood of tautology that typifies the work: 'there is no other God but God alone,' etc. You won't get very far with nonsense like that." Perhaps not, but it sounds pretty familiar to anyone who has examined the Judeo-Christian Bible—replete, as it is, with assertions such as "I am the Lord your God; thou shalt have no other gods before me" and "I am that I am."

But Houellebecq's is only in part a theological point—and those who have defended him, like Christopher Hitchens, on the grounds that discussing *theology* can hardly be an "incitement to *racial* hatred," miss the point. Houellebecq's treatment of Islam has as much to do with the prejudices of the "poor white trash" segment of French society (which he is the first French writer in decades to portray) as with theological argument. And if Mr. Hitchens judiciously distinguishes between religion and race, the man whom he is defending does not. Hitchens reminds us that "most Arab-Americans are Christian" as well as "perhaps 20 percent of all Palestinians," whereas Houellebecq is happy to dispense with such niceties: he has his hero evaluate the attractions of "Muslim pussy" while standing before his father's explicitly agnostic Arab maid. Worse, Houellebecq has Michel declare delight on reading that "a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child, or a pregnant Palestinian woman, had been gunned down in the Gaza Strip." It is obvious why such a remark causes indignation and injury, not only among France's Arab population but among sensible souls in general. This indignation might be tempered by the fact that Michel is mourning the death of his beloved at Arab hands when he expresses the sentiment; that it is self-consciously and rather tragically embraced in the hope of giving him some reason to continue living ("It is certainly possible to remain alive animated simply by a desire for vengeance; many people have lived that way"); and that it is eventually

withdrawn (a "simple thought," Michel reports on the next page, "was sufficient to dispel my hatred").

Houellebecq is very nearly an equal-opportunity offender; women, men, individualists, socialists, Muslims, Americans, Germans, Japanese—all eventually come under his level gun. This is part of the abrasive attraction of his prose as well as something for which he occasionally deserves to be taken to task. But if he is frequently incoherent in his general pronouncements, he is ingenious in his local insights. Houellebecq's fiction is full of jarringly honest micro-reflections; fascinating fragments, glittering shards that cut us to the quick. Take his passage on the poverty of the individual, in which Michel describes preparing to move in to a new flat with Valérie:

> I realized that I didn't feel the slightest attachment to anything in my apartment. . . . I had managed, it seemed, to live for forty years without forming the most tenuous of attachments to a single object. All told, I had two suits, which I wore alternately. Books, sure, I had books, but I could easily have bought them again. . . . Several women had crossed my path; I didn't have a photograph or a letter from any of them. Nor did I have any photos of myself: I had no reminder of what I might have been like when I was fifteen, or twenty or thirty. I didn't really have any personal papers: my identity could be contained in a couple of files that would easily fit into a standard-size cardboard folder. It is wrong to pretend that human beings are unique, that they carry within them an irreplaceable individuality. As far as I was concerned, at any rate, I could not distinguish any trace of such individuality. . . . When all's said and done, the idea of the uniqueness of the individual is nothing more than pompous absurdity. We remember our own lives, Schopenhauer wrote somewhere, a little better than we do a novel we once read. That's about right: a little, no more.

It is not that these meditations are necessarily true, or that Houellebecq does not immediately contradict them, but that they are provocative: they upset our easy vanities; they undercut the consolations and pieties of our culture. Occasionally expansive, they are more often brief, pithy, and contex-

tual. Talking with a lover of his late father, Michel marvels at the things he must have missed about the man—the many traits he never noticed—and concludes that "men live alongside one another like cattle; it is a miracle if, once in a while, they manage to share a bottle of booze."

Sometimes the candor is just droll, sometimes it is profound. A few comments from the early days of Michel's group tour:

> For now, my mission was to choose a pair of shorts for the walk on the *khlongs*. I opted for a longish pair in blue denim, not too tight. . . . In the bathroom mirror, I contemplated myself disgustedly. My anxious bureaucratic face clashed horribly with what I was wearing, and I looked exactly like what I was: a forty-something civil servant on vacation, trying to pretend he's young; it was pretty demoralizing.
>
> . . . I still didn't feel like eating with the others. It is in our relations with other people that we gain a sense of ourselves; it's that, pretty much, that makes relations with other people unbearable.
>
> . . . I made a small hole in the sand to bury the two books [I had brought to Thailand and finished]. The problem now was that I had to find something to read. Not having anything to read is dangerous: you have to content yourself with life itself, and that can lead you to take risks.

Houellebecq's vices are closely linked to his virtues: the fact that he has no investment in larger ideas makes him better able to supply small observations—unsubordinated, unprettified, and unsettling *aperçus* into the human condition. Faithful to no abstraction, he is fanatically committed to concrete detail; obeisant to no ideal—whether his own or his readers'—he is merciless in his mug shots of reality. It is for these mug shots—offensive, jarring, and often revelatory—that we should inspect his work. Not, as many critics have claimed, for his grand ideas; certainly not for his moralities.

He is a man of apparent contradictions, frequently bleak yet hilariously funny; he revels in the common (if you've lived in France you recognize every brand name, market, and mail-order service in his books) yet is currently Europe's most original novelist; he champions hedonism yet remains profoundly romantic. It is this latter contradiction that his reviewers seem least able to fathom: only yesterday I ran across a feature on erotic writers in the *Los Angeles Times* in which Houellebecq's narrators are charged with "abandon[ing] love for sexual escapism." But one of the most unexpected disclosures by this fascinating, flawed, and necessary writer is that he believes in private utopias. Pessimistic about society, pessimistic about the individual, Houellebecq believes, nonetheless, in utopias of two. Relationships—even when they begin in arbitrary or purely physical ways—hold within them a possibility of redemption.

"One of the surprising things about physical love," says Bruno in *The Elementary Particles*, "is the sense of intimacy it creates the instant there's any trace of mutual affection. Suddenly—even if you met the night before—you can confide things to your lover that you would never tell another living soul." Nothing is perfect, of course, and Houellebecq isn't about to pretend it is: when the woman he loves becomes wheelchair-bound, Bruno ultimately abandons her—or at least hesitates so long to invite her to live with him that she throws herself down a stairwell. But her end is Bruno's as well; like Michel in *Platform*, he does not survive the end of love. It is the one great chance we have in life, according to the avowed cynic and hedonist Houellebecq. Arbitrary and fragile, it is the only thing that makes life memorable.

Having finished his notes about Valérie, Michel consigns himself to oblivion. His notes, presumably, become *Platform*. He himself will disappear. "A few street hawkers," he predicts, "will shake their heads" on his death. "My apartment will be rented out to another resident. I'll be forgotten," he says. "I'll be forgotten quickly."

It is only his accidental encounter with Valérie which, to quote Larkin again, will

> come to be
> [his] final blazon, and to prove
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love. ■

ART WILL EAT ITSELF

What distinguishes art from everything else?

By Mark Kingwell

Discussed in this essay:

Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity, by Alexander Alberro. MIT Press, 2003. 236 pages. $35.

Real Spaces, by David Summers. Phaidon, 2003. 704 pages. $75.

On any given Saturday you may observe them, the pilgrims of art, haunting the long blocks of Chelsea. Rich and mostly good-looking, they are nevertheless a sad lot, in search of something, they know not what. Less certain of salvation than those reeling in the miles to Santiago de Compostela, they follow a trail mapped by *Artforum* and the Arts & Leisure section of the *New York Times*. Sometimes they are impressed, sometimes even moved. Sometimes they buy. But always they harbor a sense of thwarted longing: Is this all there is?

Every couple of years the pilgrims

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