

## Keeping it real: Houellebecq, art and its context

by Cesare Sinatti, originally published in Italian for *La Balena Bianca*

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Let's imagine to open the book *A few months of my life* and, due to carelessness or laziness, to begin reading it without having noticed the name of its author on the cover: Michel Houellebecq. Let's imagine leafing, for a few minutes, through the pages of this hastily written, disconnected and unstructured diary (novel?), often confused in its digressions: what kind of experience would we have, knowing little or nothing about the context in which this book was published? As soon as we were to discover that it is a book by Michel Houellebecq, that is, **by placing the work in its context**, everything would immediately become clearer: *A few months of my life* describes the period between the last three months of 2022 and April 2023, in which the author found himself at the center of some media controversies: the first linked to comments on the French Muslim community released in an interview with Michel Onfray, the second concerning what is often referred to as "**Houellebecq's porn**".

The author known for *The Elementary Particles*, *Possibility of an Island*, *The Map and the Territory* has in fact acquired a certain notoriety even outside literary circles due to some **problematic positions on Islam** he would have presented, according to some, especially in the novel *Submission*. Considering, therefore, that controversies related to his perception of Islam are not new, it is rather surprising to discover that most of the pages of *A few months of my life* are instead dedicated to the so-called "Houellebecq porn".

Before speaking of the "downfall" of an author who, until now, had never taken himself too seriously – if one thinks, for instance, about the self-portraits he made of himself in *The Map and the Territory* and in movies such as *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq* and the more recent *Thalasso*, where he plays the role of himself – one must consider what the context of the "Houellebecq porn" might be. What superficially came to light is that **KIRAC** (Keeping It Real Art Critics), an art collective from Amsterdam led by Stefan Ruitenbeek and Kate Sinha, would have invited Houellebecq to have sex with some girls from Amsterdam willing to meet him, provided that they could film everything. Last January, a trailer was released announcing the

release of the documentary on March 11 2023, quickly followed by a lawsuit against KIRAC from Michel Houellebecq and his wife Lysis Li, who also took part in the filming. In the trailer, Stefan Ruitenbeek's voiceover claims that Li was forced to cancel a **prostitute tour organized** for her husband in Morocco for fear that he would be kidnapped by Islamic extremists: the fallback of this event would have been for the French writer to accept Ruitenbeek's proposal and travel to Amsterdam in the last months of 2022.

In *A few months of my life*, Houellebecq describes his interactions with Ruitenbeek, Sinha and some girls, claiming that he had been deceived with a retroactive contract and building around himself **the image of a literary inept that does not completely persuade**, and reminds a little too much of that of some sort of Baudelaire (mentioned several times in the booklet) who, despite the abjection he styled for himself as a damned poet, still had to be reminded by his mother to buy new shoes with rubber soles. Very often, indeed, both in the context of the disputes with Onfray and with KIRAC, Houellebecq insists on his practical naivety, on his lack of documentation, on the little attention paid to the contracts he signed and to the material sent to him by Ruitenbeek about what KIRAC is, as well as to the kind of films in which he was asked to participate (pp. 9-10, p. 18, p. 40, p. 61, p. 91, ). Even assuming, however, that the author's **ineptitude** is not a mere literary pose, it remains quite disconcerting to notice how scarcely informed Houellebecq claims to have been (or wanting the reader to be) about his enemies.

Unintentionally or not, therefore, the hypothetical reader of *A few months of my life* is once again deprived of the **broader context of which the story is part**. What is KIRAC, then? And why could their twenty-seventh film, in which Houellebecq should have appeared, in addition to not being merely "porn", have been particularly interesting (and perhaps still could be, if the litigation is resolved in their favor)? KIRAC defines itself as an artistic collective; their website reads: "our core business is making films." But it is difficult to define what **kind of films** these are – these strange products, halfway between fiction and documentary, in which it is often difficult to understand what is real and what is not. Over time, in fact, the project has changed a lot: if in the first films we mostly watch Ruitenbeek and Sinha reflect on other people's artworks or on art exhibitions, in the latter, longer and more complex ones, we notice a gradual widening of their perspective, in which they move from a criticism of art works to a criticism of art critics, to a critique of all the seemingly peripheral worlds constituted by art schools, collectors, merchants

and fundraisers – worlds which are, once again, the environment and the context in which a work of art manages to emerge as such.

It should be noted that some of the first episodes have perhaps aged badly. For example, the films in which Ruitenbeek and Sinha unleash all their analytical skills against some gallery owners, defenders of identity politics, while laying bare some mechanics of **exploitation of political and social issues** in the art world, cannot hide a certain self-satisfaction with which, in the second half of the 2010s it was fashionable to expose the internal (and often real) contradictions of a certain fringe of today's academic, intellectual and artistic world. Most of their films, however, shed a disarming light on the **art world** and, above all, on its complexity: the eighth film, for example, offers a multifaceted portrait of the art collector Stefan Simchowicz and the same happens, from the sixteenth film onwards, in showing the complicated relationship that Ruitenbeek and Sinha build with their patron, Philip van der Hurk. KIRAC in fact, as an artistic project, does not evade the critical eye it casts on its subjects: if no artwork is born in a vacuum, the same applies to KIRAC, which in its relationship with Philip van der Hurk shows (or stages?) the dynamics that exist between artists and their protectors, that is, the attempt of artists to seduce protectors to support their projects, and that of the protectors to see their sensitivity acknowledged and legitimized by artists. The critical eye of KIRAC therefore extends **from the works to the personal lives** of the many people participating in the project, including in the making of the documentaries both the quarrels with van der Hurk and the birth of Ruitenbeek and Sinha's children, without fear of showing everything that constitutes the context, material and not, in which KIRAC comes to light as a work of art.

To return to "Houellebecq porn", then, those who knew a little about KIRAC could have expected **something more than porn**. Even the most sexually explicit episodes, such as the twenty-third, *Honeypot*, where the central idea, perhaps a little sensationalistic, was to film a meeting between a left-wing student and a far-right philosopher, never indulge in superficial voyeurism, trying instead to expand as much as possible the context in which the filming takes place, and to portray the parties involved from as many point of views as possible. The potential importance of KIRAC 27, therefore, might have been its capacity to capture, by choosing as a subject a great author like Houellebecq, **the interdependence between art and life, between art and its context**, which is also the center of one of the best novels by the French writer, *The Map and the Territory*, in which the artist Jed Martin paints a portrait of Michel Houellebecq, and in which

Houellebecq himself offers a squalid description of his own character, sometimes comical and perhaps not entirely corresponding to reality, but in line with a certain public perception of his persona. Literature has often played with this interdependence by including the author within the literary work in several ways, by re-telling, expanding and multiplying their biography, and KIRAC has made of this game the very center of many of their documentaries, showing the interdependence between those who buy, sell and advertise art and those who produce it, as well as between those who buy, sell and advertise KIRAC and the lives of those who film it.

The question that KIRAC 27 could raise – by showing us Houellebecq, often accused of **misogyny**, being sexually involved with one or more women – as well as the question we might still ask ourselves by reading the interviews that contain controversial statements by Houellebecq himself (and as well as the letters, biographical notes and anecdotes that gravitate around the works of any artist) is a central one: **can an artist’s work be judged on the base of their behavior and life, and can their life be judged on the base of their work?** Can a work be read independently from everything that constitutes its context – from the most immediate aspect of the physical and mental life of its author, to the broader one of the social sphere of which the author is part – or not? Simply siding for one of the two positions, enjoying artworks without considering their context, or not enjoying them at all precisely because of their context, seems too simple of a solution. And the members of KIRAC are likely aware of this: for KIRAC, to represent the interdependence between art and context is not only not problematic, but it is part of the creative process itself. Kate Sinha, in this sense, during the Houellebecq trial, used very poignant words to describe how the trailer for KIRAC 27 was put together:

“That trailer was born out of our real life. At that time, I myself was giving birth. My son was three weeks old when I wrote the trailer, and the trailer is a work of art in which I reflect on the fact that these events are intertwined, [...] a work of art in which my own sacrifice is shown: while I am in the first week after giving birth, my husband is with Houellebecq shooting in Amsterdam with Jini and Isa [two girls met by H.], and Lysis also makes a similar sacrifice for her husband, by preparing women for him. The trailer is a work of art about the kind of sacrifices – for some people bizarre – that women make for the men they love. [...] I’m shocked that the sensibility I feel I put into that trailer didn’t reach Mr. Houellebecq, because the trailer also shows how we treat intimate matters like childbirth in our films. For example, I had an episiotomy during

childbirth, but it's not something we highlighted in the trailer, as if to say, 'look how graphic this is!'. I think we can extend this to the erotic material [in KIRAC 27]. We are not treating it like paparazzi looking for something sensational. I mean, we are artists and we think that this is important material. And we have a sense of honor in this.”

What KIRAC and partly Houellebecq have shown separately with their respective artistic practices, and what they could still show together in KIRAC 27, therefore, is that, just as the life of an author can transform and illuminate the meaning of an artwork, in the same way the artwork, by inserting itself as an event in the life of an author and, eventually, in those of its enjoyers, in turn changes and transforms these lives. In this sense we can speak of a relationship of interdependence between art and life, between art and its context – that is, of a relationship in **which art and life constantly and dynamically re-qualify each other**. If one wanted to venture into using a simile to describe this interdependence, one could imagine the artwork as the mass of a new body that, suddenly appearing in space and taking there its place, bends and restructures this space around itself: the bent space, the restructured context, is part of the artwork insofar as its geography can reveal something about the artwork's features, but, at the same time, the presence of the work constantly re-qualifies and re-determines the geography of the space in which it appears. In this sense, for instance, the fact that Kate was giving birth contextualizes and informs the trailer for KIRAC 27, and the trailer, by expressing something about the experience of this birth as a sacrifice, transforms its meaning.

If, therefore, it is true that **life qualifies art and art qualifies life**, then on the one hand everything can be included in the work of an artist (from the characteristics of the language to the historical context in which the artists works, to their correspondence, to the anecdotes that are told about them and, today, to their appearances in photos or videos); on the other hand, however, as Houellebecq perhaps wanted to suggest in *The map and the territory*, as well as in some of his statements during the trial against KIRAC, in which he would have described himself as an “actor” within KIRAC 27, everything in the life of an author can be considered part of a single artistic performance – indeed, of the only performance possible: **that of one's own life**, in which the work realized, visible, presented to the public, represents nothing more than the emerged and infinitesimal part of that enormous mass capable of deforming the intellectual space of its epoch, of previous epochs and of epochs to come that is the life of an individual. An infinitely complex

performance, this one, in which, as in the life of Houellebecq and the members of KIRAC, there is also room for evil, weakness, deception and baseness, because these are also part of life.

Houellebecq, however, for a few months of his life, seems to have forgotten about this. Certainly, the little book he left us will tell us something about his work, if placed in the larger context of everything that will happen afterwards – including KIRAC 27, which I hope we will be able to see. Will what he himself wrote about Thomas Mann (p. 81) also apply to him? Will the great constructions of his novels collapse? Maybe not: but this booklet will also remain, together with all his other works, as an object that reveals and qualifies who Michel Houellebecq really was. This **unnecessary booklet** will indeed also remain – this booklet which is not really worth talking about outside of its context, this booklet full of insults, childish complaints and inflated comparisons, whose author, who may have wished to possess, like Baudelaire, irony, charm and above all the supreme ability to fly above his own wickedness and mistakes thanks to literature, might discover once again that he can only be the character of his own novel – in the case of Houellebecq, perhaps, the comedian Daniel of *Possibility of an Island*, who, despite having dedicated the performance of his life to writing politically incorrect satire shows and films, is finally forced to recognize that “life, after all, *is not comical*” (p. 318).