

Absurd Things and People as Objects in Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *When I Was a Work of Art*

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Abstract:

More frequently than one thinks consumerism comes up repeatedly as the main thesis in postmodern literature. *When I Was a Work of Art* is a 2002 French novel that explores the loss of humanist values in a contemporary dysfunctional society. In this generic world every physical presence, including the human body, has been appropriated by the consumerism and transformed into merchandise. Famous for his witty characters and engaging plots, Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt focuses on deep sociological reflections and introspective analysis of the everyday modern man.

This short novel is also a poetical art because it questions the ultimate work of art imagined by a sculptor and its consequences, thus catching the attention through its Faustian theme and auto fictional writing. Zeus Lama wants to sculpt a human body and to create a work of art alive. He finds an easy prey in Adam, on the verge of committing suicide. The notoriously eccentric artist is determined to exceed his own fame and to create something unheard of. Consequently É.-E. Schmitt's creative reality is continuously split between the two characters in the novel: the sculptor, looking for an outstanding creative experience, and Adam, who struggles to regain his civil rights and his identity.

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More frequently than one thinks the absurd of language and situation comes up repeatedly in postmodern literature. *When I Was a Work of Art* is a 2002 French novel that, that in spite of its humor, explores the loss of meaning and values in the contemporary realities of art production and art market. Within a generic dysfunctional society, life is desacralized, automatized, objectified, and mechanized for people and objects. It answers more to norms and forms than to common sense. In this unnamed world every physical presence, including the human body, has been appropriated by consumerism and transformed into merchandise. Famous for his witty characters and engaging plots, É.-E. Schmitt builds a text allusive of deep sociological reflections with a nonsense-mechanized language reminding of Jean Giraudoux, Samuel Beckett, or Eugene Ionesco's theatrical vibes.

This short novel is also a poetical art because it questions the work of an eccentric sculptor on a human body, thus catching the attention through its Faustian theme. Zeus Lama, a famous celebrity artist, wants to sculpt a human body and to create a work of art alive. He finds an easy prey

in Adam, a young man on the verge of committing suicide. The artist is determined to exceed his own fame and to create a famous work of art. The issue is in the immergence of moral law on exploiting a human body to better market experimental art. Consequently, Schmitt's creative reality is continuously split between the noble idea of experimenting with art and the continuous fight with the schizophrenic reality of inhuman experimentation.

The question of artistic value and art market value is not new in the recent philosophical reflection as it has been lately the center of attention in *La société de consommation* by Jean Baudrillard and in *L'art et l'argent* by Jean Joseph Goux, for example. Moreover, our understanding of human / nonhuman subjects changed dramatically in a culture of accumulation of objects and commodification of humans, as objects of fame. Hence the proliferation of hybrid identities and lack of critical perspectives denounced by the recent philosophies of Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* or Walter Benjamin's reflections on art and technology in *The Work of Art in the Age on Its Technological Reproducibility*.

In another novel by the same author *The Part of the Other*, Bernstein, a Jew, is a young soldier on the frontline of World War I. He confides in his best friends and fellow artists named Adolf Hitler and Newman. The horrible war scene that Bernstein recounts specifically presents the physical destruction of human bodies to uncover the little value that human life contains when confronted with huge war machines and metal tanks.

Fitting the genre of auto fiction¹, É.-E. Schmitt instills his beliefs on life and artistic creation into his characters. His style is reflective of contemporary fictional trends, mixing the stage and the big screen's strategies with the more traditional literary composition.

In *When I Was a Work of Art*, Adam's story is poignant, constantly sustained with vivid dialogue and powerful visual effects. The dialogue between Adam and Durand-Durand, is an apotheosis of mechanical thinking, enhanced by characters' theatricality. Hilarious but tragic in its essence, this dialogue is relevant for the absurd of the situation and language, so familiar to the modern theater of Giraudoux² and Ionesco.³ Schmitt's long experience with the stage shows in this violent exchange between adversaries:

Pensez ce que vous voulez, monsieur Durand-Durand. Je ne m'exhiberai plus. -Je vais vous dénoncer. -Et puis? -Vous faire arrêter. -Et puis? -Vous boucler en prison.-Bravo, n'hésitez plus, foncez, c'est le dessein que je forme. Si vous m'accusez, c'est que je suis un homme. Si on me flanque en prison, c'est que je suis un homme. Si je deviens coupable, c'est que je suis un homme. Allez-y. Portez plainte. Dénoncez-moi.

[-Do what you want Durand-Durand. I will no longer exhibit myself. -Then I will denounce you. -So what? -I will arrest you. -So what? -I will put you in prison.

-Good for you; go ahead, it is exactly what I want. If you accuse me of anything it will prove that I am an individual. If you send me to jail, it will prove that I am an individual. If they find me guilty, it will prove that I am an individual. Go ahead. Make the complaint. Denounce me.] (Schmitt 2002, 204).

Life and people became ridiculously standardized in speech, acts, and emotions as a reflection of their lack of spirituality. Even the names are reflective of this generalized neurosis, continuously repressing the desire for happiness, love, or creativity⁴. Durand-Durand, as his French name suggests, is a tough museum curator who follows the rules literally, and thrives on repeating and checking the rules obsessively. He is nothing more than a responsible employee, who doesn't have the capacity, nor want to experience artistic emotions. Once Adam understands Durand-Durand's modus operandi, he can level with the curator's mechanical thinking. Life is thus automatized, objectified, and mechanized for people and objects. It answers more to norms and forms than to common sense. This is also reflective of a major change in the way the modern public consumes literature and cinema by identifying with typical characters. In the end Adam gets his freedom back but not for the right reasons. He simply proposes to Durand-Durand a truce by declaring himself a damaged work of art. A note of *restoration in progress* is enough to ease Durand-Durand's mind.⁵

Ultimately, the Cartesian theme of human consciousness sustains the debate on the favor of human intelligence versus artificial intelligence. At this point M. Calvino, Adam's lawyer, raises the argument of Adam being human, with a conscious life. He builds the defense arguing that, unlike a machine or any other biotechnological entity, speaking emerges from a consciousness with words coming directly from the soul. This argument appeals to the truthiness of Adam's subjective reality. In addition, the love story with Fiona triggers the human part in Adam and a sense of responsibility for their baby. In spite of all this evidence, Adam remains a point of high interest for the state. The museum owns him because of his body, already transformed into merchandise. Moreover, Adam is literally sold twice as the ultimate sculpture *Adam-bis*.

Caught in this infernal Kafkaesque social and legal system, human relationships are irremediably alienated. The powerful lesson to be learned suggestively unravels in a violent language. Schmitt's movie writing skills of fast narration and detail to the dialogue effects combines with theatrical potential to identify simultaneously the abstract and the real: "En un mot le théâtre doit devenir une sorte de démonstration expérimentale de l'identité profonde du concret et de l'abstrait" [In another way of speaking, theater needs to be a sort of experimental demonstration in order to profoundly define the concrete and the abstract] (Artaud 1964, 168).⁶

In a similar work of the author Schmitt, *Monsieur Ibrahim and the flowers of Coran*, the alienation of human rapports, between son and father and towards the end between son and mother, are described as an abstract vision of the world and life. It is not a coincidence that little Momo sees his father estranged because of a supposed existence of an older son, perfect in every single detail. The imagined existence of this older brother, Popol, is ultimately confirmed by the mother, but it does reflect the schizophrenic desire of the father for a perfect son and symbolically for a perfect existence, a desire that not only destroys the father's relationship with Momo but will also lead the father to suicide when confronted with the reality of a life imperfect in reality.

However compelling, none of these reasons (the autofictional writing or the author's familiarity with film and theater narratives) is more representative for the Schmitt's style than the

talent to build genuine characters. What Adam, Zeus, or Fiona lack in psychological complexness they gain by the truthiness of their agenda. These are the stories of modern men, thirsty for a meaningful life, often caught in the emptiness of their fate, faith, and pursuit of happiness.

Zeus himself exposes some of the author's beliefs on the human condition:

Mon jeune ami, chacun de nous a trois existences. Une existence de chose: nous sommes un corps. Une existence d'esprit: nous sommes une conscience. Et une existence de discours: nous sommes ce dont les autres parlent.

[My young friend, everybody has three existences. One existence is material: we have a body. Another existence is spiritual: we have a consciousness. And the third one is discursive: we are what the others say we are.] (Schmitt, 2002, 103).

If the first two dimensions of existence are out of our control, the third one may offer the possibility of free will: Seule la troisième existence nous permet d'intervenir dans notre destin, elle nous offre un theater, une scène, un public; nous provoquons, démentons, créons, manipulons les perceptions des autres. [Only the third one lets us change our destiny, it gives us the stage, the audience; we provoke, dismantle, create, and manipulate the perception of us]. (Schmitt 2002, 104).

The initial episode of the suicide attempt enabled a future deal between the famous sculptor, symbolically named Zeus-Peter Lama, and the inexperienced Tazio Firelli who is to become Adam. According to the deal, Tazio would suffer a radical change in his physical appearance and civil identity in order to accomplish the most daring work of sculptor under the name of Adam-bis. His consent comes from a true desire to sacrifice his old self for a higher purpose. Revealed in a public ceremony, this transformation literary follows the requirements of old sacrificial rituals of one individual for the better good of the community. From Freud's *Totem and Taboo* we know that sacrifices imply a religious duty executed as a social obligation:

Sacrifice and festival go together among all races, each sacrifice entails a holiday and no holiday can be celebrated without sacrifice. The sacrificial festival was an occasion for joyously transcending one's own interests and emphasizing social community and community with god (Freud 1998, 115-116).

Later, when Tazio reclaimed his rights and refused the sacrifice, he found himself not only against Lama but also against an entire platform worshipping Lama's pretended genius. Like young Momo from *Monsieur Ibrahim and the flowers of Coran*, Adam too departs for the adventure of his life, a spiritual travel meant to give him the power to be his own master and to free himself from any debilitating authority. While Momo is lucky and finds from the start the right mentor in the wise Monsieur Ibrahim, Adam has to experience first the schizophrenic and egocentric power of Zeus before meeting the more ethical Carlos.

Fame, as portrayed by Zeus, becomes a direct result of a very superficial judgment process where the judges are inexperienced, untrained, and generally ignorant of any real aesthetic or moral

criteria. The notion of universal value, as in Nietzsche's understanding, helps with measuring the morality as well as the aesthetics of all humanity.⁷ In addition, the financial gain plays a small part in the story although the price of the sculpture *Adam-bis* is only a tool to measure his fame and not a financial end in itself.

The narrative nicely blends these opposite personalities around Adam, the final art product, burning with anxiety, physical pain from his breaking body parts, and his human part, covered in humiliation from losing his freedom. Thinking that he can avoid responsibilities, he initially wants to transition from being an irrelevant man to a valued object of art. This decision makes him less likable to the readers, as opposed to the feminine character of Fiona, who makes the right moral choices from the start. She relentlessly fights for freedom and happiness, reminding of Camus's *Stranger*.

Schmitt's people are complex. Made of ideas and not of flesh and blood, they seek the right and the responsibility of individual liberty, the human responsibility towards the others, or the divine intervention. Most of these figures share the activism of Sartre's engaging characters when raising philosophical issues and dealing with identity crisis.

Among these people, *les jeunes filles* are less significant. They make their entry in the novel as young caryatides, destined to pose for their statuesque beauty and lack of feminine pride. These women live and breathe only for Lama's pleasure and ultimately become live art, following the commercial success of *Adam-bis*.

By comparison, the characters follow a right or wrong moral path based on their physicality too. Nano-biological artifacts as Boris Vian's *pianoctec* that makes a cocktail based on the musician's state of mind, the human battery in *Matrix*, or the famous Borg technology implanted in human bodies in the TV series *Star Trek*, have always caught public attention and significantly changed the definition of human in postmodern era.

In Adam's case, the *sonomegaphore* is a curious invention: a metallic penis perfected to mechanize sexual intercourse and to illustrate the force that has been given to the statue by the artist.

Adam is a sculpture with empowering devices that only function as long as exposed to the public, while his person is dehumanized and emptied of feelings. The same nostalgia of a powerless author hunted Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* or Cocteau in the movie *Le sang d'un poète*. Both complained about the lack of control an author has over his work of art once it is finished and released to the public.

In these body reconstructions, a symbol for an over mechanized world, Dr. Fichet plays a significant part as accomplice of Zeus. He proceeds to extreme plastic surgeries and even murder in order to cover his continuous gambling debt. His professional ethics are compromised as well as his consciousness. For Fichet, the evolution of medical science has no regard to human values and shows a clear regression to ignorance and mystification. From the metaphysical reason of the eighteenth century to classicism and later, modern critical thinking - as observed by Jean-François Lyotard - humanity pursued a long battle to reach rationality as the primary support for everyone's well-being.

Rational thinking evolved based on the social, economic, and political market demands for technology. If science presumably offers today “plus de justice, plus de bien-être, plus de liberté” (Lyotard 1988, 89-91), Lama and doctor Fichet believe themselves to be the promoters of a new art and a new man through science. In fact, the doctor is far from being a pioneer while he is object to the same dehumanizing process as much as Adam is objectified in the same process.

The birth of Adam-bis is not only the inauguration of a new era in sculpture, but also the first step into a non-humanistic world with wildly unstable dynamics of power. Becoming a sculpture is an adventure and a new identity, but also a regression. Because Zeus’s plan promises an immediate validation of Adam’s existence, Adam would not have to bother himself with the tedious process of thinking and being accountable for his acts. As with so many of Schmitt’s protagonists, Adam goes through a transformative experience physical and spiritual. His character is initially likable because the vivid awareness of his meaningless life appeals to our humanism. Postmodern literary works particularly encourage this resonance with the public and its social habits. Such literature is more just a means to build an interesting story but an explorative tool, full of mechanical inventions and infinite plot possibilities. The invasive treatment of Adam’s body is not fully described in medical terms because the focus switches towards human consciousness.

By questioning the artist and his creation, the novel unfolds some of Schmitt’s own questioning of who we are and what we believe in. If what we knew as good and right changed dramatically over the last century, it is an evidence of loosing sight of human values and moral compass.

Endnotes:

1. In 1985 Serge Doubrovsky’s book *Le livre brisé* staged the scene for the auto fiction as a genre: a story truthful to somebody’s heart, without being an autobiography. This is possible because the nature of the fiction builds on the subconscious traces, the only part of our psychological life that we cannot fake or change.
2. In Giraudoux’s *La guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu* a demystified rewriting of history pinpoints to the absurd of the war (Giraudoux 1935, 172).
3. In Ionesco’s *La leçon* the absurd of the situation resurfaces when the teacher continues a tedious lecturing while advising the student to listen quietly in spite of a serious toothache (Ionesco 1954, 127).
4. Repression as defined in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*.
5. Schmitt’s elliptic style is full of suggestions and metaphors. Thus, the unsaid truth is even more striking in the way art is produced and popularized by people like Lama, Durand-Durand, and authorities, although there is no reference to a specific nation or country.
6. Theater in itself is a genre inclined towards experimenting because of its live performance, playing with the real and the abstract orders, as defined by Antonin Artaud in *Le théâtre et son double*.
7. As exposed in Jean Joseph Goux’s assertion on modern art and money:
—C’est à Nietzsche, on le sait, que l’on doit la notion de valeur dans le sens actuel du mot. C’est lui qui en fait virer le sens, vers une acception qui est maintenant commune. Non pas seulement la valeur d’une personne (digne d’estime par ses qualités - et primitivement son courage) ou celle d’un bien, mais la valeur ou les valeurs, comme système plus ou moins implicite des jugements à partir desquels un individu ou une société mesurent ce qui est bien, ce qui est mal - et aussi ce qui est beau et ce qui est laid. [We own it to Nietzsche the notion of value as we have it today. It is his understanding of value that became the norm. Not only the value of a man (respected for his qualities and the old courage) or that of

a thing, but the value or the values as a system of judgment more or less implicit based on which a person or the society measures what is good, what is bad- what is beautiful and what is ugly] — (Goux 2011, 48).

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