

Antoine Schmitt, *Christ Mourant* (2006)

Schmitt is a French programmer and computer engineer who has worked as both an independent artist and as a Silicon Valley engineer. His artistic work is typically minimal and generative, using “simple” lines and pixels as algorithmically programmed forms that explore the territory between freedom and predetermination. For example, his 2018 *Cascade* series is a generative video installation that uses simple white pixels before a black screen that gently flow like water around an invisible object in accordance with a program that is designed to perpetually change. Thus, the cascade is determined yet unpredictable. For *Christ Mourant*, Schmitt applied a similar technique to create an abstracted figure of the suffering body of the crucified Christ.

Christ Mourant is a computer-generated projection of a stick-figure Christ hanging on an invisible cross. To create the piece Schmitt used three-dimensional modeling and a computer program designed to mimic and represent the physics of a human body nailed to a cross. The result is a simple linear form that looks much like the basic mannequin used to teach figure drawing, with arms splayed wide, knees canted, and feet one atop the other. The figure itself is white and luminescent like fluorescent tube lights, or glowing bones before a black backdrop. The generative algorithm used to mimic a suspended body produces a slowly writhing human “trying to pull on his arms to be able to breathe, not being able to hold this position because of exhaustion, endlessly trying. The figure that we see is actually, in his world, indefinitely suffering, and we can feel it.”¹

Originally created in 2006, *Christ Mourant* was most memorably installed in the Chapelle des Carmélites in Toulouse, France in 2013 where it was projected atop a marble altar

¹ Antoine Schmitt, “Christ Mourant,” accessed 10/2/19, <http://www.antoineschmitt.com/christ-mourant/>.

in the majestically muraled seventeenth-century chapel. Not coincidentally, the mural that Schmitt's dying Christ obscured was a depiction of the Annunciation; the announcement of a miraculous birth overlaid on an all too human death. As Schmitt notes, "I have focused on the climactic moment of the death of the Christ on the cross and extended this moment indefinitely. The figure that we see never dies."² This is an endless, algorithmic passion of the Christ for the digital age, and as such, it offers a profound insight into the suffering body in cyberspace.

The digital space of cyberspace is a non-space. It is a virtual place where materiality and the body are left behind. In cyberspace we experience ourselves as disembodied non-spatial entities comprised of an assorted amalgam of websites, photos, videos, posts, tweets, likes, and snaps. On this view, the physical body is simply the object of record and the mechanism by which this online, non-spatial, entity exists and extends itself into virtual space. Consequently, the body that exists online is a caricature of sorts, with certain features exaggerated and others reduced. This is typically done either through photo and video editing software or simply through the self-editing demanded by conscientious online curatorship. The result, like the body of Schmitt's crucified Christ, is a digital sketch that only captures certain essential features while leaving others out entirely. Additionally, because cyberspace is a non-place, this body can exist everywhere simultaneously and indefinitely. As such, the suffering—the passion—that this body can endure is, like the suffering of *Christ Mourant*, potentially endless.

Because cyberspace is a non-space and yet every space, there is no place to escape to—there is no place for the bullied body to hide. The idea of simply unplugging or deleting an account, while possible, is not realistic for most. An online presence of some kind is required for most jobs, school, and social relations, as is having a cell phone and all that comes with it—text

² Ibid.

messaging, apps, etc. In this respect, the kind of cyberbullying that Jessica experienced is worse than the “old fashioned” kind of playground bullying where a punch in the nose was typically the end of it. There was an end to the suffering and there were places to hide. Additionally, like Schmitt’s *Christ Mourant* whose body is reduced to glowing, apparition-like lines for limbs, the bullied body in cyberspace is similarly stripped of personhood and reduced to a caricature that is identified only by cruel hashtags and mean tweets. The bullied body in cyberspace is not a person, it is simply #fat, #ugly, and #slutty. Lastly, and again like *Christ Mourant*, there is a generative quality to the suffering of the bullied body in cyberspace. Like the generative algorithms that constantly reproduce Christ’s suffering, there is a type of algorithm that perpetuates the suffering of the bullied body in cyberspace. The image, video, profile, snap, text, or tweet, is passed along to others and circulated in a cruel ritual of humiliation like buzzards circling a dying animal. Like Schmitt’s algorithm that protracts and endlessly repeats Christ’s suffering, those that circulate such content are not necessarily aware that they are in fact participating in and replicating—generating and regenerating—the suffering of the bullied body in cyberspace. Like so much of our social interactions, they are simply carrying out a programmed, or at least expected, function.

Consider, for example, the tragic story of Jessica Logan. In 2008 Jessica Logan, then a senior at Sycamore High School in Cincinnati, sent a nude photo of herself to her boyfriend. When the couple broke up, the photo was sent to hundreds of teenagers in at least seven Cincinnati-area high schools. Consequently, she was continuously harassed through text messages, Facebook, and Myspace. Shortly after this, Jessica committed suicide. This is the endless suffering of the body in cyberspace.

Thus, intentionally or not, Antoine Schmitt's *Christ Mourant* offers a chilling analog for the suffering body in cyberspace. It offers an understanding of the suffering body for a disembodied age. It offers an understanding of endless persecution when the space of torment is a non-space that is also every-space. It offers an understanding of how personhood is stripped from the bullied body in cyberspace as the individual is reduced to hurtful labels that are hurled at them. And finally, it offers an understanding of how online social interactions are just as learned and "generative" as our offline social exchanges. Indeed, Schmitt's *Christ Mourant* is the passion of Christ for the digital age.