

ABSALON, ABSALON

Absalon, Alain Buffard, Dora García, Robert Gober, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Mona Hatoum, Laura Lamiel, Myriam Mihindou

Curated by Guillaume Désanges and François Piron

Absalon Absalon is a collective exhibition that takes the work of the Franco-Israeli artist Absalon as a centre and suggests a new interpretation of his work through formal and conceptual affinities with other artists of his generation. Interrupted prematurely, Absalon's life and oeuvre is most well-known for his *Cellules*, a series of geometric architectural constructions in immaculate white, which the artist designed and built to inhabit. *Cellule* in French means both a cell in an organism and a unit in a prison, and both definitions are relevant in his case. Absalon's practice has recurrently been read as a follow-up of the avant-gardes, as the continuation of a radical, generic and idealised abstraction, disconnected from the world's contingencies. Without denying that Absalon's work has features in common with the aims and purposes of the avant-gardes, the exhibition nevertheless seeks to question its intentions and meanings, proposing a radical approach to the work. Through a broad selection of his drawings, models, sculptures, plans and prototypes, the exhibition's intention is to show in the first place how Absalon's work is articulated around a single programme whose linear trajectory pointed to a personal life project beyond the art's territory. Although the work has this superficial minimalist look, it contains a multitude of social, emotional and psychological questions relating to the emancipation of a physical body vis-à-vis *the* social body. The scale is political, but is applied from a non-prescriptive minority position of absolute individuality. It is a pocket of resistance nestling in the heart of the system, imploding rather than exploding. The *Cellules* are not so much a reflection on claustrophobia or withdrawal but the construction of a mental and physical space on a 1:1 scale, self-preserved but connected. It is a parasitic bio-device which functions as an autonomous living space, but also as a place for healing and recovery in a world regarded by the artist as a set of assignments and determinations from which his work must help him to free himself. Alongside the presentation of Absalon's concrete utopia, a selection of works by seven artists (Alain Buffard, Dora García, Robert Gober, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Mona Hatoum, Laura Lamiel and Myriam Mihindou), creates multiple perspectives pointing at issues dealing with culture, identity, poetry, spirituality and sentiment hidden in the core of an seemingly monolithic and programmatic oeuvre. The exhibition situates Absalon's meteoric career not only in relation to a hypothetical spirit of his time, the 1990s, but also within a network of dissident resonances whose echoes are still heard today.

“I have taken possession of my heart
I have taken possession of my two hands
[...]
I advance in broad daylight, I have been
born
For the second time
I walk faster, and I know where the door is
I shall travel all over the earth among the
living.”

Muriel Rukeyser

“Absalom”, from *The Book of the Dead*

Meir Eschel was 23 when he arrived in France in 1987 after leaving Israel, where he had grown up. He had just completed a traumatic military service. For some months, he lived on a beach in Ashdod, until he was invited by his uncle, Jacques Ohayon, an art critic and art history teacher, to join him in Paris. Ohayon recommended his nephew to his friend the artist Christian Boltanski, a professor at the school of Beaux-Arts de Paris. Legend has it that when Meir Eschel enrolled as a fine arts student, he did not know who Picasso was. History tells us of a meteoric career that took the young artist in two years from the school of Beaux-Arts de Paris to that of Cergy-Pontoise and subsequently to the Institut des *Hautes Études* in Visual Arts, directed by the artists Sarkis and Daniel Buren together with the former director of the Centre Pompidou, Pontus Hulten.

In the meantime, Meir Eschel changed his name to that of Absalon. In the Old Testament, the name of Absalom is associated with a figure who rebels against his father, a character struggling against determinism and identity attributions. Absalon's only recorded lecture, given in the auditorium of the school of Beaux-Arts de Paris in 1993, reveals his perception of his identity. He considers himself an “iconoclast”, a figure engaged in “resistance against culture”, in search of a “utopian” life.

Culture (1986) is one of the few objects Absalon took with him to France. Shortly before his departure from Israel, he crafted some expressionistic figures out of raw clay, paper and thread, most of them to be sold to the tourists in Ashdod. One was *Bande de guerre* [War Band, 1986], a scene of war where filiform figures seem to be struggling to crawl out of the mud that covers them. Another was an exhausted *Sisyphé* [Sisyphus, 1986], held up by strings like a marionette on a gallows. And the last was *Culture*, made up of four pieces of clay cutlery (spoon, teaspoon, fork and knife) hanging inside a cardboard box, looking like ethnographic specimens brought back from an expedition. Even before becoming Absalon, Meir Eschel viewed the products of culture from a certain distance, interrogating himself about habits, decisions, and the notions of coercion and comfort. Behind this was an urge to question precisely what emerges from the naturalised use of objects.

The first work he produced as part of his art studies was inspired by a form of organisation that perfectly represented the culture he had just plunged into, the so-called garden *à la française*. Taking these gardens as a basis, he drew abstract and symmetrical compositions that were soon to turn into compositions made with objects and found materials (boards, planks, boxes).

Arranging, placing, ordering: Absalon articulates his compositional procedure with objects in a given space, amidst a sort of abstraction that very soon takes the shapes of white parallelepipeds arranged in boxes – the term *cell* appears from 1988 onwards – and puts down roots in everyday life, incorporating the notions of the interior and the habitat. *Intérieurs corrigés* [Corrected Interiors, 1988], for instance, are photographs of interiors cut out of catalogues and architecture magazines, where Absalon makes the furniture disappear under a layer of white paint.

Absalon freed himself from studio work when he was given opportunities to exhibit that allowed him to give concrete form to his ideas on a different scale. Sometimes he scaled them up so much that his interventions became ephemeral, as it was impossible to transport them. When Christian Bernard and Christian Besson organised the exhibition *Sous le soleil exactement* [Exactly under the sun, 1989] in Nice and offered young artists the chance to occupy spaces in the *Villa Arson* school and art centre, Absalon chose to intervene in the building's underground car park. There, generations of students had stored materials, remains of artworks, furniture and other forgotten bits and pieces, which Absalon arranged and covered with a uniform layer of white plaster, using all 18 of the underground garages for his display. Organising, arranging. Between arrangement and repair, as the art critic Elisabeth Lebovici points out, Absalon tries to “suspend the state of entropy of his materials [...] converted into ruins.”¹

Stratified under their crust of plaster, the objects deprived of function are no more than simplified silhouettes, prototypes that are more ideal than functional. Throughout the year 1990, Absalon made geometric cardboard shapes inspired by various models, such as variations on mechanised forms in the manner of a tool catalogue, modules arranged as furnishings in a living room, and even the outlines of cars.

His installation at Tramway, Glasgow (1990) was also ephemeral. There, his object-prototypes were lined up along the interior of this post-industrial shed, like capsules or idle machines, systematically illuminated by hanging neon tubes (another element taken from the industrial vocabulary). In *Compartiments* [Compartments] at the Künstlerhaus in Stuttgart in 1991, he divided the space into cells inhabited by white organic ovoid forms.²

With his first *Cellules*, and also with his various *Propositions d'habitation* [Proposals for a Habitat, 1991], culminating in his contribution to documenta in 1992, Absalon's inclination to architecture became more precise and the projective dimension of his work more obvious. His productions succeeded and complemented one another logically, and his recurrent forms steadily constructed a coherent and highly individual vocabulary.

From 1990 onwards, Absalon knew he was HIV positive, and he was killed by AIDS in

1 Élisabeth Lebovici, “Habiter, habituer”, *Absalon, actes de la cellule 5/6*. Dilecta, Paris, 2014.

2 The same year, he made a similar proposal to Chantal Crousel for his stand at the Paris Contemporary Art Fair (FIAC). Absalon divided the available surface into a grid formed by cells of equal size, inaccessible and impracticable since they were occupied by blocks of white polystyrene. The gallery staff were confined in the only open cell.

1993, at the age of 28. In the early 1990s, the lack of therapies made such a diagnosis a fatal countdown. However, only a few people knew about it: his partner, the artist Marie-Ange Guilleminot, whom he met that same year; his gallerist, Chantal Crousel; and his assistant, Philippe Piccoli, with whom he had shared a studio since 1991. One of his uncles, François Lasry, had lent him a studio on the outskirts of Paris, in a building designed by Le Corbusier in the 1920s for the sculptor Jacques Lipschitz. From then on, it was there that most of Absalon's projects were to take shape.

In 1991, he started to make six small cardboard models of white houses with curved lines. These would keep him busy for the next two years. The parallelepipeds are replaced by softer and more rounded forms whose ergonomics seem to imply they are meant to hold a body, merely outlined for the moment by a hollow.

When fully unfurled, Absalon's universe now seems close to certain science-fiction dystopias where mankind is entrenched in clinically uniform architecture.³ His productions are often described as "minimalist" and "modernist", a formal assonance that risks creating a false impression. For Absalon's ideas are distant from, if not opposed to, modernist messianism and minimalist standardisation. What he wants is not to "change the world" but to "change his life", inventing new rules for himself that will give him a new and more intense way of living and enable him to flee learned behaviour.

In a lecture, Absalon describes how he constructs his project in opposition to the idea of utopia: "The final stage is the real construction of the house to be set in place. It is a project for six different houses that will be placed in six different places around the world, all totally linked to my artistic activity (...) and I situate those houses in places that would permit me to use them, with the simple wish to avoid utopia. That is to say, those houses are by no means utopian, but real houses that I am really going to live in." Absalon's projection consists of inscribing his project as a life project within concrete everyday existence, beyond the symbolic regime of artistic representation. He is especially loquacious on life in the *Cells*, imagining what they will and will not allow him to do, and how they will create comfort from coercion, generate a new "dance" of his body in space, and deflect any impulse he might feel to accumulate goods or set up a bourgeois family lifestyle. Absalon did not live enough to see his houses, which he imagined as a "virus in the city",⁴ installed in the cities that he wanted to dwell in: Paris, Zurich, Frankfurt, New York, Tel Aviv and Tokyo.

In the spring of 1993, for an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, he built full-scale prototypes of his houses. They had no water or electricity, but the public could go in and feel what Absalon intended to

3 His first video, *Propositions d'habitation* [Proposals for Habitats, 1991], presents a figure dressed in white who performs in an immaculate set furnished with white objects, arranged like furniture with a slightly mysterious function. Absalon saw this film as "a proposal for future civilisation, or a still undeciphered document from a past civilisation."

4 Quotation taken from Absalon's lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris. The term *cellule*, as Absalon uses it, is linked above all to the image of an organic cell, the idea of a potentially reproducible unity, although he evidently does not ignore the connotations of confinement and isolation associated with a cell in a monastery or a prison. However, he does not adopt a mystical perspective towards his project, nor is his goal one of voluntary isolation.

experience for himself: a life constrained in a few square metres, but above all a space that was entirely thought out, chosen and made to his measure (he was 1.90 metres tall), turning it for him into a mental space as well as a concrete one. In alignment with this perspective, Absalon's work is entirely projective. Everything functions as a prototype, from the plan and the model to the 1:1 scale execution, and only illness and an early death were to prevent his project from being fully carried out.

His last works are especially physical and violent videos where Absalon appears on camera and his concrete body is subjected to a trial of effort. In *Bruits* [Noises, 1993], he stands before the camera, his head shaven, and screams for two minutes until exhaustion. In *Bataille* [Battle, 1993], shot from a very high angle, he punches and kicks the edges of the frame. As the video is on a loop, it shows a never-ending struggle. These two recordings both oppose and complement each other, as Absalon said: "With the same desire not to become what I am called on to be, not to yield, I make this second recording in which I am never exhausted. I'm going to fight with all my strength (...) in that desire not to give in, to fight, not to accept, to live my life as I understand it: well, actually, to not live it."

Suspension. Thirty years on.

The exhibition *Absalon, Absalon* proposes several formats gathered in a single exhibition. On the one hand, it is a selective solo exhibition centered on the oeuvre of Absalon. On the other, it is a group show designed around certain affinities between the work of Absalon and that of seven artists who have been his contemporaries, but who do not necessarily belonged to his immediate artistic environment.

Reconsidering the work of Absalon nearly thirty years after his death involves reflecting on his singularity, but also on his proximity to a certain generation of artists who emerged on the international scene in the early 1990s, and on the relations we establish with those artists – the American Robert Gober, the Lebanese Mona Hatoum, the French choreographer Alain Buffard and others – allowing us to locate Absalon's place in a dialectic between body and architecture. Notions of vulnerability, but also of will-power, effort and coercion, are fundamental for an understanding of a form of revolt against conditioning and a need to reconstruct practices and spaces that are both mental and physical.

Nothing could be further from Absalon than the melancholy associated with postmodernism, that nostalgia for the avant-gardes linked to the decline of ideologies, epitomised during that period by the fall of the Soviet Union. By contrast, Absalon's oeuvre, aligned in its entirety with a desire to live and to do so on his own terms, is very close to those artists who responded to the fight against AIDS, for example, by leaving aside the hesitations which for a time had separated activism from art, and embarked on practices built on the urgent need to live and provide testimony. It also recalls artists like Mona Hatoum who are inscribed within a decolonial and antiracist perspective, and who bring to light the deterministic mechanisms

of oppression. While Absalon's oeuvre stands out in this context for his refusal to consider an overt political and social dimension for his work, as it is instead an individual search for an ideal of liberty emancipated from attributions, it is nevertheless in his proximity to more politicised artists that his radical urgency finds coincidences.

The contributions of Laura Lamiel and Myriam Mihindou furnish the exhibition with an extension and reinterpretation of some of their works of the 1990s. These are constructed around a vocabulary of objects in keeping with personal rituals that invest them with great symbolic power. The notion of whiteness acquires a spiritual function, associating concrete and mental space. As an organiser of space, Absalon's work contains a ritual dimension. When he evokes the constrained movements of his body in the limited space of the *Cellules*, he summons up a dance, a choreography of coercion, destined to institute the rules of a "new comfort". The ritual constitutes a system of organisation that surpasses the system of artistic representation to become a way of life. Among other things, Absalon affirmed his passion for Le Facteur Cheval⁵, an amateur artist builder who obstinately constructed his "ideal palace", as a way of situating his frame of reference outside the sphere of an excessively normalised contemporary art that is centered more on signs than on the concrete life Absalon's work tries to confront.

Hay otros mundos, pero están en este. (There are other worlds, but they are inside this one, 2018) says the 'golden sentence' written by Dora García. Among her corpus of phrases, some paradoxical and some sarcastic, which she inscribes with gold leaf, and which acquire an auratic and oracular dimension in exhibitions, this one resounds with stoical wisdom. It invites us to seek no more transcendence than that which permits us contact with the concrete world.

In the work of Marie-Ange Guilleminot, whiteness, this time protective, is a more precise tribute to that of Absalon, whose partner she became in 1990. *The White Watch* tries to make time disappear. The dial of the watch, which shows only the hour and the minute of the explosion of the bomb in Hiroshima, becomes uniformly white when the hands are superimposed. Guilleminot created this work, evocative of a "portable monument", on her return from a trip to Japan after Absalon's death. It is both a realisation of Absalon's dream journey and a momentary suspension of time that evokes the interruption of his work in mid-flight.

5 In 1879, the 43-year-old rural postman Ferdinand Cheval started to build on his own a monumental "Ideal Palace", as he named it, in his backyard garden. Its construction lasted after 33 years and is a unique example of an "outsider" piece of architecture, borrowing from many architectural and ornamental styles. Facteur Cheval intended the monument to be his graveyard, but the law forbid people to be buried in their garden. Cheval had barely enough time to build a miniature replica of his palace in the cemetery of Hauterives where he lies.