

A Moment of Our Time: The Sculpture of Micah Lexier

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visage: un masque rehaussé de deux trous pour les yeux et d'une fente pour la bouche (*The man and the child*, 1994).

En somme, il apparaît que chaque œuvre instaure un récit, que le sculpteur veille ensuite à déjouer, pour contrarier toute

esquisse de narration ; la conclusion tarde à venir et cette attente fonde la dynamique de cette création centrifuge. Ainsi, Henk Visch accentue les échos de son propre travail. Ceux qui adhèrent à cette orientation esthétique s'en réfèrent aux repères que l'artiste dissémine tout au long de son sillage (de loin en loin, les rebondissements sont nombreux). Les autres s'en détournent et le laissent disparaître derrière l'horizon. ←

Henk Visch
Stedelijk Museum Voor Actuele Kunst
Citadelpark, B-9000, Gand (Belgique)
28 janvier-19 mars 2006
www.smak.be

Yoann VAN PARYS est né en 1981 en Belgique : études d'histoire de l'art à l'Université de Louvain-la-Neuve et diplôme de troisième cycle sur l'art contemporain à l'Université de Bruxelles. Artiste et critique d'art indépendant, il collabore aux revues belges *Flux News*, *l'Art Même*, *Context K*, à la revue française *Critique d'art* et à la revue autrichienne *Camera Austria*.

Notes

1. Ainsi de l'exposition *Chambre d'amis* (1988) qui reste la plus célèbre aujourd'hui, et dont le principe s'est largement répandu par la suite. Il s'agissait alors, pour les artistes participants, de présenter leurs créations dans des espaces privés appartenant à des familles gantoises qui s'étaient prêtées au jeu. Dans tel salon, dans tel bureau, on découvrirait des œuvres spécifiques, réalisées par les ténors de l'époque : Dan Graham, Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman, Daniel Buren, Sol Lewitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner et bien d'autres.
2. Jan Hoet est présentement associé à une nouvelle aventure puisqu'il dirige un musée flambant neuf en Allemagne, conçu par Frank Gehry : le MARTA à Herford.
3. Certaines sculptures évoquent d'ailleurs lointainement le Giacometti de la période surréaliste (on pense, par exemple, au *Palais à quatre heures du matin* qu'il réalise en 1932 et qui est conservé au Museum of Modern Art de New York).

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Henk VISCH, vue partielle de l'exposition au Smak, 2006.
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A Moment of Our Time: The Sculpture of Micah Lexier

GIL McELROY

The work of New York City-based artist Micah Lexier is usually considered to be of a conceptual bent, and as with the work of others who are mining the same vein, system and order are at the very heart of all things aesthetic. Lexier has taken particular interest in probing the issue of time and the various ways and means we've employed to measure and demarcate its passage. Indeed, he has constructed pieces that can (and eventually will) span a human lifetime, like *A work of art in the form of a quantity of coins equal to the number of months of the statistical life expectancy of a child born January 6, 1995* (1995), a work in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario comprising 906 consecutively numbered coins one of which is publicly transferred by a volunteer from a document box (in which the coins are pre-arranged in orderly rows) to a second identical box (in which, however, the increased disorder mandated by the time-linked principle of entropy is made abundantly manifest) on the sixth day of each month. The piece will be completed on July 6, 2070.

Most artists working conceptually of course opt to transform idea in some artefactual form. Much of Micah Lexier's work is manifestly sculptural in its execution and effect, and because the element of time is absolutely central in it, the cosmological worldview devised by the late German mathematician Hermann Minkowski affords a useful context within which to consider it.

In the early twentieth century, Minkowski devised a means whereby an object's location in both space and time could be simultaneously plotted in diagrammatic form. It was his realization that space and time—which had been thought to be independent of one another—were, in fact, one entity: a four-dimensional continuum we now call spacetime. Albert Einstein would use what would come to be called "Minkowski spacetime" to help formulate his general theory of relativity.

Minkowski's diagrams aren't, however, the most visually interesting things to look at. They're two-dimensional simplifications of a four-dimensional reality—draw-

ings comprised of two intersecting axes (a vertical line representing time and a horizontal one representing space) that most closely resembles the system of Cartesian coordinates. The point of intersection of the lines of space and time denotes zero, that point we now call "The Big Bang," that singularity from which spacetime, and so our entire observable universe, was born. Extending up and away from this zero point at equal angles on opposite sides of the vertical time line are two lines that represent the speed of light. They're the most important part of the diagram, for the spacetime of everyday life—the place where things can happen within the universe of which we are a part—ends up diagrammatically represented as the space within those two lines. The shape of that space resembles a cone, for the two lines which form the sides—those denoting the aforementioned speed of light—represent the absolute limits of our possible experience of the universe. All that is, has been and will be, exists within a cone of light. It is the shape, however banal we might think it to be, of spacetime.

Over the course of the winter of 2001-02, this cone of early twentieth-century Minkowski spacetime found an early twenty-first-century aesthetic equivalent in a sculptural work Lexier undertook for the Toronto Sculpture Garden (TSG). In its final form, after fifteen weeks of construction and halfway through its exhibition existence, the piece was a long, low rectangular wall of bricks and mortar that diagonally sliced across the TSG's small lawn. *The End and The Beginning*, however, comprised fourteen previous sculptural incarnations before terminating in the simple geometry of the wall. Each week, brick mason Noel Puype, following Lexier's specific instructions, added precisely 420 new bricks to the work. At the end of week 1, the piece comprised 11/2 courses of brick that only just protruded above the grass. By week 3, verticality was introduced, as a stubby chimney-like shape arose from otherwise horizontal courses of bricks, and through the following weeks more complex shapes occurred that were, in the end, absorbed into the plain geometry of a brick and mortar artefact.

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Micah LEXIER, *A Portrait of David*, 1994. Life-size photographs mounted to a free-standing wall, 2,44 x 38,1 x 1,07 m. In the collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg. Photo: Ernst Mayer.

Earlier on, back in the last decade of the twentieth century, Lexier's aestheticization of space-time was made sculpturally manifest in another series in which, again, stacking was a primary structural element: his *Book Sculptures*. Using life-size photographs of individuals, Lexier mounted them on the spines of a series of custom-made "books" (actually, wooden objects lacking things like pages that are book-like in external appearance only) he then arranged on shelves—like *Book Sculptures: Brothers (Bunk Bed)* (1993), a piece in which each book individually comprised a slice of the total figu-

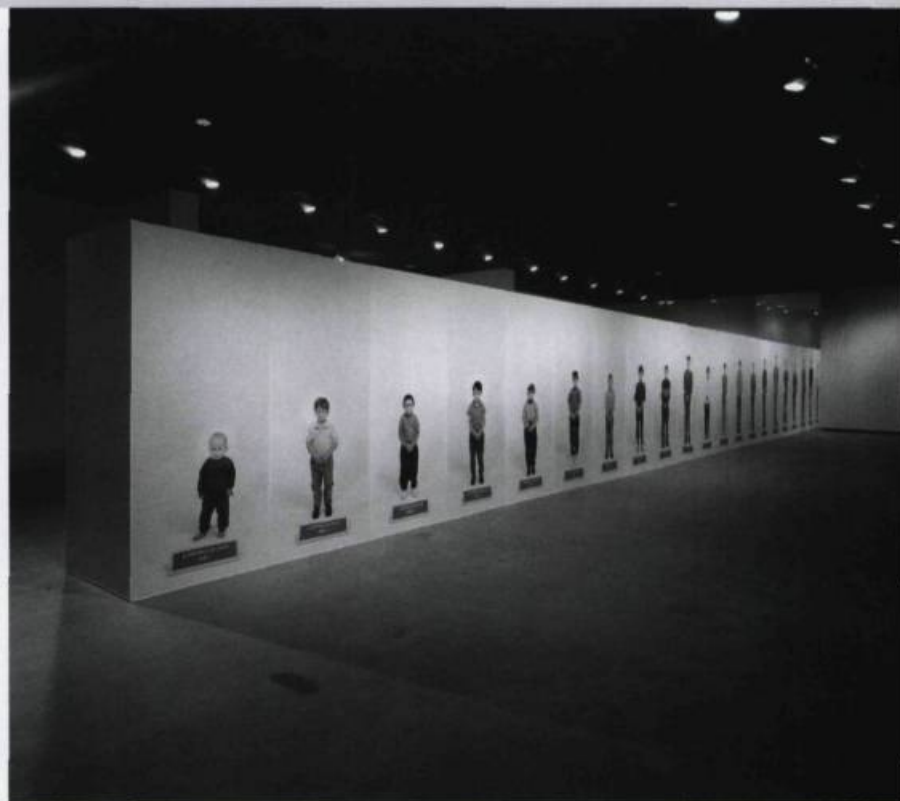
represented on the book spines. Photography may be an element absolutely vital to this body of work, but its manifestation is entirely within a sculptural context. Lexier's *Book Sculptures* are encounters with the artefactual, with physical things giving space-time a very particular shape.

In many works from a series of individual pieces collectively entitled *A Minute of My Time*, Lexier wrought sculptural spacetime from the two-dimension domain of pen and ink doodles, each of which he drew in an interval that precisely spanned one minute of time of a specific date (all duly noted in the

something of the equivalent, if you will, to Minkowski's two-dimensional spacetime diagrams—and that a number were even created on paper that had been prepared beforehand with grid lines drawn in perspective so as to suggest three-dimensionality.)

With his *One of These Things* series, Lexier furthered this enquiry into the sculptural possibilities of the two-dimensional by objectifying and actualising signs—in this instance, two of the formal elements of written language. With enamelled waterjet-cut aluminium, he materialized linguistic punctuation: the comma in *One of These*

the typographic symbol as a series of blunt, squared-off objects, all hard angles and devoid of the graceful flowing curves we tend to associate with most visually appealing typefaces, which he has grouped together on the wall in abutting blocks so that only the typographic tails protrude at varied angles. It may begin with typography, but Lexier's transposition of symbol into artefact iterates its almost sculptural origins while actualising and substantiating what is really little more than an insubstantial mark—a highly stylised, albeit semantically meaningful, doodle, if you will—on paper.



rative image which itself only made representational sense when the books were assembled together to create a whole—or vertically stacked on the floor, as in *Book Sculpture: Three Generations (Female)* (1993) where the images of three women, standing back-to-back so that the woman of the middle generation (and there is a reference here—intentional or not—to the so-called "Sandwich Generation" of women caught between the competing demands of children and aging parents) is repeated twice as a kind of visual and familial fulcrum on which both the piece and the family hinges, are

title of each work). The drawings were transformed into large objects of waterjet-cut steel that were then mounted on the side of walls or building exteriors—like *A Minute of My Time (September 29, 1999 15:04-15:05)*, which hangs on the side of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario—or were worked out as smaller, entirely free-standing gallery-exhibited objects, like the bent steel piece *A Minute of My Time December 10, 1998 22:22-22:12*. (It's worth noting that many of the works in the series were never intended to be anything other than drawings on paper—

Things/Commas (2003), and script braces in *One of These Things/Braces* (2003). In each work, the child's game in which one object amongst a group is to be identified as in some way different contextualizes Lexier's sculptural manifestations of figures that are abstract symbols—pure typographic shapes—never originally intended to be manipulated as dimensional objects (although, interestingly, until only recently they have themselves been the product of objects—fonts of lead, for example—that are themselves artefactual). For *One of These Things/Commas*, Lexier articulated

In the winter of 2003, Lexier returned to his hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba to update one of his best known works and so make it a unique piece in its own right. As it was first conceived and executed, *A Portrait of David* (1994) comprised 75 full-body portraits of males named David that Lexier had located in Winnipeg and had individually photographed in black and white and in identical poses. "We are looking for all sizes and shapes of David between the ages of 1 and 75," read the original advertisement when the work was being created. Each David photographed (after random selection from those

who responded to the call) corresponded to a year in what Lexier determined to be his life expectancy based on statistical information in the *Canadian Global Almanac*. For *David: Then & Now*, exhibited in the summer of 2005, Lexier had successfully managed to re-photograph 48 of the original 75 males and exhibited the before and after images side by side.

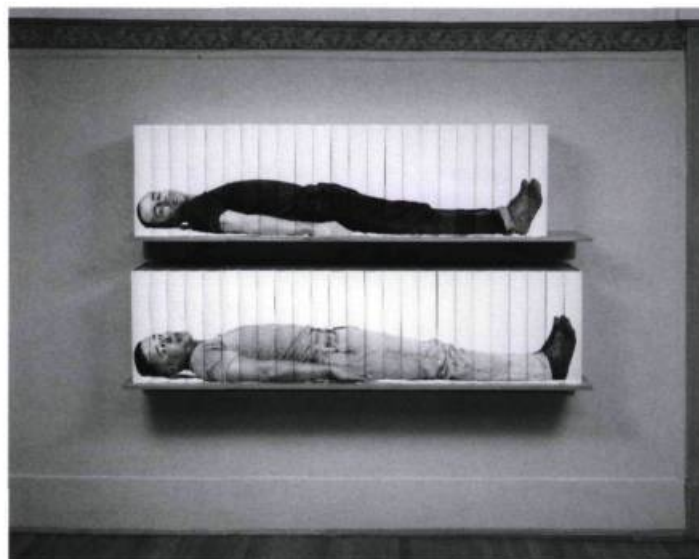
Though photography is at the heart of *A Portrait of David* and *David: Then & Now*, the installational aspect of the exhibitions—life-size images, arranged in chronological order, mounted on masonite panels that in turn were part of freestanding walls independent of the fixed gallery walls—exerted a strong sculptural pull on

the exhibition space and our experience of it. As with Albert Einstein's conception of gravity as localized deformations of the fabric of spacetime, Lexier's work too deforms the experiential quality of a gallery environment, courtesy the localized phenomena of time-based figurative imagery deployed with spatially subversive ends in mind.

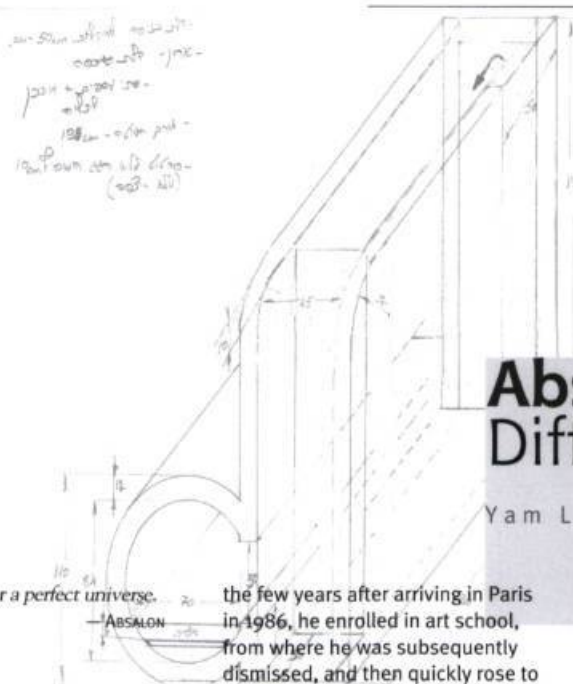
Spacetime, it turns out, has many possible shapes, and in his work, Micah Lexier substantiates but a few.

Let us therefore marvel. ←

Gil McELROY is a poet, independent curator and critic. He is the author of *Gravity & Grace: Selected Writings on Contemporary Canadian Art*



Micah LEXIER, *Book Sculptures: Brothers (Bunk Beds)*, 1993. Photographs, book-forms, wood. 122 x 195.6 x 30.5 cm. In the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. Photo: Peter MacCallum.



SOLITUDE AS FORM

Is it possible, I often wonder, to live otherwise? To take up as one's work the question, "How might one live?" To construct a different image of life from that which is simply given and hence dogmatic? A related question would be, "What are the models, measures and economies that constitute a remarkable life and work of resistance?"

One of the most exemplary artistic practices that engages these questions is forged by the French/Israeli artist Absalon. Originally from Israel, Absalon lived and worked in Paris for a few years before he died at the age of 28 in 1993. Throughout his short career, the artist explored the elemental possibilities of living on his own terms as the source of his work. In

the few years after arriving in Paris in 1986, he enrolled in art school, from where he was subsequently dismissed, and then quickly rose to international fame before his untimely death. In this brief interval he created an impressive body of work that poignantly wagered his individuality against standardized life.

Almost from the beginning, Absalon's works can be described as architectural proposals. These proposals are constructions of solitude—a search for the most essential and reduced architectural forms in order to foster such a state of being. For the artist, solitude is not a state of deprivation but a precondition of resistance, a protective frontier against the encroachment of standardized life on his desire to become a fuller human being. Living differently on one's own presupposes the invention of such an environment of resistance from which an authentic agent may arise. Hence, Absalon's forms, economies and values provide a cluster of interrelated

Absalon: To Live Differently on One's Own

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dynamics that constitute a struggle towards authenticity.

EARLY WORK—BECOMING BODY

Absalon's earliest works are either architectural models or models of utilitarian objects whose function has yet to be determined. These objects are modest in scale. Later, when financial support became available, the small objects were realized on a larger scale, thus engaging the body differently. Towards the end of his life, the forms were developed into fully functional and liveable habitats. Consistent throughout his practice is the conglomeration, arrangement and compartmentalization of architectural forms covered with a white, plastered surface, and the use of overhanging fluorescent light which frame the work. The forms, regardless of their diverse manifestations and functions, are related by a shared familial resemblance of volumes, simplicity and austerity.

The earliest small white forms were "proposed" as functioning hand-held, everyday objects, since

their scale and shapes approximate such familiar objects. A number of these objects of similar sizes would be compartmentalized within a grid. Such an arrangement imposed a kind of internal logic, a necessity within the composition. As "proposals" however, the white forms did not anticipate any fixed utility. Absalon asserted the right to use or explore these forms in infinite ways. "I am free to give things the function I decide on," declares the artist. "An armchair could be an architectural structure, a cake of soap or anything else." These "proposals" are not objects in the sense that they are subordinated to the utilitarian interest of a subject. Instead, by inventing new usages for them, users are in fact constructing new bodies and unforeseen actions that exceed the limited ways they customarily apply their bodies in the world. In other words, these objects invite the body to connect with them in order to construct new bodies. Absalon's body and his constructions are thus pledged to each other in a state of perpetual becoming.

ABSALON, *Drawing Cell No. 3*, mixed media; photo: courtesy of the artist.