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Absalon: To Live Differently on One’s Own

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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 rephotograph 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 installation 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 a search for the most architecturally relevant Canadian styles that exceed the limited ways they are generally 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 1995. 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 conglomeration 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 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 overwhelming 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 “proposals” 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.
Hence, I consider his work to model an experimental utopianism without end or finitude.

These constructions call to the body to perform itself, to draw out an energy that would otherwise remain coiled within the regime of utility that the body is supposed to serve. In a video work entitled Proposal for Habitat, the artist directs a male performer in a white suit to execute ritualistic movements and postures that are created out of the performer's interactions with an environment of architectural forms. Though sometimes reminiscent of everyday gestures, these movements are invented. At one point the performer rubs his jacket against an architectural form, producing a scratchy sound that calls attention to the material fact of the jacket as a source and a measure for his architectural environment. "I need no justification...I expend a mad energy to create something new, not something better...the artist remarked.

Solidarity with One's Self

From the beginning, it was clear that Absalon did not identify with artistic precedents. Instead of forming an artistic alliance, he seems to have posited himself as the sole agent engaged in the architectural/performative procedure in order to subject his "self" to perceptual inventions. His name change testifies to his striking out on an individual path, which demanded that one lose an encrusted social self. This new name, however, does not espouse a mythology. Everything in the artist's work is physical, in so far as it is arrived at through the body's interaction with the architectural form in the present. It is in this separate world that the artist's life can be tested and invented. Such a radical break with the status quo creates a kind of solitude, but it is not one that expires in isolation. Absalon's is not a diminished life of seclusion. Instead, it constitutes a radically reduced economy that enables the artist to propose new grounds for freedom and resistance. He must have been sure that the testing and inventing of his deeds in a self-contained architectural environment warranted a unique measure, an exemplary ethic out of which the related questions of art and life could be intensely fused.

Cells or Some Experimental Exercises on Freedom?

Absalon's last and most moving works consist of one-to-one scale models of white cells. These cells are the most elaborate expression of his experiments in the ethic of living. The most powerful group of cells is a series of six. Each one is a fully functional living unit designated to be his personal habitat in a specific city. They create, in the midst of homogenized life, a kind of solitude and independence associated with nomadic existence. The cells are indeed gestures of protest, of resistance. As Absalon stated, "These homes will be a means of resistance to a society that keeps me from becoming what I must become."

Outwardly the cells are reminiscent of a monk's cell, a kind of cloister or space capsule. They are also somewhat related to Le Corbusier's modular units and monastic sensibility. Formally, the cells and the furniture designed for them reflect the artist's interest in De Stijl. However, these analogies are only vaguely helpful, since the impulses and aspirations that motivated Absalon's work are quite different.

The cells' minimal structure gives expression to what is absolutely essential for the artist to live; they accommodate only the body's most basic needs. Nothing extraneous to this organizational principle is accepted. Each cell contains compartments designated for sleep, work, wash and toilet. But these activities must be conducted within a constrained space. A very limited amount of storage demands the most scrupulous decision in selecting personal belongings. The cells also produce the possibility of sharing the space with a companion, let alone family. In some cells the respective functions of the body are reflected in external forms. The cylindrical volume in Cell No. 3, for example, is used to accommodate a bed for sleeping. Limited cuts create openings that allow for very reduced traffic between the inside of the cell and the world at large.

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Wood, cork, white paint. 60 x 20 x 130 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

ABSALON, Solutions, 1992.
Video, 7 mm 50 s. Photo: courtesy of the artist.
thoughts and deeds, are incarnated as actions.

The cells would have been rather challenging for a body that seems to fit a 5'8" frame and perhaps around six-foot. The cells were tall, perhaps around six-foot. The dimensions of the cells, including the furniture specifically designed for them, resulted from countless attempts to discover the appropriate architectural measure of the artist's body. Judging from photographs, I believe Absalon was quite tall, perhaps around six-foot. The cells would have been rather tight for his body (they seem to fit his 5'8" body) and hence would have exerted considerable constraints on the artist. These constraints are apparently designed to transform the artist's movements into ritualised forms, since manoeuvring in the cells requires a heightened mental and physical energy. It is precisely those daily actions that are subjected to constant repetition, examination and experimentation. There is nothing behind the deeds and architectural forms, yet their astonishing power compels us to acknowledge the possibilities of other dimensions of living. When Absalon so confidently declared that the cells could be models for a whole civilization, I took him to mean that each individual may figure his/her own body, ethics, or forms of life and resistance in resistance and through the cells. Here, an intense engagement with the mundane could also warrant a path to agency.

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Given the cells were exhibited in major museums and the artist did not always live in them, there are not so many inconsistencies between Absalon's life and art. Surely his practice is not directed by morality. Resistance outside of the cells can take many forms, even a life of crime. Is it then a legitimate and even necessary question to ask what the artist's life is like outside of the cells? Are the cells nothing more than impossible ideals against which mundane life must be measured and recreated? Perhaps more importantly, could one sustain/extend the enormous mental and physical energy required to live in the cells to life outside? It is through people who knew Absalon that I have come to learn about his extraordinary life and work. It does seem that at the most crucial level — the ethical — his "outside" life did approximate life in the cells. His personal possessions were very limited. He owned one coat, two pairs of pants and three pairs of underwear. His living space was very small and everything in it was white; his furniture was often the same as that he designed for the cells. His answering machine announced only his name. In general, he insisted on carrying the rituals and restrictions of the cells into his life. For example, I was told that he took his meals in a very small table, which forced the body to adopt a posture that was not at all conducive to digestion, a ritual he maintained even when he became very ill towards the end of his life. Although he was not seduced by material possessions he was fascinated by the abundance of merchandise in shopping malls. He exuded a captivating dynamic personality. He was always talking about his work, demanding, very sure of himself and yet humorous.

The earliest work of his that I know, probably a student work entitled Sisyphe, is a small wooden construction of a man pushing a rock uphill. Looking from hindsight, the spirit of the last cells was already germinating in this modest work — within an enclosed self-supporting structure, a man chose to struggle against an enormous obstacle in order to create a battle with himself. In time, Sisyphe's body and the rock will become each other's extension. This is an instance where life creates friction as a means to recreate itself. It is rare that a student would make such a demand on himself. It seems Absalon had already decided no one can dictate his measure of life. Six years later he produced the last cells. To live differently on his own terms is probably the thing Absalon knew best. 

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