

Absalon: To Live Differently on One's Own

Yam Lau

Number 76, Summer 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/8872ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Lau, Y. (2006). Absalon: To Live Differently on One's Own. *Espace Sculpture*, (76), 38–40.

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.

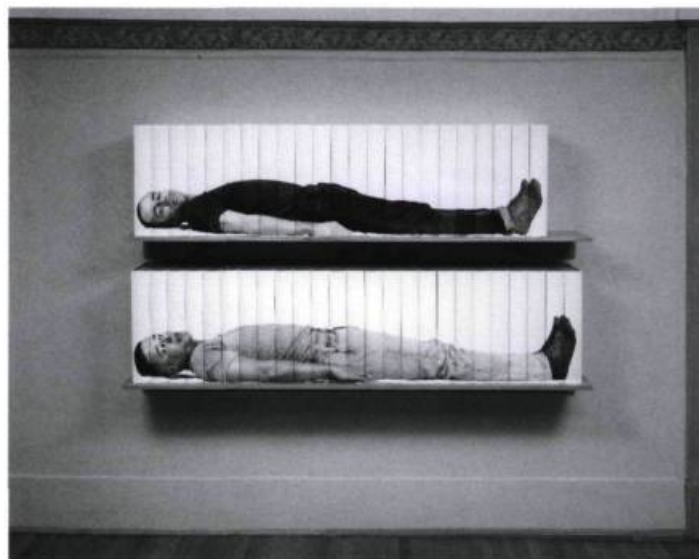
Though photography is at the heart of *A Portrait of David* and *David: Then & Now*, the installational aspect of the exhibitions—life-size images, arranged in chronological order, mounted on masonite panels that in turn were part of freestanding walls independent of the fixed gallery walls—exerted a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

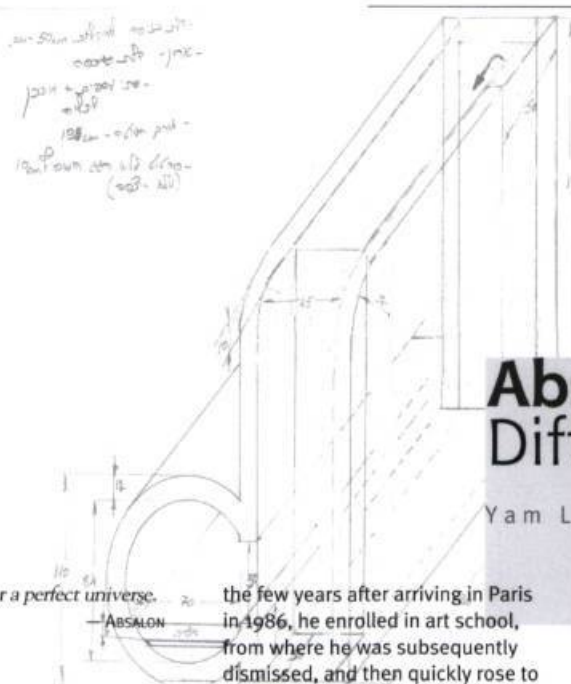
Spacetime, it turns out, has many possible shapes, and in his work, Micah Lexier substantiates but a few.

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.



Absalon: To Live Differently on One's Own

Yam LAU

I have a desire for a perfect universe.

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

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.

Hence, I consider his work to model an experimental utopianism without end or finality.

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 large architectural forms. Though sometimes reminiscent of everyday gestures, most of the movements have no "meaning" outside of the specific environment in which they 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 constitutive component of the environment. Divested of usefulness, the gestures are not to be regarded as oriented towards some future goal. Yet neither are they devoid of meaning, for they are embedded and indigenous to the specific environment created by the artist. As the body/environment performs itself, one witnesses the emergence of a different subject, one that is authenticated by this very performance.

I would like to remind the reader that Absalon's constructions are in fact quite rough and heavily textured. This visceral quality threw me off guard when I first encountered the actual work, since in reproduction it had appeared polished and pristine. Later, as I became more acquainted with Absalon's practice, I realized that it has been evident from the earliest works that he had eschewed pristine materiality, that he had no patience for abstraction and meta-physical pretension. Rather, he chose to exert and expend his body 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

demanding 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.

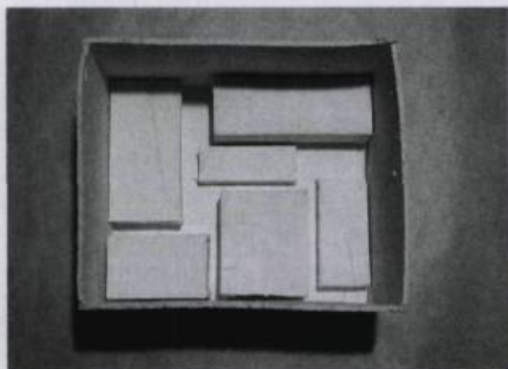
CELLS OR SOME EXPERIMENTAL EXERCISES ON FREEDOM?

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."

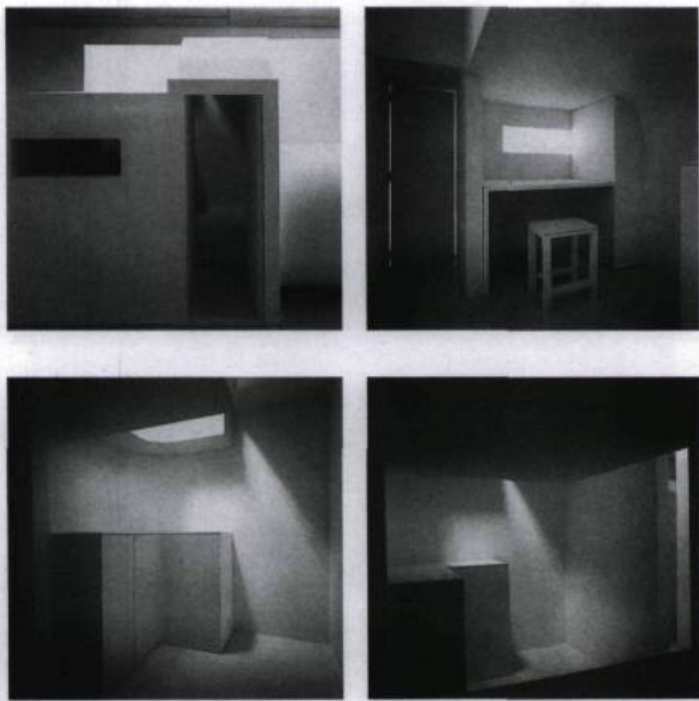
Outwardly the cells are reminiscent of a monk's cell, a kind of cloister or space capsule. They are also somewhat related to Le Corbusier's modular units and monastic sensibility. Formally, the cells and the furniture designed for them reflect the artist's interest in De Stijl. However, these analogies 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 preclude 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.



←←
ABSALON, *Order*, 1988.
Wood, cork, white paint. 60 x 20 x 130 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

←
ABSALON, *Solutions*, 1992.
Video, 7 min 50 s. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



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 my 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 awareness. In the highly restricted dimensions and economies of the cells, one can imagine that daily activities, both thoughts and deeds, are incarnated into the physical forms of the cells and vice versa. I do not think it is simply a matter of allowing the body to be conditioned by architecture since the specific architectural constraints are self-generated. I think the intention is to compact and elevate the normally unfocused energy of everyday life, usually dissipated through unremarkable routines, into ritualistic gestures that are made alive by a heightened sense of their limitations. One may characterize the cells as a kind of laboratory through which the artist explores the expressive potentialities of his body. And it is through the life in the cells that he announces his individuality by making his mundane actions extraordinary. Here, an extreme economy becomes the precondi-

tion, as well as an affirmation for the possibilities of freedom and selfhood.

Absalon envisioned his cells to be models for a different way to live. They are not just models for an individual who has decided to live differently but also for an entire civilization. This enormous confidence was not earned in the abstract. It was demonstrated by the physical search for new protocols that compress as well as ritualise his daily actions into almost palpable forms.

TRACES OF AN IMPURE LIFE

Wittgenstein once wrote, "I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrines, so that nothing is spoken. Clearly, then, the essence of religion can have nothing to do with what is sayable." On another occasion he said to his student Drury: "If you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn't be that we talk a lot about religion, but that our manner of life is different."

The white cells are filled with a diffused, soft and initially unnerving light. This light suggests an aura of spirituality—a kind of perpetual twilight. Inside one receives the sensation of being "transported." Surely Absalon did not align his work with institutional religion. But the question of whether his is a religious art persists especially when the viewer understands that religious sensibility may very well be found outside of the institutional confines. In organized religion, it is through the extreme beauty of, say,

Christian rituals that God's presence can become palpable. Might Absalon's not be an intensified form of life that constitutes a religious and ethical dimension of living?

In the video entitled *Solution*, he "performs" in one of his cells a series of activities such as drinking a cup of tea, smoking a cigarette, masturbating, even banging his head on the wall. The cells do not propose a pure life of contemplation, as is the case in a monk's cell. They do not repress the body and its desire. They are not about worship. Absalon would not have posited authorities higher than his own actions. 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 or through the cells. Here, an intense engagement with the mundane could also warrant a path to agency.

ANECDOTES

Given the cells were exhibited in major museums and the artist did not always live in them, are there not some 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?

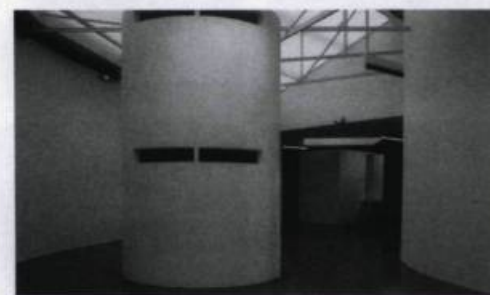
It is through people who knew Absalon that I have come to learn about his extraordinary life and work. It does seem that at the most crucial level—the ethical—his "outside" life did approximate life in the cells. His personal possessions were very limited. He owned one coat, two pairs of pants and three 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 on 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 *Sisyphé*, 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, Sisyphus' body and the rock will become each other's extension. This is an

←
ABSALON, Cells no.3, 1992. Wood, cardboard, white paint. 210 x 404 x 240 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

ABSALON, Cells, 1992. Wood, cardboard, white paint. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



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. ←

Yam LAU is an artist and writer based in Toronto. He teaches painting at York University.