ABSALON: THE MAN WITHOUT A HOME IS A POTENTIAL CRIMINAL

by Philippe Vergne

For many years I dreamed of living in a hotel. It's not exactly an original thought; perhaps it's even a cliché. The pretext was naiveté, a certain snobbery no doubt, and, most certainly, an idler's fascination with room-service and the quasi-total abdication of all decision-making. Then this dream of the bare minimum became blurred, came to be seen as oppressive submission to a generic mediocrity. The adolescent goal of the bare minimum was somehow transformed into an ambition for the bare maximum. I'm speaking here of quality rather than quantity. In short, the ambition for a way of life dictated by generic, neutral, objective terms quickly gave way to the search for a return to the world of the specific, the unique, the subjective, and the chosen.
As I began this reflection on the work of Absalon, these thoughts came back to mind, insofar as, over time, my reading and understanding of this body of work has undergone a similar transformation: a passage from the concept of unanimity of habitation to one of uniqueness of habitation.

No doubt one of the traps of looking at Absalon is the temptation to mythologize, to create and invent a myth that would encompass the body of work. Everything about his career tends towards mythology. A fast life, before the exhaustion. Born in Israel in 1964 under the name of Meir Eshel. Inescapable time in the army, in uniform. Then the retreat, solitude, life in the desert among the bedouins. Later, a more shady life: owner-manager of a bistro. The bar was closed by the police because of drug-dealing, use of narcotics . . . it's not really important. He moved from Israel to Paris and took refuge at the home of a relative who was an art critic. Visit to a museum of modern art: revelation. École des Beaux-Arts, where his mentor was Christian Boltanski, that artist of personal mythologies. His chosen name: Absalon, synonymous with revolt. The young artist: galleries, the art world, institutions, exhibitions. A fast life, very fast. At the time of his death in 1993, at the age of twenty-nine, he was forever frozen in that image of the young artist, blessed with everything, who burned all his bridges.

It's almost annoying. It's almost too perfect. Nearly all writings on him perpetuate this mythology. There's a bit of Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, a touch of Joseph Beuys, a hint of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The myth is perfect, perfectly preserved, for reasons that are certainly not the best. Meditating on domesticity and interiors, Walter Benjamin wrote: "To live is to leave traces." The traces that Absalon elaborates are what interest us, as well as the logic of their progression from 1987 to 1993.

According to a catalog published in 1995, *Théorie Poussée* (Forced Theory, 1987) was one of the first documented installations. It consists of a grouping of various objects-painted white, black, or gold-arranged on the floor in a room measuring 120 square meters. The objects are basic and simple: crates, boards, planks. They saturate their environment, prohibiting any sort of movement in it, and exhausting their sculptural properties, as well as the space they occupy, through an ordered and dense geometry. *Théorie Poussée* seems to mark not only the debut of the artist's work but also the completion of a formal system clearly derived from Minimalism: the Minimalist logic might be found in the attempted draining of the space through the arrangement of black, white, or gold modules. An abstract, ossifying arrangement that pushed the artist towards a form neither simply sculptural nor literally architectural; an arrangement that pushed him towards an alternative.

Such an alternative presented itself with *Chambre Solitaire* (Solitary Room) of which an initial version was realized in 1987 at the Villa Alésia in Paris). Again, we have a domestic space, a bedroom. The room is furnished with geometric austerity: a wooden table, a straw bed, a shelf, a narrow loft. The ensemble is painted white, except for the edge of the loft and the top of the shelf, which are painted gray. Photographed from the front, the room takes on the formal, planed quality of a geometric De Stijl abstraction, given rhythm by the different levels of the furniture and the contrast of white and gray. The lone element that is out of place is the nineteenth-century fireplace, part of the existing architecture.
A second version of the piece), realized in 1988 in Lyons as part of the group "October of the Arts," again takes up many of the same structures (benches, table, bed), but this time in a more radically clinical configuration: white cube and neon lighting. The installation is violent, stripped of any external element (the fireplace in the first version) not controlled by the artist's decisions. Anything superfluous has disappeared. The space is closer to the body. From the first *Chambre Solitaire* to the next, the intention has become more precise. From one *Chambre Solitaire* to the next, the arrangement-the act of arranging in the space, or arranging the space-seems to give way to the desire to invent a space, and to give it order.

The objects produced by Absalon under the titles *Disposition,* 1988 (Arrangement; wood, cork, white paint, 110 x 180 x 30 cm); *Neuf Cellules,* 1988 (Nine Cells; cardboard, wood, white paint, 35 x 160 x 160 cm); Ordre, 1988 (Order; wood, cork, white paint, 60 x 120 x 130 cm); and *Cellules (en silence),* 1988 (Cells [in silence]; cork, plastic, 91 x 82.5 x 31.5 cm) seem to explore this new direction. Of modest dimensions, these fragile objects have an uncertain status, somewhere between models and proposals. They do not imply realization on a human scale. The modesty of the materials used in these four groupings-exhibited at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1988-confers on them the character of more or less abstract studies. *Disposition* and *Ordre* become studies of volume and virtualities, effected by cubes or parallelepipeds arranged according to a system of variations. *Disposition* offers six different options, viewed from the front and arranged vertically like a three-level, double bookcase. Different proposals are visible laterally. *Ordre* consists of a group of nine cork boxes on a white wood table. The boxes-their tops open-offer a bird's-eye view of these constructions within closed spaces. The nine modules on the table are a single piece, having an architectural goal more aggressive than in *Disposition. Neuf Cellules* and *Cellules (en silence)* respond to the same logic. The former are presented on a square, low table; the latter on a rectangular table, lit from above by neon tubes. Here, the geometric volumes, which were previously used to organize the space of the cells have been transformed into reductive models of simple, daily furniture, similar to that conceived for *Chambre Solitaire.* The cells-and this term is used for the first time-are furnished interiors: the furnishings occupy all the available space; their functionality is therefore neutralized.

Absalon's work seems, in this way, to become increasingly complex. With a deliberately limited sculptural vocabulary, he observes the different possibilities of occupying abstract volumes; these become matrices for the study of livable spaces, furnished in the most stark manner possible with everyday objects. While evincing the desire to exhaust all the volumetric and formal properties of a cell-like enclosure, Absalon, beginning in 1989, turned towards the dissection of everyday objects and their interaction with the spaces they occupy. Looking at Absalon's investigations at this moment, it seems that he was trying to find, invent, understand the furniture-object that would occupy a space without being an intrusion: an object so well integrated that it participates fully in its environment. Derived from the abstract volumes that furnish his modules, the cells echo those volumes. Absalon might be seen, then, as searching for a space that is completely harmonious, unified, holding nothing that might assault the gaze or alter the physical experience of the space. Then in 1989, he produced *Propositions d'Objets Quotidiens* (Proposals for Everyday Objects; wood, cardboard, plaster). The everyday objects in question are presented according to a formal solution similar to that of *Disposition* (1988): an inventory of more or less identifiable forms-tables, shelves, benches-but also closed or open cylinders, cubes, parallelepipeds. Painted white and small in scale, they are placed on the different levels of the shelves more according to their formal values than to their functional values.

Also in 1989, he created *Compartiments* (Compartments) in the basement of the Villa Arson art center. The underground level of the Villa is the storehouse for construction materials (piles of wood, compressors) and various objects (table, chairs, shelving). Absalon arranged, ordered, classified, and compartmentalized these left-overs from one end to the other of a large, long central passageway. He then covered these objects in white plaster, causing them to blend in with the raw concrete of the geometric architecture. Their respective functions were neutralized. An armchair was presented strictly for its formal qualities, just like a pile of boards. Each element became a part of the architecture, within a space unified by the lack of color, a sleek space, frozen in time and silent.

A second version of *Compartiments*) was realized in 1992, but, this time, composed solely of abstract volumes sculpted from insulation foam and covered in white plaster. The study of these objects and the analysis of their formal properties no doubt led Absalon to the conception and realization in 1990 of *Prototype* (wood, cardboard, white paint, 60 x 210 x 50 cm). This work consists of forty proposals for furniture-objects (chairs, tables, benches, beds, etc.), crudely made and arranged on a long white plinth. That same year the elements of *Prototype* seemed to find an application at the center of *Propositions d'Habitations (échelle 1:1*) (Proposals for Habitats [scale 1:1]; wood, cardboard, plaster, white paint). Each of the five units (60 x 250 x 300 cm) presents an inventory of recognizable and abstract forms circumscribed by neon lighting from above and contained within a shallow tray on the floor. Such combinations defy the definition of these projects: they lie somewhere between object, autonomous installation, and architectural proposal. It was towards architectural proposal that Absalon turned when he presented the next of his *Propositions d'Habitation* (cardboard, plaster, wood, white paint, 160 x 240 x 200 cm) at the Musée Sante-Croix de Poitiers in 1990. Here, the very complex objects are proportioned to the human scale of the white wood vitrine-open in front-that holds them. The proposed experience is one of contemplation and not one of physical experimentation. The same goes for *Propositions d'Habitation* (1990, wood, cardboard, plaster) conceived for the "Lignes de Mire" exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour L'Art Contemporain in Jouy-en-Josas. Here the vitrine is a 100-square-meter room. The elements, always closed on themselves, are scaled to the space they occupy. At Glasgow, also in 1990, the showcase was an industrial space [The Tramway Art Center, Glasgow]. with *Propositions d'Habitation*) at its center. The scale of the objects is once again determined by the available space (60 x 28 meters). Arranged in the center of the room, they overwhelm the viewer by their volume and, in fact, possess an architectural quality. Henceforth, all these elements, which were the result of experimentation with objects and furnishings on a maquette scale-as in *Cellules (en silence)* , *Propositions d'Objets Quotidiens, Propositions d'Habitations (échelle 1:1)* -take on a scope greater than the structures that contain them. They have progressively evolved from the dimension of contents into that of the container: from the object in a box to the box containing the object.

From this moment on, several options were available to Absalon. One option might have been to consider the different components of *Propositions d'Habitation* as matrices within a body of work striving to establish a phenomenological dialogue with its environment and to logically extend the researches undertaken since 1987. In this case, each object could be seen within the vocabulary of installation art established and parsed through the previous work. Such an option would be indebted to minimal art. Another option might have been to consider these modules as architectural objects, cells, containers. The development of the work appeared to head in a third direction: that of reconciling the first two options.

Case in point: *Cellules,* numbered one to six), exhibited at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou in 1991. The six cells (wood, cardboard, white paint, neon) are independent of each other. All are slightly larger than human scale. They are closed; but each has an opening that allows viewers to look inside. The interiors are organized by abstract, geometric volumes, but suggest a generic type of furnishing like that found in *Propositions d'Objets Quotidiens* (1989).

From the outside, the cells formally recall *Propositions d'Habitation* (1990), and that work finds its full meaning when considered in the context of Cellules. Absalon's oeuvre builds upon itself, and each new progression is nourished by the preceding ones. A similar statement could be made regarding *Propositions d'Habitations* (1992), presented as part of Documenta IX at Kassel. The configuration of this work is, however, slightly different: a network of parallelepipeds connected to one another by cylindrical conduits. The individual cells are open on top; they occupy a space 100 x 320 x 490 centimeters and are lit by two neon tubes. Their interiors appear to be occupied by geometric volumes, arranged according to a series of variations not unlike those of *Disposition* (1988) or Ordre (1988).

The most immediate referent for this work is the series *Intérieurs Corrigés* (Corrected Interiors, 1991), comprising 140 magazine pages painted in variations of white, off-white, and gray oil paint. Each page, taken from architectural journals, represents an interior space furnished with abstract geometric forms. The complete series offers 140 variations on the generic theme of interiors, as if trying to exhaust all possible configurations. It is important to note that these painted images were themselves intended to be reproduced photographically. Once again in Absalon's work, the artistic status of this work is difficult, even impossible to define. Far from being a work of painting, *Intérieurs Corrigés*would be the matrix, the atlas of a future work. The series could, equally, be compared to *Slides of a Changing Painting* by Robert Gober, eighty-two slides that document the daily alterations the artist made to one painting. Created in 1982–83, *Slides of a Changing Painting* announces very early in the artist's career the quasi-totality of his future formal vocabulary. Likewise, the status of Gober's images, mechanically reproduced, remains a hybrid. Gober speaks of it as the "memoir of a painting." If *Slides of a Changing Painting* has a programmatic value in Gober's work, then the vocabulary established in Absalon's *Intérieurs Corrigés* remains in a state of suspended value since the process of the work was interrupted by the artist's death.

In terms of programmatic value, the six *Cellules* created in 1991 are of particular importance. Their scale, their interior structure, their form, all suggest the possibility of living in them. Combined with two videotapes-*Proposition d'Habitation* (1991) and *Solutions* (1992)-they set the stage for *Cellules (réalisation habitables)* (Cells [realized and inhabitable]) of 1993.
The video *Proposition d'Habitation* shows a person dressed in white from head to toe, moving about a white room furnished with generic objects that have the shapes of furniture but not the functionality. The protagonist of this video is captured in various positions that imply the use of these objects: seated, lying down, leaning over a cylinder. The overall effect is one of strange disequilibrium: what should be everyday activities have been slightly shifted. Therefore, it is difficult to tell, of the object and the protagonist, which is using and which is used; which compels and which is compelled. We are offered a generic proposal for inhabiting a space that accommodates one, and only one, person.

Solutions (1992) makes explicit what is only hinted in *Proposition d'Habitation* (1991) one step further. The protagonist, dressed in dark pants and a white shirt, in a cell painted white from floor to ceiling, performs a succession of domestic activities: eating, drinking, sleeping, masturbating, taking a bath. As in *Chambres Solitaires* (1987), the furniture is strictly functional; the cell accommodates the proportions of the human body perfectly, with nothing superfluous.
The transition from the first video to the second marks a turning point in the artist's oeuvre. Absalon puts to the test all that had previously been merely experiment, proposal, prototype, development of a language. That language would soon be parsed, in 1992 and 1993, through the elaboration of six habitable cells for urban settings.

Structurally, these six cells all have an interior volume of less than 10 square meters. Their dimensions were calculated as closely as possible to the artist's body, effectively creating uncomfortable, constraining, almost unbearable conditions. Each cell accommodates basic human needs—for lodging, sleeping, washing, working, and eating—and functions as protection, insulation from external parasites. The external volumes comprise simple, geometric shapes. Both inside and outside, the forms are white. Each has long, horizontal openings on the outside.

(See the writings of Le Corbusier on the subject of “long windows and their qualities in terms of superior lighting.”)

An initial series of six prototypes was realized (*Cellules no. 1 à no. 6;* 1992; wood, cardboard, white paint). Destined to be installed or exhibited indoors, they provide clarification-supported by the videos-of Absalon’s project and illuminate his physical engagement with the spaces. These cells were full-scale models for *Cellules (réalisation habitables),* which he planned to install in six cities, including Paris, Tel Aviv, Frankfurt, and Zurich. Two of them were realized: one in Paris and one in Zurich.

The goal of an overview of Absalon’s work (such as this) is not to take inventory. The exercise allows us to see the logic of his career, how little has been left to chance, and how the subtlety, precision, and discretion of each decision opened up a multitude of possibilities. Strongly conceptual, the work rests no less on sensory experience: that of the eye. Without being didactic, the work reminds us all-architects, artists, and curators-of the necessity to work the space: its demands, its rhythms, its interstices, its balance. As Xenophon wrote, “When something is missing, the gaping space will cry out.”

Clearly the discussion of Absalon’s work cannot end there, and the ambition of his project raises a number of analyses. Three of them are particularly enlightening, as they offer very specific views of the work.

In July 1992, Bernard Marcadé wrote *Absalon’s Monadology.* In this essay, after citing Manzoni, Malevich, Le Corbusier, Boltanski, and Kafka as eventual guiding influences on this artist, the author develops three specific points. The first is the establishment of kinship between Absalon’s cell and Leibniz’s monad: a simple substance, impenetrable by all external actions, different each time, and endowed with qualities of ingestion and perception. It recalls Absalon’s cell: an organism with self-generating laws and a sense of order that is independent of social norms and external organizations. Taking as a point of departure the idea that Absalon’s cell is a system of insulation and protection, Marcadé quotes Deleuze’s commentary on Leibniz: “The monad is a cell, a sacristy more than an atom: a room with neither door nor window, where all actions are internal.” In the same way, Marcadé points to the autarchic nature of Absalon’s cells, as much from an architectural point of view as from the perspective of their development and functioning. He supports his argument with Absalon’s affirmed intention to respect the single condition that he imposed on himself and his surroundings: “I am free to give things the function of my choosing. An armchair could be architecture, a bar of soap, or anything else.”

Another point made by Marcadé in his analysis of Absalon has to do with a way of life that is unique to our current historical moment. The key word might be individualism. He observes, first of all, that Absalon’s reflections on domesticity are not concerned with a stationary domesticity, but rather with an alternative domesticity-nomadic, moving between the various host cities that he has chosen. In a play on words, Marcadé situates the work of Absalon between “monadology” and “nomadology.”

A third point-which also seems to relate to our current cultural state-is Absalon’s rejection of the utopian goal of inventing new models, of projecting a better future: “I desire a self-contained universe. . . . But the difference between me and someone who wants to change everything is that I like change for the sake of change and not for improvement. Contrary to the revolutionary, I have no need to justify my dream for change. I put a wild energy into the creation of something new, not of something better.”

We can see in retrospect how such an interpretation distances Absalon from modernist models-with which he is often associated-and links him more closely with the most recent architectural developments.

Artist Moshe Ninio also situates Absalon in relation to historical models and more specifically to Le Corbusier. While recognizing Absalon's kinship with the machine aesthetic of Le Corbusier (boats, planes, etc.), he draws distinctions between them, arguing that by rejecting "the generalizing criterion of the *modulor* in favor of an absolute specificity of scale, Absalon turned to a radical incarnation of architecture as a tailor-made cell, an enveloping, womblike structure sited on the ground . . ." He thus validates the personal nature of the cells and goes on to examine their posthumous evolution. If the cell is the fruit of a desire for "self-gathering for the purpose of self-realization," it is then, in fact, a mirror of Absalon's interior life. Entering one of the cells assumes, on one hand, an invitation by Absalon to do so, and on the other, the intensity of a face-to-face encounter. In the sense that the cells are now "extensions of a body that is no longer here," is it right to visit these spaces and in the process, as Ninio believes, violate the wishes of the artist?

In the end, Ninio states that the cell-houses are "the matrix for the construction of solitude," that they are explicit, even ostentatious signs of the choice for solitude-a choice that favors marginalization in our present culture, as well as the rejection of all standardized and mediocre norms. A marginality that is accentuated by the localization of the cells on the peripheries of the chosen cities, in their suburban margins. A marginality that was conceived, no doubt, as a provocation.

This chosen isolation is one of the themes of the text *Cellules, Casements, et Camisoles,* published by Jérôme Beyler in an issue of the aesthetics journal *Exposé* dedicated to the idea of the house. According to the word's etymology, the cell—which he also calls a "uni-personal" house—is a small bedroom, a hut, a personal dwelling place. According to Beyler, these minimal lodgings are intended to protect and insulate the individual from external parasites. To this end, Absalon controls the space of the house, without any consideration of exterior parameters. The architecture of these cells is closer to the proportions of the artist's body, to his movements, his needs, his behavior—to such an extent that the cell creates a constricting environment and, eventually, Absalon's behavior will be conditioned by it. He stated: "The volumes are constructed in such a manner that, despite the relatively small size, I suffer no sense of claustrophobia. . . . The cell is a mechanism that determines my movements. With time and regular usage, this mechanism will become my comfort."

The paradox of Absalon is thereby brought to light. On one hand, the cell provides protection from the outside, without implying a retreat from the world, but rather just a voluntary holding back, a measure of self-preservation. But, on the other hand, in light of Absalon's own words, this holding back takes on a constricting and prisonlike tone. The cell becomes the straitjacket that not only protects Absalon from the world, but also protects the world from the artist and his violence. For, if we look more closely, the course of Absalon's work is perhaps animated by a hidden violence, as evidenced in certain of his videotapes. *Bruits* (Noises, 1993) shows the face of Absalon screaming for three minutes and twenty-three seconds. *Bataille* (Battle, 1993) runs for more than an hour and, likewise, shows Absalon fighting against the void, against space, against himself, against an abstraction. He ultimately struggles with the paradoxical logic of the notion he himself has developed of the cell: the dynamic dichotomy of interior/exterior; comfort/discomfort; individual/community; private/public; tranquillity/anxiety; rational/irrational; nomadic/stationary. As Marie-Ange Brayer has noted, during the 1980s and 1990s, the house, the architectural maquette, has become one of the most recurrent elements in contemporary art. Architecture very often appears in art as a "new vindication for the figure, a new type of portrait, where polarities between abstraction and figuration meet." She adds that the house is perceived as "secretions from an autistic subject, self-congratulatory . . . recast as a 'heroic' subject by its desperation, its condition of being lost to the world."

If these ideas, which are characteristic of one aspect of contemporary artistic practice, apply to Absalon, how then do we classify his work? Many critics have placed Absalon within a historical perspective of architecture that revolves around Le Corbusier. However, Absalon's work stands out when one looks at it in the light of recent architectural developments and of new models of

domesticity. The accepted position is that the domestic model inherited from the nineteenth century, which placed the family at the center, is today obsolete or at least in crisis. Statistics show that just after World War II, only 8% of households were composed of a single person; today their number is around 25%. And that doesn't include couples without children, let alone alternative lifestyles. All of this points to the need for architectural solutions that respond to very specific lifestyles and individual needs and that abandon all pre-existing notions of domesticity: the uni-personal house, in the example of Absalon.

On the other hand, by nature of their "nomadology," Absalon's cells are echoes of another phenomenon: the disappearance of nineteenth-century stationary life. They bear witness to the modern rise of mobility and globalism, and to questions about the permanence of home. They might also reflect the thoughts about the difficulty of feeling at home expressed by Theodor Adorno who, in the context of the deportations during World War II, considered the home as a provisional stage during exile: "It has become completely impossible to feel at home. . . . The time of homes is long gone." However, if modernism introduced the mobile individual, it also invented the media-connected individual; and the contemporary era invented the cyberindividual, for whom the notions of public and private are forever confused. Every daily activity—from bank transactions to using the telephone or the personal computer—drags the individual more and more out of the private sphere. Absalon's cells might here offer a means for analyzing the consequences of living in a society that values constant communication over self-definition. They might question the place of individuality in an environment organized around non-stop, homogenous accessibility to information and people. [Terrence Riley recalls the doubts expressed by Martin Heidegger ("The Thing" and *Being and Time*) about the effects of the omnipresence of the media in our daily lives.] On this subject, Absalon declared: "I would like to make these cells my homes, in which to define my feelings, to cultivate my behaviors. These houses will be mechanisms of resistance to a society that prevents me from becoming what I must become."

In fact, in many regards, the work of Absalon can be seen as a violent re-questioning of a social order based on what the home represents and reinforces. For the home is the foyer both of our possessions and of our institutions (marriage, sexuality, family, education). What does an asexual dwelling, for the "single person," stripped of all possessions, of all decorum represent? What does this cell represent if not the deliberate choice for marginality: the destruction of social, identity-based, and economic norms.

Absalon will therefore always be the criminal protagonist of his video *Assassinats* (Assassinations, 1993), in which we watch a series of murders for thirty minutes. This video brings to a close-on a brutal note-a body of work christened by the violence of a choice. The choice of a myth signifying rebellion and death. The choice of a name: Absalon. It's almost too perfect.