

Cells for Living: An Interview with Absalon for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris



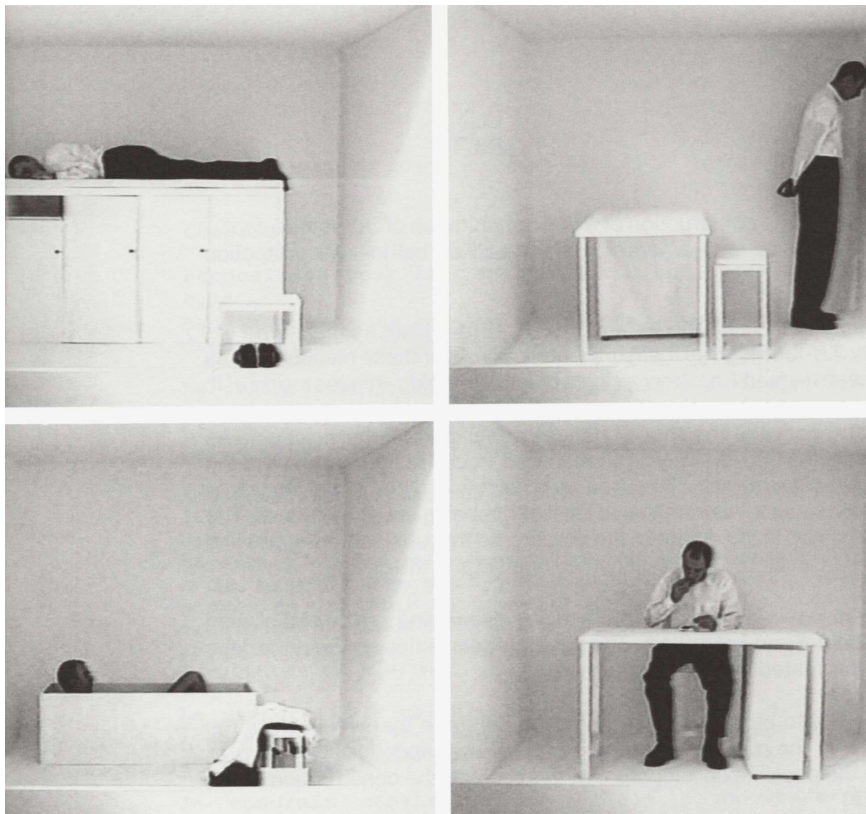
Absalon, *Bruits*, 1993. Collection of the CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art, Bordeaux.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Absalon was an artist whose work, although developed outside architecture as a formal discipline, persistently engaged with questions of typology, habitation, and the body. His practice can be understood as an attempt to rethink dwelling through the convergence of art and architecture, articulated in what he later described as a “proposition for living.” To situate Absalon’s work within this trajectory, it is necessary to briefly retrace the circumstances through which these concerns emerged. Born Meir Eshel in Israel, Absalon relocated to Paris in 1987 at the age of twenty-two, shortly after completing his military service. Upon arriving in France, he settled with his uncle, the critic and art historian Jacques Ohayon, before enrolling at the Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques, the experimental program shaped by figures including Daniel Buren, Sarkis, and Pontus Hultén. It was during this period that he adopted the name “Absalon,” a reference to the biblical son of King David who revolted against his father. The gesture marked a deliberate rupture with inherited forms of identity and belonging—national, familial, cultural, and religious—that would later reappear in his sustained critique of fixed social and territorial structures.

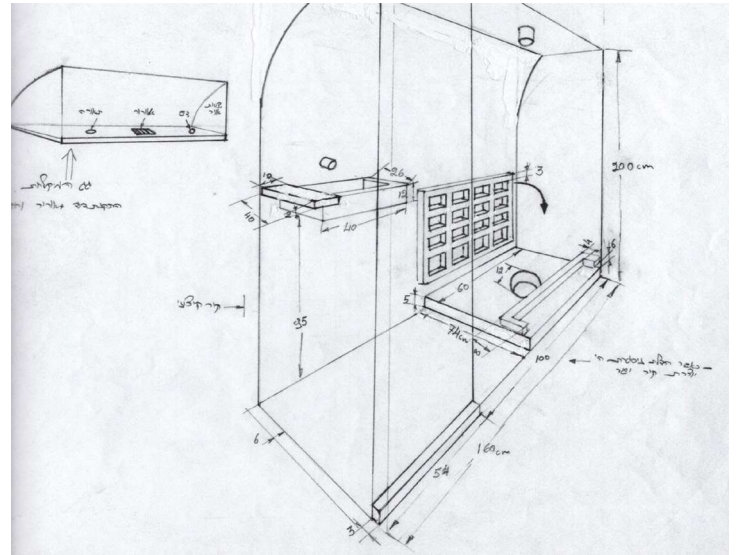
Throughout the late 1980s, Absalon increasingly turned toward the domestic interior as a field of inquiry. He gathered ordinary household objects, coated them in white, and arranged them into continuous, undifferentiated spatial compositions. In parallel, he produced collages assembled from architectural catalogues and magazines, recomposing fragments of housing typologies into abstract configurations that oscillated between representation and inhabitable form. In 1990, Absalon was diagnosed as HIV positive; the illness later developed into AIDS, from which he died

in 1993. Yet in the final years of his life, while living in a studio in Boulogne-Billancourt originally designed by Le Corbusier for the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, he remained deeply committed to what he conceived as his overarching “life project.” The body became the primary measure through which subsequent experiments were calibrated, leading to the development of six compact dwellings proportioned precisely to his own routines, gestures, and physical dimensions. These white, curved, monolithic structures reduced habitation to its most elementary functions, transforming everyday acts into the very material of design. This line of inquiry continued in *Propositions d’habitation*, a video work, among many, in which Absalon moved through an all-white interior populated by objects whose functions remained deliberately indeterminate.

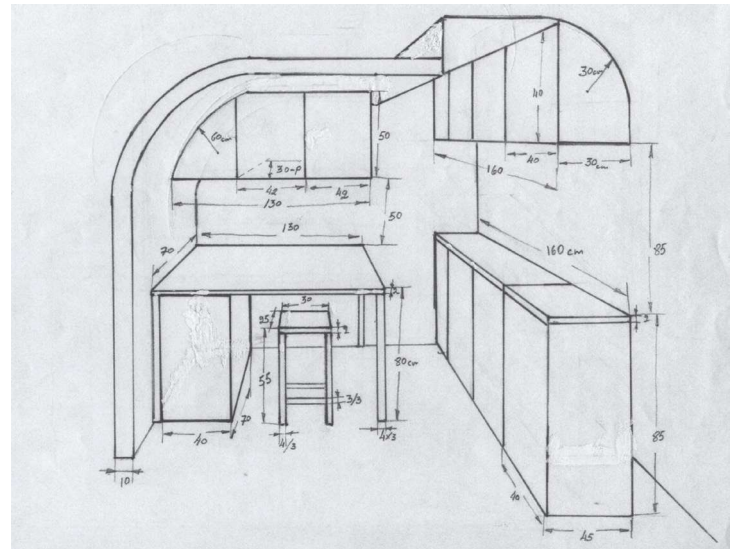


Absalon, *Solutions*, 1992. Image from *Absalon Absalon*, ed. Guillaume Désanges and François Piron (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2021), 57.

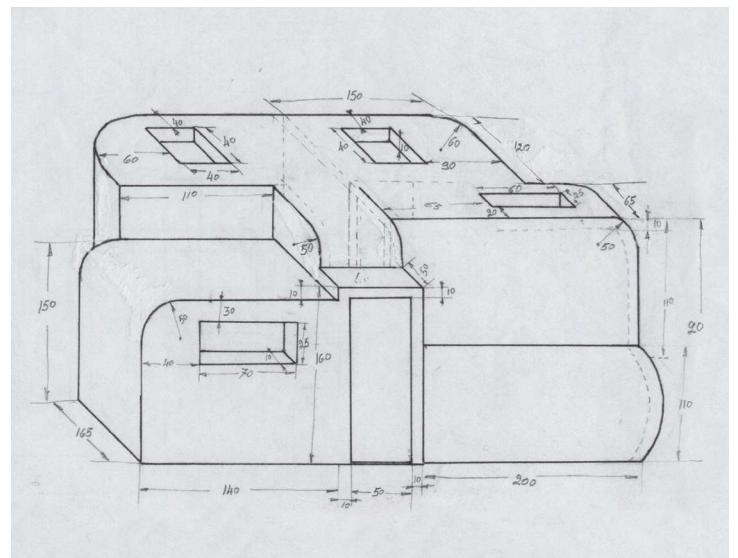
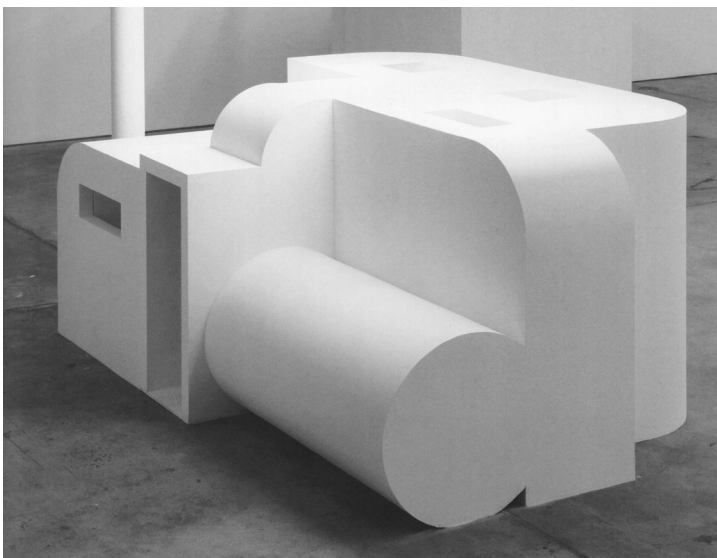
A lecture delivered in 1993 clarified the conceptual position underlying the cellules, particularly Absalon’s insistence on distancing the project from utopian speculation. Describing the work, he explained: “The final stage will be the real construction of the real house that must be placed somewhere. The project is comprised of six different houses, which must be placed across six different global locations that have tangible links to my artistic activities [...] and I would place these houses in locations that would allow me to use them, with the simple desire to avoid utopian ideas. That is to say, these houses are anything but utopian; they are real houses in which I will really live.”¹ Paris, Zurich, Frankfurt, New York, Tel Aviv, and Tokyo were identified as potential sites where the work could become operative within lived reality rather than remain within the realm of speculation.



Left: *Cellule no. 1* (Prototype), 1992, Paris. Image from *Absalon*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 61; 65.
 Right: *Cellule no. 1* (Drawing), 1992, Paris. Courtesy of Absalon Estate.



Left: *Cellule no. 2* (Prototype), 1992, Zurich. Image from *Absalon*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 43; 45.
 Right: *Cellule no. 2* (Drawing), 1992, Zurich. Courtesy of Absalon Estate.



Left: *Cellule no. 3* (Prototype), 1992, New York. Image from *Absalon*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 31; 33.
 Right: *Cellule no. 3* (Drawing), 1992, New York. Courtesy of Absalon Estate.

In 1993, at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, Absalon presented full-scale prototypes of these cellules alongside a short recorded interview, positioning the project somewhere between spectacle, manifesto, and inhabitable proposition. The following text is based on a transcription and translation of that interview. It offers insight not only into the conception of the cellules and the philosophical premises that informed them, but also into the broader implications of Absalon's radical rethinking of domesticity: a vision of life reduced to its most essential conditions of individuality, stripped of the conventions, comforts, and social codes associated with bourgeois family life. Permission to publish this interview was granted by the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris and the Absalon Estate.

Constantinos Marcou

Interviewee: Absalon (A)

Interviewer: Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (MAM)

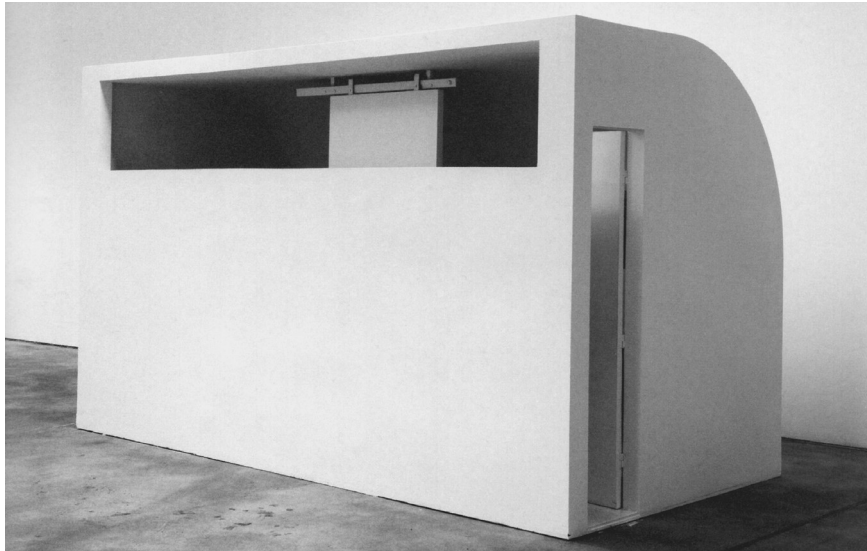
MAM: The houses are designed for only one person. Is this because you are looking for solitude?

A: Yes, I am looking for solitude. There is a kind of fantasy in solitude. I feel we do not experiment enough with this fantasy; we constantly soften it. I think we all have it, but as if we are afraid to fully inhabit it. There is, first, the common perception of solitude as something negative, immediately associated with suffering—the condition of being alone. But I do not think solitude is a terrible thing. There are two ways of being alone: one is to choose it; the other is to find oneself alone without having chosen it. Of course, the second is frightening, but when solitude is chosen, it becomes an experience in which one can be more honest with oneself. You are confronted with yourself, and you have to face it. For example, I can say that I do not watch television anymore, but if I am alone and feel the need to turn it on, then saying I do not watch television is only language. The moment I switch it on, it becomes the reality of my solitude. In solitude there is something very real, very close to life, much less artificial.

What strikes me is that we live in a chaotic society where notions of truth are often dismissed as naïve. Instead of truth, we construct situations that produce strong emotions for short periods of time. For example, a very good friend of mine lives near a yoga studio. People go there once a week, and for one hour they are meant to feel calm and rested—in other words, they have a one-hour spiritual experience. They arrive by car, sometimes with a bottle of wine. They spend one hour in this supposed moment of divinity and then return to life, to images and sounds. I do not think things can work like that.

I think we are too vulgarized, too contaminated, to experience something truly spiritual. We are more concerned with fantasies of spirituality, with its spectacle, than with something real. When I speak of the spiritual, I mean a very intimate emotion. I am not speaking about religion; I am speaking about something entirely individual. Everything I build is connected to this idea.

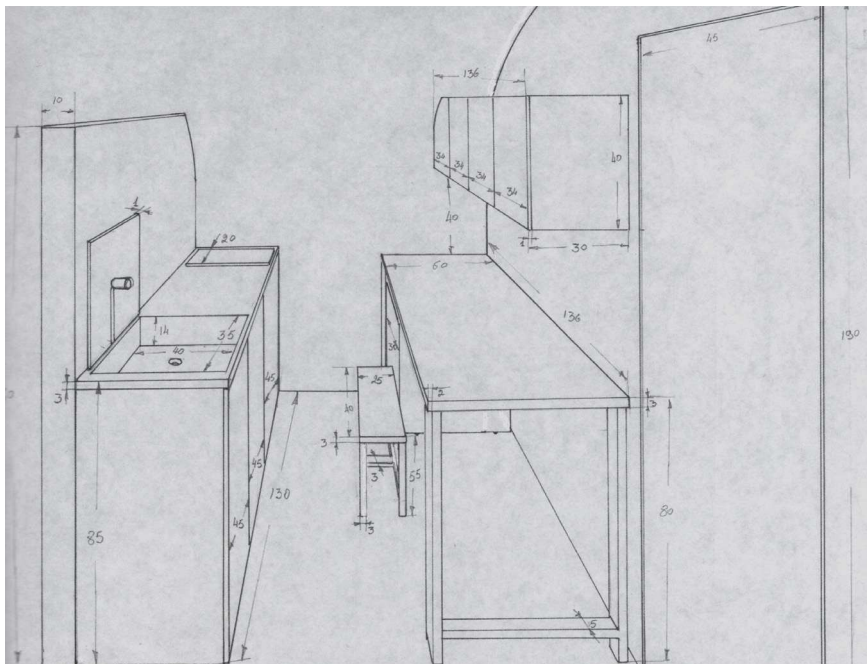
For me it is somewhat hopeless. I feel too marked, too contaminated, and I am forced to begin again with the body. I have to start from the lowest level, like a fakir. In the Buddhist universe, the fakir is the lowest level, and this interests me emotionally. A great Buddhist might appear like a fakir because the fakir gives a spectacle of his spirituality. In a way I find myself at the same level: what I do is necessarily spiritual, but it becomes spectacle, and it is carried through the body. I present a physical spectacle through my own physicality.



Cellule no. 4 (Prototype), 1992, Tel Aviv. Image from *Absalon*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 49; 51.



Cellule no. 4 (Prototype), 1992, Tel Aviv. Image from *Absalon*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 49; 51.



Cellule no. 4 (Drawing), 1992, Tel Aviv. Courtesy of Absalon Estate.

MAM: *When you present your prototypes, do you ever feel that you are turning the spectator into a voyeur of your private life?*

A: Yes, I have often asked myself that question. But I do not know another way to do it. If I knew a way to expose myself less, I would have used it. I do not know how to construct all this without producing a form of spectacle. I would have preferred a solution without exposure, but I think that in the society we live in there is no other way.

I think there are two possibilities, and the line is drawn between them: You become a madman or you become an artist. In both cases I can pursue my ideas to the end. Becoming an artist is simply less painful. It is not that I avoid pain, but there is something I know I cannot endure anymore. It would be ideal to be mad without suffering, but I do not think that is possible. So this is the least painful solution.

There is also the desire to create a country that is mine, a country to which I belong. I have two nationalities, French and Israeli, and both suffocate me. I hate being taken for an Israeli as much as I hate being taken for a Frenchman. I would hate it equally if I were taken for a German or anything else. What I reject is belonging itself. Even being identified as Jewish—I reject all of that categorization.

What I would have liked is to have created a place where I did not belong to Germany or France simply because I have a house there. The unity is formed by six constructions, and my country exists between them. My movement across them is equal. I am not more French than German or Swiss or Israeli, because I go only to my houses, to my constructions.

This is a fictive territory that is created between these six homes. That is my way of forming a country but also of forming a culture. In my culture there is no place for borders imposed by others. The borders are mine; I choose them.



Cellules nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. Image from *Absalon*, ed. Susanne Pfeffer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011), 5.

If I created this only in France, it would always be read through French culture. But if I do it in the United States, in France, and in Israel, then I exist across several cultures. My culture becomes one among others—a totality rather than a single identity.

So yes, there is the idea of a country: a country as language, a country that is not part of the geography imposed on me but part of the geography I choose. My fantasy is to recover the freshness of childhood, that state before differences appear. Perhaps life is difficult, but I refuse to become what I am supposed to become. I refuse to become an adult in the way society defines adulthood.

Once I have built six homes, I see that moment as a new beginning. It will already be my choice, and from there nothing seems more appropriate. I would even be willing to leave everything afterward. It would be like resetting the pendulum to zero, establishing a new starting point.

These houses would become a physical barrier, preventing me from living what society calls life. Even if one day I wake up weak, with a terrible headache, and think how terrible it is, how I wish someone lived with me—they would protect me from becoming what I am supposed to become. They would protect me from domestic life, from living with a partner. They would protect me from myself, especially from my weaknesses.

It is a form of constraint, but a chosen one. In that sense it resembles religion. Religion functions through constraint: the more demanding it is, the more it structures life and the more strongly people believe in it.

Of course, I behave like a believer. But belief is not necessarily about God. To believe can simply mean saying to someone, “I believe you.” But how can you say “I believe you” if you are not, in some sense, already a believer?

AUTHOR

Absalon (1964–1993), born Meir Eshel in Ashdod, Israel, was an artist who, following his move to Paris in 1987, was active for seven years before his death from AIDS-related illness at the age of 29, developing a multidisciplinary practice spanning installation, sculpture, and video works, including the *Cellules* series and the videos *Bataille and Bruit*. During his lifetime, his work was exhibited at institutions including the Centre Pompidou and the 45th Venice Biennale.

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