

To Dwell among Things

“... to build is, in itself, to inhabit.”¹

Martin Heidegger

Out of Habitat

Through image and mass, Jocelyne Alloucherie creates refined and truncated, polished up and rudimentary representations of habitats. If these environments are destabilizing, it is obviously because of their infinitely subtle allusions to particular pieces of furniture or buildings, making their way inside us like doubt. We walk in, stupefied, not knowing how to stand before this furniture. Our presence suddenly feels somewhat strange, even irreverent. We feel awkward standing inside this disturbing dwelling, whose rooms we no longer know how to move in, surrounded by incomplete sections, skeletal or massive corner angles, with odd bulges, thicknesses and volumes. Should we approach them as proto-houses, a sort of infra-degree of the habitat? Or are they post-modern, openwork versions of buildings?

These incomplete dwellings are in fact moulds of our presences, effigies or fetishes that display the mobility of meanings we project unto them, since the opinion we are trying to formulate on the works leads us back to ourselves, to the minimal area we are left to occupy, to where we stand. Through the representations referred to, our image is everywhere—and this essential presence is what the works are ultimately about. How do we inhabit our world, amidst the ramparts we have erected according to precepts and principles that are all constructions into which our restlessness is mirrored?

As images of (movable) furniture, the works are subjected to the ceaseless reorganization of the artist and seem to be of a transient and relative importance, the artist being in a position to very well decide that particular elements will not survive the current exhibition. The artworks are not the final end here; they are the tools leading to this revelation, as evidenced by the artist's own words: “I often have this dream: I am inside an immense, infinite mansion, always changing and the same; and everything ends where it begins again...”² Beyond the finitude of these constantly reorganized pieces of furniture and building, there is perhaps the infinity of our presence that, for the time being, we know only how to measure against the durability of dwellings that shut us up...

This is probably in a nutshell the essential part of Jocelyne Alloucherie's intention. Her works are provisional spaces where various types of presences and relationships to the world—theoretical, critical, existential... human—are elaborated.

“Inhabitation is how mortals are in the world.”³

Martin Heidegger

Out of Medium

These constructions are not merely adobes or vestiges of shelters that we invent for ourselves. They are artworks, imbued with what culture and art history has prepared and remembers from the works produced by men and women in the past. They offer themselves filled with history, antecedents and precedents. If it were otherwise, Alloucherie's work would not resonate within us. Therefore, we must approach these pieces as conceptual adobes, places with multiple echoes, having numerous relationships with disciplines from which they borrow. The point is thus to find out how exactly they address the mediums to which they refer, which issues they awaken, appeal to, and what they do with them.

The term “photosculpture” was proposed for the first time in 1992 in conjunction with an exhibition focusing on this hybrid theme, to describe works where both mediums meet and look each other up. Among the work presented were pieces by Alloucherie. At the time, one was expected to try and see the relationship, within the installational and speculative *mise-en-scènes*, between various artistic mediums in an attempt to measure the conditions of possibility, the epistemological foundations upon which the mediums grounded their effects. Each thus presented itself as a sort of ersatz, an ideal manifestation, a generic representation of what the medium was about, of what founded it materially, historically, of everything in its definition that might appear agreed upon, cultural, constructed. A piece of sculpture was considered a presentation of sculpture as a **genre**, a speculative operation, a re-examination of its own issues.

A few years earlier in a paper given at a symposium, Johanne Lamoureux had argued that the relationship between photography and sculpture was essentially allotopic, there being between the two an irreconcilable difference. Any attempt on either side to integrate the other medium, she wrote,

comes up against photography as if it were a core that cannot be assimilated (moreover *germinating* and *transforming* the entire work). Photography does not lend itself to being digested; it ceaselessly

imposes its presence in the work as allotopy, even if it means spreading itself to the point of making the entire work an allotopic fragment in space.⁴

Even though both mediums are forms of commemoration—the first marks the place where it stands, commemorating the particular event it inscribes and evidences, while the second testifies to a bygone co-presence—the fact is that sculpture and photography do not easily cohabit. Because, perhaps, of the tri-dimensional nature of the former and the latter's two-dimensionality; because also of the too pregnant referent from which the picture sometimes struggles to extricate itself and that we desperately strive to minimize, who knows... because the images are planted in front of pieces of raw material more and more intent on avoiding any realistic references and on revealing the specific substance of their spatial occupation. Be that as it may, one cannot avoid the question of the allotopic nature of their relationship. Their common, joint presentation creates a climate of conflict, an installational collision field.

In previous texts on Allouche's work, I have tried to demonstrate how monumental masses and minimal images formed couples where they both tried to return to their essence, playing with their essential components and exchanging them in a game where what is usually experienced as a keystone element of image becomes mass and vice versa. Otherwise how are we to grasp and understand why the images are framed by stiles large enough to become angular sculptures? How are we to miss how some of the smooth masses' surfaces present themselves as the limit of an opening onto an image or as a mirror surface offering itself as an adobe for the image? Let's take for example Allouche's public sculpture on the grounds of Montreal's Notre-Dame Hospital. At the core of the upside down arch, an open and rough U, the central, slightly curved in the middle crucible shows a shift of level where surrounding trees fix their protean and fleeting images, constantly reshaped by the weather's vagaries and the course of the sun. This structure acts as an adobe for a moving image that finds its shape there, as in a dream, a hospitable utopia where shadows slip.

Of course, the same goes for images of pavements and grounds, and of declining shadows brought down by the night on our Western cities' modern architecture. After the obvious reference to architecture, the sculptural and architectural masses appear here as forms that have been hollowed out, relieved of their weight and dimension. The raw and three-dimensional matter is flattened and levelled, becoming a cast shadow or cut against an evening sky, at a time of day when shadows betray the real (refractory) appearance of obstacles met by light. The image is an ethereal presence created by the sculptural work just as the sculpture is itself in a position of sub-figuration within the image. No longer merely acting as foils for one another, as Johanne Lamoureux suggested, image and sculpture here seem essential to one another through the agency of shadow. Light needs the obstacle of the large object to create an image. This shadow is as essential for the sculpture whose forms could not be revealed without the luminous caress that shapes it.

We have tried to delimit in a previous essay⁵ how Allouche's sculptural practice, adopting the form of stony ensembles with alluvial deposits—a sort of sedimentation of substances working towards a sculptural composition—has moved from the representation of raw, telluric material to abruptly angled steles and monuments whose angular and dense shapes integrate and frame, sometimes at a distance, pictures showing dark landscapes with austere shadows. This exchange between photo and sculptural pieces has increased in the past few years, so much so that one is inclined to believe on the surface that they have emancipated from one another, and that each of them now composes an independent version and complete section of Allouche's aesthetics. But nothing could be further from the truth. If one lingers upon recent works by the artist, one immediately notices that the frames' presence is too important for them to be merely stiles emphasizing images, or that everything in the images always has to do with human sculptural works shaped by the workings of shadows on pavements uneven enough to become themselves shapes. The sculptures, apparently acting as observation posts from which to assess the photographic works, also delineate the limits of a geography where images filter in.

I had also noted how one should make the sculpture work at the edge of its deployment into more affirmed shapes, at the threshold of the *undifferentiated* proposed by artist's minimal masses, her refined monuments. I had also lingered on the deictic function that is common to photography and sculpture. A certain tradition clearly shows how sculpture rises on a pedestal from which it is used to point out its location as the seat of a particular event one wishes to commemorate with a piece of work. Similarly, photography draws the gaze onto a particular place upon which it seeks to draw attention. According to Rosalind Krauss, modern sculpture has lost this function and all its efforts have focused on absorbing the pedestal and on making each piece a nomad work, "producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential."⁶

One will agree that the above descriptions could apply to the work of Jocelyne Allouche. In her sculptural and photographic projects, one could indeed speak of an effort towards abstraction, towards the production of a white space where multiple meanings and diverse referents come to the surface. It is as if it were an attempt to enumerate numerous semiotic possibilities, as if the masses and images brought us to the threshold of real places that

served as inspiration while making it impossible to pin down those that really served as models, those that should be used to ground our understanding and begin an interpretation. This sculpture might be a table or a ceremonial altar, a cairn or mound, a sarcophagus or scaffolding. And this image is perhaps showing the cut of a high-rise or residential property, a public building or place of cult or culture.

In fact, this kind of reasoning will get us nowhere. We must not look for “what it means.” What is constructed is an interpretative situation where the identification of the artist’s final purpose is not as important as the path we must follow to appreciate this aleph of interpretative possibilities. Beyond the reality of the pirated and transformed monuments, landscapes and architectures, we must move towards an encounter with the suspicion raised by their common presences.

As far as a constitutive resistance and allotopy between sculpture and photography is concerned, despite what the mediums have in common in terms of commemoration and deictic function, despite their effort to designate a “there”—which is ghostly in Alloucherie’s work—we must probably also agree. And even add that this allotopic effect is part of a strategy. The resistance is fostered, exploited, affirmed by all possible means. Indeed it is as if every means was employed to explore all of the usual and expected components that constitute these mediums: cut-out, silhouette, shadow and light, visible grain, “monumental” picture, high density prints, minimal contrast between dark areas, apparently chalky masses and substances, the granule of sands and metallic powders, the angular rectangle with curbed plateaus, shimmering smooth surfaces, sculptural pieces made of enclosed blocks... Yet everything is animated by a constant play of images and masses exchanging basic definitional traits where bridges are continuously created so that the constitutive elements of one medium are displayed within the other. These are of course transient and crumbly bridges.

In fact, everything leads us to consider their basic allotopy not simply as an accident, but as the result of a certain critical reception. Photography and sculpture have difficulty working together because although they have a similar relationship to the real, they use potential referents that are extremely divergent in their commemorative function. At least, this is how we come to understand their fundamental difference based on their respective manifestations in contemporary art. Alloucherie sees in both of them, as well as in architecture, a sort of essential kinship of mind that goes straight to their specific identities: the effect of “the inevitable observation of the object’s instability and its continual dispossession, inscribed in the constant flux of light and time.”⁷ The forms revealed by these three mediums would in no way be set but ephemeral, changing, in motion.

Indeed, one must consider the fact that this work is probably not about sculpture or photography. —The artist has herself declared that she wishes “to ignore definitions of painting, sculpture, photography or installation.”⁸ — It is more about acknowledging the effects of elements designated as “compositional,” traits that are, and are said to be, inseparable from the chosen mediums, to the detriment and in complete oblivion of what “photography” and “sculpture” ought to be. Alloucherie’s pieces constantly work towards revealing the boundary between mediums and showing its arbitrariness, through a display of characteristics that evidences both the compossibility and impossibility of their being brought together.⁹ It is as if the intention was to welcome the constitutive elements of photography and sculpture outside of photography and sculpture. Installation, the installational situation produced by Alloucherie, is used to create this form of oblivion. I use the word “oblivion” on purpose, preferring it to a «going-beyond,” which suggests a sort of stoic and desperate confrontation, an absolute representation beyond the mediums employed—a “leaving behind” like the kilometre-marker we soon forget one we have passed it. Except that here we witness an operation resumed a hundred times, a deliberate attempt at letting potential significations hang, all of which could equally *stick* to the work but none of which totally does.

It thus seems that the artist’s task is to arrange things so that the mediums summoned and of course evoked by the works are in a way reduced to an ensemble of definitional traits and then exploited without ever being reduced to the mediums that they participate in making recognisable. The art work is thus geared towards its being reduced to the specific traits of photography and sculpture as mediums, while these are treated in such a way, through reversal and transfer, that they finally emancipate themselves from the definition to which they belonged and henceforth present themselves as irreducible elements.

There is however an almost insoluble paradox in Alloucherie’s works, without which the pieces could not apparently live and emanate, nor evoke. That is the works are fashioned so as to escape, in the end, being confined to certain mediums and to the critical reception that these attract, but this final purpose is strewn with critical and theoretical references characteristic of photography and sculpture as distinctive mediums. Any attempt to show sculptural and photographic situations outside of a restrictive designation of known mediums is not possible without a careful use of the conceptual views with which they were recently defined in contemporary art.

When I chose the titles “Out of Habitat” and “Out of Medium” for the sections of this essay, I was not being fashionable. —One might also add “Out of Trend,” which would seem a valuable use of a commonplace idea in critical appraisals.— It was more in reaction to various critical responses and receptions, interpretations in which

certain historians and critics have indulged. Because it is indeed difficult not to try and measure this work against the latest trends and movements fluttering about in today's art. How can one not recall the writings of the past twenty years on photography and its indexical nature? How can one not call on minimal and *site specific* art, the concept of nomad sculpture and its expanded field, its *placelessness*, for help? But Alloucherie is beckoning us in a totally different relationship. One must no longer think in terms of a going-beyond the limits of sculpture and photography as we know and appreciate them. One must no longer blandly invoke minimal sculpture nor evaluate these works against the post-modern and installation. Of course, Alloucherie has integrated in her thinking as well as in her artistic conceptualisation current concepts (such as the "fold" discussed further on), which haunt, define and determine the theoretical landscape of today's art. But that is not what the work is essentially about. These elements, such as the supposedly necessary, definitional components of the mediums used, are simple markers on the way to an encounter with the works. It is essentially about a journey towards objects about which everything suggests that they should be forgotten to the advantage of what they evoke and awaken inside us, that is an experience on the edge of mobility and finitude. Therefore Alloucherie's dream is still the most telling on this matter. A person will possibly stumble over crumbling sections of walls and buildings... and escape towards his/her infinitude, his/her absolute. Thus, objects can only weigh us down, maintaining us to the ground in our armour made of pavements, walls and façades. This also explains the artist's preference for doors and portals, windows and openings, all endowed with the double and paradoxical aspect of an angular adobe and an opening towards an elsewhere, thus giving the exact measurement of confinement and flight. Much the way architectural components always lead us back to ourselves, the object—even the art object—is nothing. Sticking to it is only the manifestation of a fetishism that forgets the artistic experience and confines it to the limits of material representation. But how can we bypass this indispensable object, how can we suggest the need to go further, to go beyond the fact that the object also masks the horizon it seeks to reveal? What is to be done except find a way to water it down, to foreground it by submerging it in indecisive and imprecise forms, shapes that use all means available, essential shapes that bring the object back to its first intense sensation, before any duplicity occurred. This is what Alloucherie's art is all about: gathering recognized mediums, known and characteristic forms, conventional and necessary references and, in her carefully designed composition, about making the whole thing both aesthete and simplified, laminate. This lamination is thus a wilful operation so that a person (read also: the viewer) always finds before his/herself a polysemous and plurivocal object that inevitably leads to a perception of one's limits in terms of contingency and finitude, so that the experience of one's infinitude in time is revealed.

A Fold

A new motif has recently been added to the display of tools, surfaces and volumes in Jocelyne Alloucherie's works. Like a cast shadow, the drape now spreads over the angular volumes of the erected masses. Stretched over the chalky, milky mausoleums are elongated veils with almost solid folds whose shadows are photographic inlays.

The drape, the fold, is not an innocent figure. It can first be likened to sculpture. Georges Didi-Huberman and Gilles Deleuze have both respectively delivered fascinating books on the multiple meanings of these figures and motifs. For Didi-Huberman, the drape is one of the shapes given to what cannot be represented in sculpture. A figure of the undulating fall of a fluid substance, the drape is fixed in stone, wrapping up the body it steals and conceals under a mass imagined as mould and wave. The body is thus stretched into a mass of folds, intensified in this contorted presence, enveloped to the point of becoming a virtual figure. Moreover, the body erected into sculpture, cut off from the ground, returns to it in this cascade of fabric. For Deleuze, the fold is a manifestation of the Baroque, but a Baroque that becomes the manifestation of folds and bends, the ebb and flow of a chain of signifieds where each component, each sign, hides another one—a sort of continuous modulation of an absolute and perpetual "connotativity," a sort of literal falling into the Sign, as a totality progressively successful at checkmating the signified.

In the case of Alloucherie's own drape, the seal of a signifying irresolution also marks the folds she is obviously trying to give these fabrics—like shrouds over monuments. On one hand they have not pervaded the stone, they are not seeking a sort of representation-limit through the raw material of the making. On the contrary, they cover the stone like a veil following the abrupt angles of the artist's geometric constructions. As a sort of reverse materialisation of shadow—are the folds not suspended over the pieces, obstructing the light?—the light fabric creates bulges on the sculptures' flat surface, swelling up its slightly massive fallback area, in a volumetric densification above (and perhaps beyond) the masses. The drape thus appears at first as a deceptive virtualisation of volume.

But that is not all. Imprecise figures and silhouettes, almost totally submerged in the fibre's granular substance, appear on the shadows and shimmers produced by the light in the exhibition space. Through this photographic presence, the drape becomes at once a shroud, a densification of shadows from elsewhere, images

forming beyond what shadow and photography are both able to conceive. Everything transforms this drape into a common element interceding between sculpture and photography. It has the former's substance but in a more fluid version and is related to the latter in its being an imprint. Moreover, it has less the formal characteristics of an image than its aura, its ghostly presence. And we are never quite certain that its shadows are real. In fact it is never far from a sort of persistent undulation, be it through its dancing fabric or the shadows with which it seems imbued.

This new motif thus changes the deal since the fold collapses photography and sculpture. As a go-between, it is itself an indecisive interface, dealing one or the other, accepting in its moiré the folds of both mediums. In agreement with Deleuze's reading, this folding is like an open space in representation, a thin rift showing that things are not what they appear to be, that the formal characteristics of a medium are not enough to comprehend it. The dialogue that an artwork has with itself—what it tells itself it should demonstrate, bypass or put on trial—and that is based on its own expressive capacities and means, stumbles over this rift, this fold. This admittedly formalist way of considering that the work certainly does not say much about its own definitional foundations, its own conditions of possibility, is here put to flight. The drape perhaps shows the artist's desire to work beyond and above the medium (at this level, both possibilities meet)—a desire to demonstrate that all does not rest on the medium itself. That we should try to put forward a counter-specificity by taking the medium at its face value, maintaining its formal appearance at a sort of infra-degree, so that we can no longer tell if the medium is in a refined and abstract version or, on the contrary, in a fundamental and materialist mode.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, "Bâtir habiter penser," in *Essais et conférences* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, NRF, 1958), p. 171. Heidegger who uses the words in his essay also inspired the title of this text. [Our translation.]
2. "Conversation, 1995" (interview with Sylvie Parent), in *Jocelyne Allouche. Conversations et œuvres choisies (1993-1999)* (Montréal: Éditions Parachute, 1999), Ron Ross trans., p. 11.
3. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
4. Johanne Lamoureux, "Noir et blanc : précis d'usages plus ou moins vagues," in *La Photographie et l'art contemporain. Actes du colloque*, special issue of *Esse* magazine, Montréal, 1988, pp. 39-41. [Our translation.]
5. "Du Monument, Jocelyne Allouche," in *Chambres obscures. Photographie et installation* (Laval: Éditions Trois, 1995), pp. 21-48.
6. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1985), p. 280.
7. "Conversation, 1999" (interview with Sylvie Parent), dans *Jocelyne Allouche. Conversations et œuvres choisies (1993-1999)*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
8. "On the Nomad Gaze," *ibid.*, p. 42.
9. The terms "compossible" and "impossible" are from Gilles Deleuze in *Le Pli. Leibniz et le Baroque* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, "Critique" coll., 1988). He describes as "compossible" "the ensemble of convergent and extendable series that constitute a world," and as "impossible" "series that diverge and therefore belong to two possible worlds" (p. 80). I see in them the possibility of appropriately describing the act of summoning together the specific traits of various mediums, generally addressed in their specificity, and of assessing their possible cohabitation.

Translated from the French by Colette Tougas.