

# Fallen from the Sky

## Life, its Sanctuaries, and its Ghosts

A full-scale replication by Jean-François Fourtou, in the neighborhood of Marrakech, of a Charente region's house has every chance of entering the annals of art history. Replication? The word is not strong enough. Reconstruction seems more exact. On his property of Dar el Sadaka the artist has rebuilt identically the modest house, originally located in the small town of Fouras, in the Charente-Maritime region by the shores of the Atlantic, where as a child he spent his vacations. The outside, the interior, everything that Jean-François Fourtou has remembered accurately, is given again in the present, inspired by the various houses he spent time in during his youth (his grandparents' house in Montreuil, another one they rented during several summers in Fouras in the Charente region...), whether it's the furniture, its placement in the house, the color of the plaster or the wallpaper and above all the specific atmosphere of all these ancient places.

### **A populated place**

Another, even more spectacular aspect—the house is built upside down, its roof planted in the earth. A strange house, this: you would almost think it fell from a cargo plane that lost its freight in mid-flight. As the artist puts it: "It's as if my grandfather who rented this kind of house in Fouras during several summers, was sending me a sign. It's a wink beyond death." Another aspect—the acrobatic skills required of anyone who wants to visit this place of memory. It is first entered through a window in the bathroom. As expected, everything is upside down, the tables, the bed, the stairway, the clothes in the dresser. To go upstairs means going outside and using a wooden ladder, like those in old barns, or those used by goblins in fairy tales to climb to their huts in the treetops, deep in a remote and mysterious dense forest inhabited by fairies and gnomes. Finally, the vertigo. The house leans to one side and with it all its interior surfaces. You have to cling to move forward, and take care not to fall. You progress as if drunk, in a paradoxical way: the place, a major reference point in the artist's life, makes you lose your bearings. It's as if memory cannot be shared—to each his own!

There are many ways to interpret this strange work. The first favors the theory of "the return to," which is radical here. You can re-experience a memory, a past event by re-creating it and reliving it in the present, aware of the time lag (you can't step into the same river twice, as Heraclitus said poetically). The second possible interpretation: nostalgia. You survive by surrounding yourself with commemorative artifacts, by giving yourself over to the "retro." The third interpretation: the invocation, the artist working with "ghosts." Our life? It is populated with those who have vanished, forbidden to exist in the present; everything we experience reminds us of someone, a past encounter, a lost love, someone dear who has disappeared from our immediate surroundings, or was swallowed body and soul by death. The ghost, the phantom, is a host, a guest. For Jean-François Fourtou, rebuilding that house was not insignificant. It was not the house of just anybody—it was that of someone dear to him, a forebear, an individual from whom he is descended and who placed the artist in the cycle of life. A genetic connection. We live in the heart of time, no doubt. Nevertheless, we live in the wake of ghosts who shaped our being and with it, our future.

## **Not everything is lost**

As a whole the work of Jean-François Fourtou gives the impression of being a repository. It's difficult to die there. Bodies and objects resist death with great determination. In his Paris apartment (populated from the ground up to the balcony with sculptures of snails, creatures known for carrying their houses on their backs) the artist exhibits in private works that are very telling. For example, mounted as a panorama, photographs of the Parisian square lined with houses where he grew up in Menilmontant. Also, his kitchen is decorated with anonymous portraits discovered in flea markets. This gallery of portraits, although in the spirit of Boltanski, purposefully avoids appearing as an accumulation. Rather, it has the unexpected effect of making the faces no longer anonymous. You would think that there is a father and mother, children and their grandparents, in short, a family composed of all the pieces, which the artist's assemblage has transformed into a coherent whole regardless of the obvious fact: The people whose faces are posted together, of very different physiognomy and races, have no obvious relation to one another.

Therefore, it is a repository. If many of our actions are in the nature of conquest, or the struggle to achieve, other actions are taken to enable us to maintain ourselves. A human being doesn't easily accept the loss of things, and least of all that of the self. He dreams of an easy life, free of all burdens. Would he also bury himself in a home filled with photographs, fetishistic objects, and utensils for comfort? As if he would build on earth the equivalent of a tomb, where the well-being of the body and soul is not only for the present but above all, for eternity. In this spirit, Jean-François Fourtou's house "fallen from the sky" is more than recreational, much more than something playful. If this house is upside-down for all that, it's first of all because everything there functions upside down, starting with the flow of time, which goes back in this case to the family history of the artist, like a pendulum with reversed mechanism. Visiting it is less the experience of playing with ordinary perception and balance, in order to disorient them, than to literally experience, physically, a reversal, a true situation of upheaval. What is this house fallen from the sky, if not a revival that has materialized, if not the past come to say "here I am" to the present? Certainly there are many obviously entertaining things: because the floors, the ceilings and walls all lean, because everything is head-over-heels backwards, and it's not usual to be confronted with this sort of aberrant construction. Many artists have toyed with the viewer in this way, wanting to disorient his frame of reference. Exhibiting objects upside down in this way has become a standard in recent times, an example being Carsten Höller and his Upside Down installations, mushrooms hanging upside down from the ceiling and slides that perform loops overhead. However, the important aspect is the heightening of two givens: *Tempus fugit*, the flight of time, on the one hand; the strategy of the petrification of time, against forgetting, on the other.

## **To be your own refuge**

The House Fallen from the Sky by Jean-François Fourtou, a unique sculpture, stands among a vast repertory of houses by artists, a repertory that has recently been greatly enriched. In 1993, Rachel Whiteread exhibited in London her House. This massive sculpture, more or less rectangular, was made up of concrete blocks piled on the ground as if fronting the street. Whiteread installed her enigmatic stone pile at the location of the original Victorian house, 193

Grove Road. The artist's House is a concrete cast of the interiors of that house, which she has piled one on top of the other in terms of their actual position in the original house. Bringing attention to the house? Undoubtedly, through her concrete casts of the interior spaces that had been rooms in the now-demolished house. In 2006, in Lorient, Séverine Hubard re-created a giant model of a house in the Penhars neighborhood, a model she placed on a flatbed and moved to a public space. The house that was Hubard's model was not just any house: it was a copy of the "house for all people" conceived by the architect and urban planner Jean le Berre in 1975. Nor was it built from just any materials. Its walls were made from enormous doors salvaged from a building slated for demolition in Penhars. What was the significance of Séverine Hubard's work? The loss of a social utopia? The symbolic renewal that art can confer by resurrecting failed projects? Jean-Pierre Raynaud, Bernard Calet, Absalon, Wolfgang Laib, Ilya Kabakov, Fieschli & Weiss, Gregor Schneider . . . all, following the example of Jean-François Fourtou, also attempt to transform the house, each in his own way, into a poetic archetype. A place of life, and a place of memory, a place defining the self, at the same time.

The house is a time and place, a place where life is lived, in a family, intimately, that is shared only with those who are wanted within it. It is a place where the inner life is fashioned, an escape within oneself, where is found, for good or bad, one's own space or limitations, protected, or on the contrary, incarcerated according to the situation, the mood, and the circumstances. The house is more than an object: it is a metaphor. An object of high symbolic value, it communicates something of our self, what we are—"a positive object" that can infer an analytic category defined by the art critic Pierre Restany. He had the uncomfortable mission of questioning the meaning of "chez soi," "home," and "heimat" . . . the ultimate place of social ebb and flow. The Analogon of the legendary labyrinth of King Minos, a place to dispose of your enemy? An evocation of hell and the depths of the underworld? An expression of this desire for maximum withdrawal evoked by deep shelters where people huddled during the bombings, as in "The Burrow" by Franz Kafka? Or the ideal place of comfort, comparable to the security represented by the time spent in the maternal womb. The theme of the protection of the womb can be found in numerous other works by Jean-François Fourtou, notably in pregnant animals protecting within their wombs their future progeny.

Jean-François Fourtou, whatever else he may be, is the artist for whom the house shelters the self.

Paul Ardenne

*Academic and art historian Paul Ardenne is the author of numerous works on the current cultural scene, notably: Contemporary Art (1997), Contextual Art (2002), Extreme (2006), and Art of the Present (2009). He is a regular contributor to the journals Artpress and Archistorm.*