THE PEACEFUL, THE IDIOTS AND THE FURIOUS

by Flora Katz

1. The tales of Concrete Garden

In the four symmetrical flowerbeds of the Bon-Sauveur courtyard in Caen, decorated with yews, lime- and box-trees, rise four modules composed of equally dimensioned cubes; their glass walls, tinted with bronze, are set with steel painted black. Constructed along the diagonal axes of a classical cross plan garden, each element is developed as a variation on the cubes' vertical alignment, bringing to mind the grid systems used in the 1960s by the Italian group of radical architects Superstudio. Titled *Concrete Garden*, Wilfrid Almendra's installation is the result of a commission by the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles (the local branch of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication) of the Lower Normandy region, installed in the buildings surrounding the courtyard.

Wilfrid Almendra likes re-writing the histories of architecture. For a number of years now, his works reflect on the forms and utopias of vernacular architecture, making buried or unknown narratives of History emerge. Here, the garden space has become a point where a multitude of narratives intertwine. At first sight there is a contemporary one, since these cubic mirrors capture the facades decorating the skyscrapers of emerging urban centres. Then another one, more liminal this time, that one discovers by attentively observing the four elements making up the installation: they are all designed in reference to an iconic architectural form involving a traversal, an opening, a passage. These forms, which have become commonplace nowadays, are revisited

and compose an open and passable path both through the garden and among the sculptures themselves. The box trees are cut into shape to form entry points, opening the four flowerbeds to the strolling visitor.

If one, wandering, draws out a path starting from the courtyard's entrance, one would first of all find, on the right, two modules of different sizes, placed parallel to each other. A wrought iron grid that the artist found close to his studio, in Cholet, in the Maine-et-Loire area. runs through the taller module. Further on, a second element is composed of a straight line, rising gradually in the flowerbed's diagonal axis then breaking off into a short perpendicular line in the end. Halfway through it, a U-shaped concrete block, bringing to mind the history of American minimal forms, adopts the standard format of suburban house garden gates. Moulded into shuttering boards, the cement retains the vein-like aspect of the wood whose base is partially buried in the ground. In the third flowerbed, the cubes' alignment this time forms a line suspended between two vertical and perpendicular walls, one of which is not made of mirrors anymore, but of Carrara marble. This cantilevered opening at first reminds one of a simple garage door; however, it is also influenced by American architect Richard Neutra's pieces – an important reference in Almendra's body of work. Neutra had contributed to the iconic Case Study Houses project (1946-1966), architectural experimentations on residential homes with a modernist aspect, which had been the starting point for the sculpture series Killed in Action (Case Study Houses) (2009). It is the cantilever form that is taken up in *Concrete Garden*: emblematic of Neutra's projects, it presents itself as an elevated extension of a façade or a roof. In conjunction with the antique Carrara marble, two moments of the past meet here, only to become intertwined. The fourth module adopts an important architectural element, which in one case brings to mind Le Corbusier's work. A straight transversal, composed of the steel structure but without its mirrors, pushes into the perpendicular of an elevation. It is empty, taking the form of an openwork interior wall, like a trellis found in classic Middle-Eastern homes and traditionally used in order to "see without being seen". But the first elevation also contains an emptiness, a rectangular cleft through which one can catch a glimpse of a sculpture in the background. Entitled *Cherub on* Globe, this piece was made by Almendra in 2010 and has a whole history behind it. Raised onto a block of white marble, a small cherub is pensively sitting on a globe. Grey asperities, signs of the passage of time, are spread on the sculpture – a copy of an ancient piece that Almendra exchanged with its owner, who had installed it in his suburban house garden. Cherub on Globe is part of awider series, presented for the first time in 2010. Conserved by the artist, it is now coming back in its original space, that of the garden. These successive passages in different environments - of a private garden, an exhibition space, later of a public garden—are interesting in relation to the work's identity and its quantification by the markets. In each space, its value is modified, adapting to the different contexts brought about by the artist.

Each element composing *Concrete Garden* is thus assembled around non-linear traversals: historical ones, where different strata interlace, accumulate and reflect each other, enriching new narratives where the intimate, the academic and the vernacular are brought together. Then there are the physical ones, where the visitor wanders and roams through the box trees, the mirror modules, the garden and its surrounding architecture. Every step leads us towards multiple directions, the work becoming a matrix of innumerable breaking points and convergence lines.

2. Breaking points and convergence lines

The interplay of lines and perspectives, already set off by the sculptures' forms and the garden's layout, is strengthened through the choice of the mirror as the primary material in Concrete Garden. Through ruptures, reflections and fragmentations, the mirror images produced destabilise the passers-by's environment—putting them at times in a disoriented state: front, back, close and distant can at any moment be confounded, blending into each other. For each plot of land, oblivious of gaps or upward perspectives, the mirrors' reflections provoke double ruptures: they multiply viewpoints while also dividing them. Images, surfaces and textures become more complex through their area and surface relations. Every angle becomes multiple, both a breaking point and an extension, giving rise to new leading lines of force, providing a new glimpse of its exterior: the site's neo-gothic architecture, the sky, nature and the passers-by are all repeated and different.

To exist through what one reflects: Concrete Garden could also be claimed to be a mirror sculpture whose carved up body is only constituted by its exterior. Straight away, this language echoes another history, another memory: not the one of vernacular architecture, but the one of the site, which since the early 18th century gradually developed as a psychiatric institution. Founded in 1732 by Anne Le Roy, it initially accommodated "penitent" or "mentally disturbed" women. It was then developed by a priest, Father Jamet, before becoming the third psychiatric institution in France around 1899. Opposite Concrete Garden, one finds the Saint-Joseph pavilion, now hosting the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles of the Lower-Normandy region. It was completed in 1820 and became the historical core of the quartier des hommes (men's quarters), which was in its turn, at the time, divided into three sections: the peaceful, the idiots and the furious.

Be it in Western literature or the psychiatric sciences, the fragmentation of identity is one of the figures of madness; the unity of the person vouches for their stability. Duality, ruptures and divisions of the "I" are classified as symptoms of this mental disorder. However in *Concrete Garden*, the mirror figure lets multiplicity be conceived as an open space—a source of disorientation, to be sure, but also of contemplation, where one can

enjoy the movement of infinite images. Multiplicity, therefore, referred to as fragile and deviant by theoretical authorities holds back in its determination, presenting itself as such, as if in a state where meaning is suspended. Norms are wiped off in favour of emergence and the old asylum garden presents itself in a different light.

Since Concrete Garden was proposed in 2011 but only realised in summer 2014, we will, either trace our steps back or go forward in time and see how this work on convergence lines and on the environment was developed. Until 2013, Almendra worked primarily on series of sculptures which functioned autonomously; however, his two last solo exhibitions – one at the art centre Passerelle (L'Intranauillité, 2013) and the other at the art centre Les Églises de Chelles (Between the Tree and Seeing It, 2014)—focused on more or less immersive installations transforming and reflecting the spaces hosting them. We will first bring our attention to these two propositions' common element, which allows us to elaborate on the ideas developed through the piece Concrete Garden: similarly, in these two projects, it's all about geometry, convergence lines, light and filters troubling spaces.

In L'Intranquillité and Between the Tree and Seeing It, lumps of land carrying robust plants slip out of time-worn glass panels. Even if they are arranged differently, they both bring to mind the aspect of a community garden. In L'Intranquillité, two adjacent rectangular constructions are installed within another rectangular space—that of the art centre, but in an angle placing them out of alignment. The slight deviation—only some degrees—creates a tension in the two architectures. One can discern here both the monumentality of an old bunker¹ transformed into an exhibition space and the strange instability of the artist's construction, titled with the eponymous L'Intranquillité (2013). It is composed of worn glass panels on the one side and of metal bars supported by concrete pylons, defining a space without walls, on the other. A trench is opened up in the middle of these two rectangles, full of philodendrons, exotic plants that develop in an anarchic manner, growing towards the walls and the exterior. While in L'Intranquillité one is found in the presence of closed modules being worn out, in Between the Tree and Seeing It the almost perfect geometry of the rectangles gives way to various surfaces whose convergence lines slip away. The soil and its plants are thus sometimes contained, sometimes outside. On the other hand, the meticulous dissection of the space breaks up the unity of the old church. However this fragmentation is not subtractive; on the contrary, it is, just like in Concrete Garden, full of textures and perspectives. Instead of diving into it in one go, we wander in the Romanesque church, aimlessly following the lines drawn out by the artist.

The material of the panels installed in the two exhibitions also adds an interesting play of perspective: the worn-out aspect of the glass gives them a porous transparency, creating a view of the space through a series of filters modifying its light and drawing new crossing lines. Our visual field is thus modified: clarity and depth are variable, revealing only by hints the nature proper

to the elements at stake. The gaze is further disrupted by also grasping the winding forms of the garden's plants, growing, as for them, without geometrical rules. They are not only attractive by virtue of their irregularity, but also their almost cotton-like matter, whose blurry lines spread beyond their own bodies, merging with their horizon which becomes—in turn—uncertain. This work on transparency is found once more in the basement of the art centre Passerelle, where the piece Désiré (2013) unfolds on a five-meter surface of a wall. Here as well, it is a question of surfaces troubling volumes: a ceramic black form, whose geometrical lines stretch out along the wall, is placed on top of two Plexiglas panels found in a community garden. In places, a surface breaks away from the plane and soars towards the interior of the room. An impression of volume thus appears, intensified by the projected shadows of the black edges and the Plexiglas, whose glass, turned vellow from the sun, draws a parallelepiped of light.

Almendra has been working with colour filters and their projected shadows since 2012: *Model Home (Sonata)* (2012) is a series of mural sculptures composed of materials collected in an abandoned display home. The metal structures (security railings found in the same house) contain within them coloured or frosted glass which brings a rhythmic and pictorial dimension to the work, whose shadows are cast on the walls, here and there, following the passing lights' whims. As in *Désiré*, the object is made of density and volume through the play of lights.

3. Moving contrary to the concrete

There is something decisively pictorial in Wilfrid Almendra's works: each sculptural element is played through rhythm, colour, volume intensities created by the light and the design. At Chelles, the philodendrons are accompanied by crotons and iresine, endowing with colours the glass walls also used in L'Intranquillité: strokes of purple, pink, red and green appear through the glass. composing a landscape echoing those of impressionists such as Monet, Renoir or Pissarro. The visitor is thus invited to contemplate, to take this disinterested pleasure in beauty where one wanders among the tricks of filters, light and colours. This musing is all the more heightened when one catches a glimpse of small white butterflies spinning around in the old church. Wandering through the glass walls, we find ourselves in the presence of complex plastic effects giving an impression of simplicity and lightness. We slow down our pace, to get lost, caught up in the sight of a colour, a butterfly, the mingling of lights.

Concrete Garden also engenders an open gaze where the elements brought together are revealed in a certain plastic autonomy. It does so through two axes, the mirror and wandering. We have already mentioned the formeras a mark of fragmentation and multiplication. However, the mirror also bears the capacity of transforming images and light, which Almendra places in a continuation of impressionist work. While the structure touches on the complex history of institutional seclusion of deviance,

for Almendra *Concrete Garden* is obviously also a site of contemplation, activated by the material of the mirror. The fragmentation of the touch, the valorisation of the light's constant variations on the elements, the rhythm of the image, punctuated by the mirrors' square frames, all compose pictorial resonances in which the visitor can enjoy the play of image variations.

One might, then, be tempted to say that in *Concrete Garden*, just like in the installation *Between the Tree and Seeing It*, everything occurs as if the visitor were penetrating a site of Kantian beauty², where every element is illuminated in a free and disinterested way, without given purpose. Confronted with the inefficient presence of autonomous elements such as butterflies and plants, the visitor's judgment mechanisms are, in a way, suspended. Steering clear of a form of productivity though wandering and contemplation, Almendra seems to guide us towards the simple presence of things, leading towards the path of beauty as interruption.

One must not, however, forget an important element appearing after the Concrete Garden project: in L'Intranquillité and Between the Tree and Seeing It, the growing plants wear out the tattered and fragile glass walls; indeed their sites of contact become points of tension, where the plastic beauty is confronted with the uncertainty of time. Throughout the duration of the pieces' presentation, it remains possible that the architecture will collapse, like a rope stretched too far over an empty space. This precarious aspect is actually present in a large part of Almendra's work: he has always used exchanged or found material as the basis for the composition of his pieces. Pacing through unpopulated zones, the artist passes a great deal of his time searching, collecting, gathering what has been pushed aside due to its wear. These abandoned and fragile elements are habitually rendered invisible by normative authorities – be they economic, cultural or political. It is through the exhibition territory that Almendra brings them back into play and destabilises the identity assigned to them; the small cherub placed in the Bon-Sauveur courtyard is an example of a series of exchanges, the glass panels used in L'Intranquillité and Between the Tree and Seeing It were found in an abandoned greenhouse close to Nantes; the wrought iron gate dwelling in one of Concrete Garden's modules had also been abandoned. While initially the point for Almendra was to go though disused zones alone, in order to find the materials for his future pieces, the collection process has gradually become more complex, including the immateriality of exchanges with different people he meets along the path of his research.

Two works presented in the second part of the Chelles project allow us to develop these points: *September 25th 2013 at night* (2014) is composed of a large, old-fashioned, wooden family table on which is placed a strange cake made of copper. Light slips through the skylight—a roof-window—decorating a false ceiling, suspended at the height it would have in a standard social-housing apartment. It draws out a fine horizontal line, disrupting the church's vertiginous elevation. The copper bread loaf was

conceived with a group of Roma: in the industrial zone where Almendra works, Roma people often collect different metals, in order to sell them to metal scrap merchants. Following several weeks of discussion, the artist proposed to them to gather copper wires and pipes (copper being one of the most valuable bargaining chips on the black market) from an abandoned house, destined to be destroyed. Once the material had been collected, they went together to their encampment to melt the copper: for three days and two nights, successive fires slowly acted upon the material. During this time, Almendra and the Roma group shared moments of companionship, talking about numerous subjects, enriched by their respective differences: nomadism, labour and the alternative economy were at the heart of the exchanges. When the copper was melted. it was poured into a barrel buried in the ground, which gave September 25th 2013 at night its circular form and irregular aspect, marked by the traces of earth, pebbles etc. The piece, in a rhythm defined by time, oxidises and gradually changes colour. Loaded with imperfection and contingency, what used to be a stable bargaining chip becomes an obscure and unstable object, an intruder placed on a family table, relic of an inaccessible memory.

Next to September 25th 2013 at night, a radio placed on the ground regularly lets the sound of Portuguese poems slip out (George, 2014). Their transcriptions and translations are available in a document whose copies form a pile of paper placed on the floor right next to the radio. George is also the result of an encounter, this time in a construction site in Portugal, where the artist's father comes from. In the course of a discussion following a day of work, George, a Portuguese builder and peasant, recited one of his poems to Almendra. Moved by this unexpected gesture and its content, Almendra asked him, two years later, to compose a series of poems, the fruit of their echoing exchanges on poetry, art, the world of labour and George's everyday life. Rhythmic and suave, the poems focus on concrete actions and objects as much as they concentrate on elements of contemplation and musing. Broadcast by a radio transmitter installed in the art centre, the poems pirate a popular frequency of the FM band (NRJ) and surreptitiously infiltrate random radio programmes. A foreign voice thus interferes with and surprises the outside world, beyond the—always and already reified and delimited—art centre space: in a super-market, a clothes shop, during a car drive.

Areia água e cimento Uma mistura potente Usada na construção Com betoneira a trabalhar Carreta para a massa transportar Colher sempre na mão Para blocos assentar

Sand, water and cement
A powerful mixture
Used in construction
Cement mixing truck in action
Wheelbarrow full of glue in movement
Trowel always at hand
For the breezeblocks to be sealed

We can therefore recognise, both in the materials and the procedures deployed by the artist, a fragility and uncertainty that form the basis of the tensions taking place at the core of his works: an almost-collapsing architecture, the subtleness of an encounter, the uncertainty of the other, the surprise of poetry. Infiltrating the underground spaces where plants grow, the processes pre-existing the work, the exterior of the exhibition space, they bestow contingency and human relations on the—even invisible—matter of a sculpture.

These elements carry within them a sort of distrust towards the stability of a scientific discourse or a noble material. An emblematic text by philosopher Michel Foucault can help us construct a discourse around this gesture. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France on 7 January 1976, entitled « Il faut défendre la société », and then translated as "Society must be defended", Foucault introduces the founding methodologies of his thinking, archaeology and genealogy:

"It is a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, organize them into a hierarchy, organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge, in the name of the rights of a science that is in the hands of the few. (...) Genealogies are, quite specifically, antisciences. (...) They are about the insurrection of knowledges. Not so much against the contents, methods, or concepts of a science; this is above all, primarily, an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and workings of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours. (...) Genealogy has to fight the power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific³."

Almendra's works' materials therefore also function like an 'anti-science': invisible, precarious, buried and contingent, what is normatively affirmed as negative becomes a force capable of destabilising certain value systems. The artworks, spreading clandestinely outside the exhibition space, deriving from non-academic knowledge, or threatening with their own collapse, distort and frustrate normative spaces in order to take over other values, other possibilities, through an artistic procedure. It is besides to be noted that the signs of an 'anti-science' are present all over Almendra's work: whether he focuses on vernacular architectures or on amateur practices such as biker and garage cultures⁴, Almendra has always been interested in what is situated outside academic and institutional limits.

4. Guerrilla gardener

In order to pursue these first steps towards a political dimension in Almendra's work, we still need to study one of his recent productions' essential elements. As it has already been mentioned, the pieces *L'Intranquillité* and *Between the Tree and Seeing It* allude to what the artist calls *jardins ouvriers* (community gardens; literally

labour gardens). While Almendra's body of work has for many years now been separately permeated by nature and poor materials, the precise work on community gardens is a turning point, since it unites these two elements in one and the same piece. Also called a community garden in France and North America, or an allotment garden in England, the *jardin ouvrier* has strong political connotations both in Western history and in our contemporaneity. British author George McKay's book Radical Gardening, Politics, Idealism and Rebellion in the Garden (2011) one of the artist's most important references—is a major source allowing us to grasp this political dimension. The allotment was first created in England, in the mid-19th century. A plot of land was given to workers so that they could cater to their own subsistence. Having played an important role during both World Wars, the community garden was gradually abandoned, a symbol of instability and of the war effort. It was in the 1980s that the community garden resurfaced, this time with a communitarian and playful aspect. This friendly, non-hierarchical and inclusive space is thus claimed as a site of simple experimentation and alternative economy. Today, a community garden culture remains deep-rooted mainly in England and in North America. In France there are hardly any: the community garden is still associated with instability and when one is set up, it remains relegated to a marginal territory. But in England the allotment is a genuine political space in which alternatives to a number of contemporary issues can be claimed:

"It has come to express a tactical, grounded resistance to global capital and its negative environmental impact. Allotments and local foods can be seen as broader movements to re-localise and are often imagined as being in opposition to the conventional food system⁵."

The community garden therefore becomes the crystallisation of a wide set of critiques against global capitalism. British associations such as SchNEWS affirm autonomous production of food as a threat to capitalism, since it liberates from the necessity of consumption⁶. But beyond such political struggles, which can go so far as to criticise private property, lies the idea of constructing an independent space of liberty where each and every person can construct their own modes of existence, away from what is determined by institutions. Those of Almendra's pieces that allude to the community garden carry, therefore, within them a history of activism, of resistance and of alternative production.

Hidden in a nook of the exhibition space at Chelles, the piece *Sans titre (Patates)* (2014) could easily be missed out. These discrete fragments of aluminium sections taking the form of potatoes were collected in the ruins of La Faute-sur-Mer, a small village on the Vendée coast, struck in 2010 by the Xynthia cyclone. An important part of *Sans titre (Patates)* consisted in convincing one of the very few cast iron artists still working in France to melt these aluminium scraps, marked by a conflictual history, into this simple and old-fashioned form. It seems, actually, that this last piece has all the ingredients needed in order to compose an image exemplary of Almendra's work:

presented at the limit of visibility, it alludes to what lies out of habitual market economy (working the soil, rudimentary nourishment) while at the same time bringing to mind the indefatigable mechanisms of capitalism. The piece was created as a result of a long dialogue with a craftsman and arose from the confidence of an exchange in order to pay tribute to a humility that has become liminal. In confidentiality, Almendra's works act by rustling: tracing pathways alluding to buried histories and their utopias, Almendra thwarts authorities and destabilises value systems, giving rise to a body of work whose force resides in the precariousness of a balancing act, the tension of a difference, the fall that is to come. *Resistance is fertile*⁷.

- ¹ This space was constructed in the 1930s and finished in 1940 on behalf of the cooperative company L'Alliance des Travailleurs (The Workers' Alliance)
- ² According to Kant, beauty is the object of a disinterested pleasure. An autonomous beauty concerns simple form, without purpose. See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, translated by James Creed Meredith, OUP, Oxford, 2008, section 1, book 1, §5 – 16
- ³ Michel Foucault, Lecture of 7 January 1976, in Society Must be Defended, translated by David Macey, Picador, New York, 2003, p. 9
- ⁴ See Zoë Gray's text « Le jardinier constant » ("The Constant Gardener"), in Wilfrid Almendra, exhibition catalogue, Dijon, les presses du réel, 2013
- ⁵ Thomas Jellis quoted in George McKay, Radical Gardening, politics, idealism and rebellion in the garden, Frances Lincoln Limited, London, 2011, p. 167
- $^{\rm 6}~$ For a precise description of these movements, see George McKay, op. cit. chapter 5
- $^7\,$ Expression used by the guerrilla gardeners and adopted by George McKay to conclude his book. op. cit., p. 195





Wilfrid Almendra
L'Intranquillité, 2013
Verre, silicone, béton, terre, acier, aluminium, bois, plantes (philodendrons) / Glass, silicon, concrete, earth, steel, aluminum, wood, plants (philodendrons)
1200x675x200 cm
Vue d'exposition / Exhibition view, centre d'art contemporain Passerelle, Brest
© Nicolas Ollier





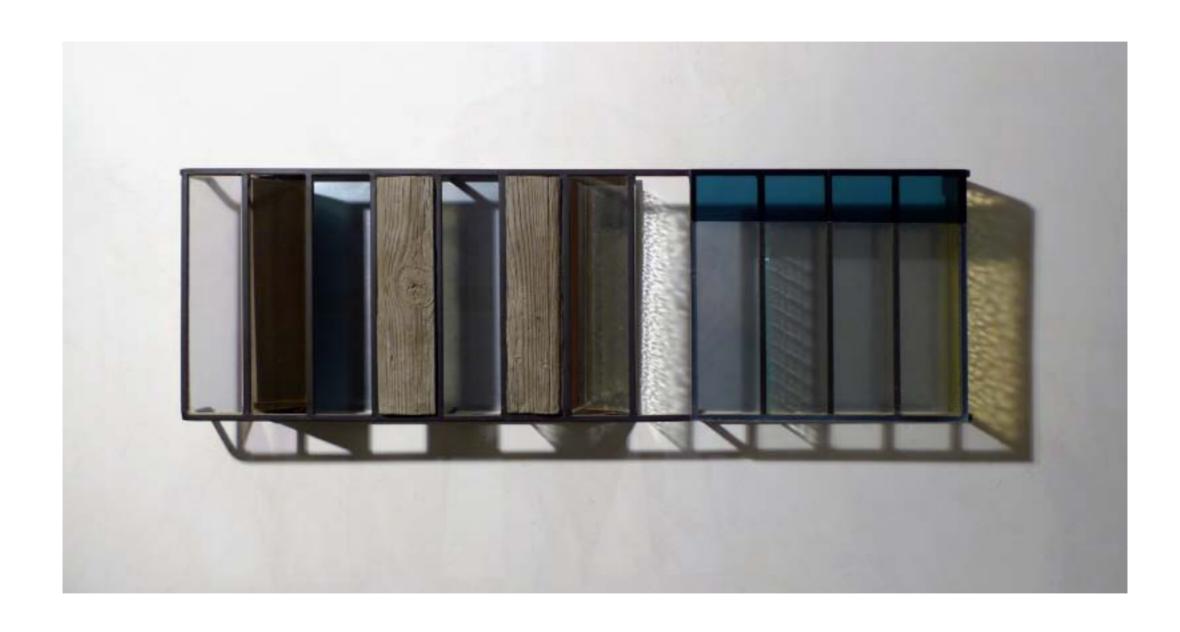




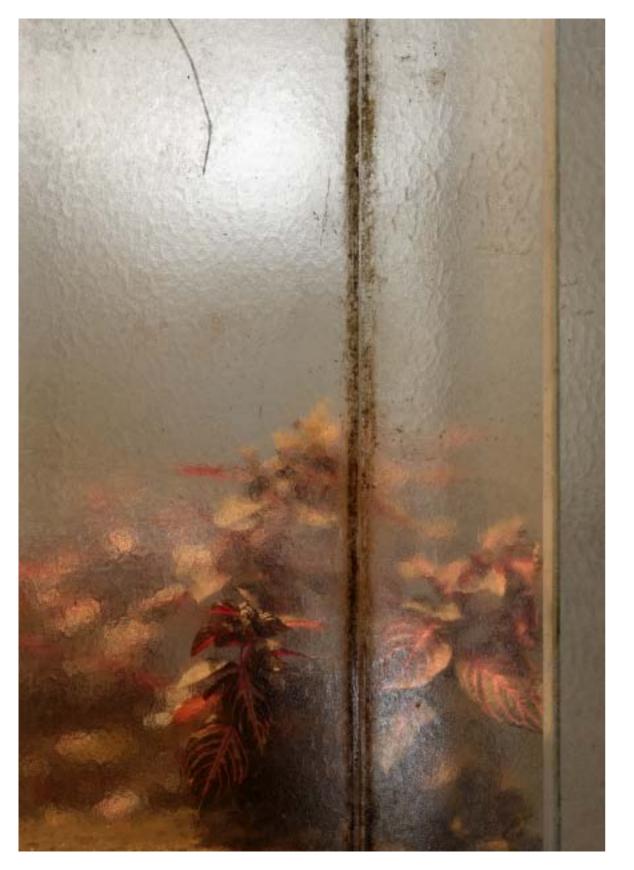
Wilfrid Almendra
Désiré, 2013
Céramique, plaquette de frein, plexiglas, acier galvanisé, silicone /
Ceramic, brake pad, plexiglas, galvanized steel, silicon
480x120x35 cm
Vue d'exposition / Exhibition view,
centre d'art contemporain Passerelle, Brest
© Nicolas Ollier





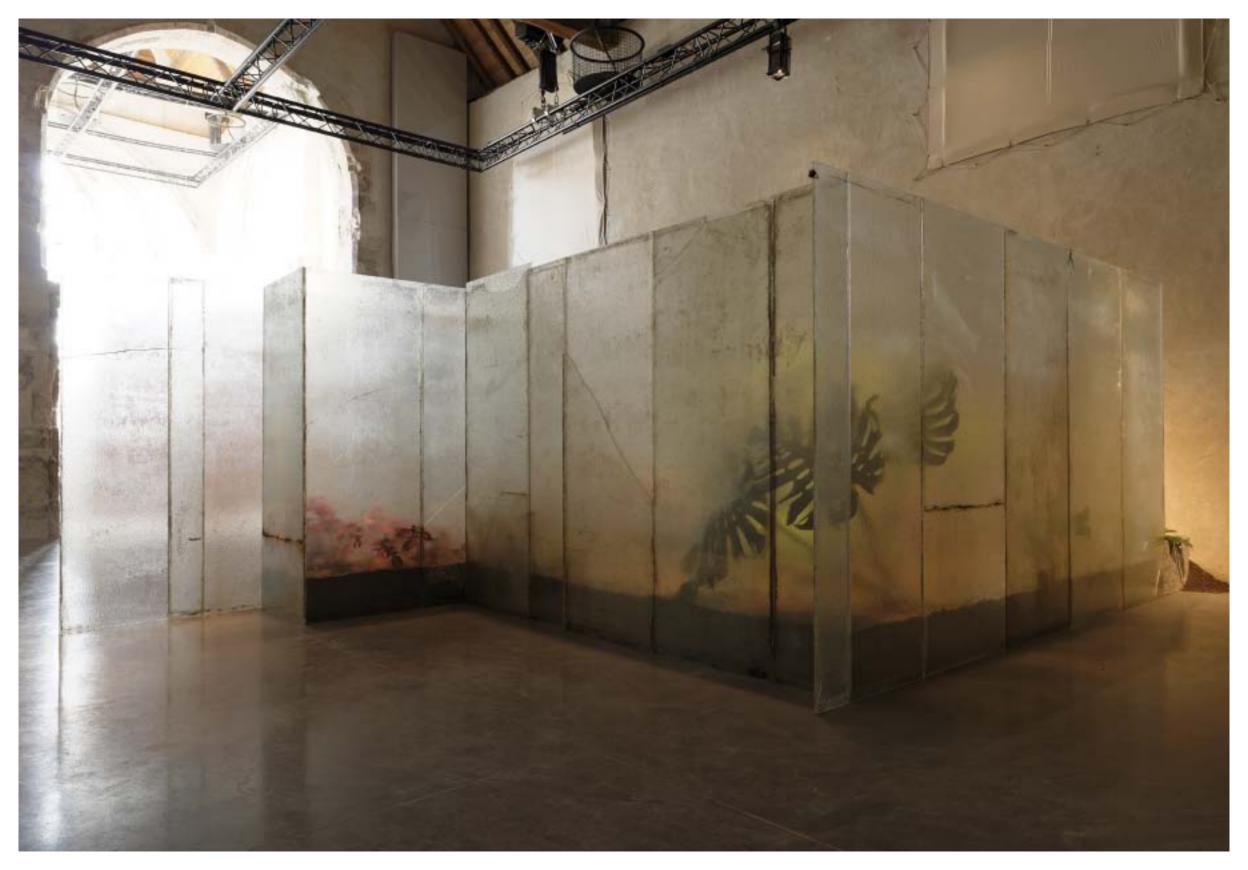


Wilfrid Almendra
Model Home, (Sonata 12), 2014
Acier, miroir, verre, silicone, tôle galvanisée, béton / Steel, mirror, glass, silicon, galvanized steel, concrete
37x120x12 cm
Collection privée / Private collection
© Wilfrid Almendra

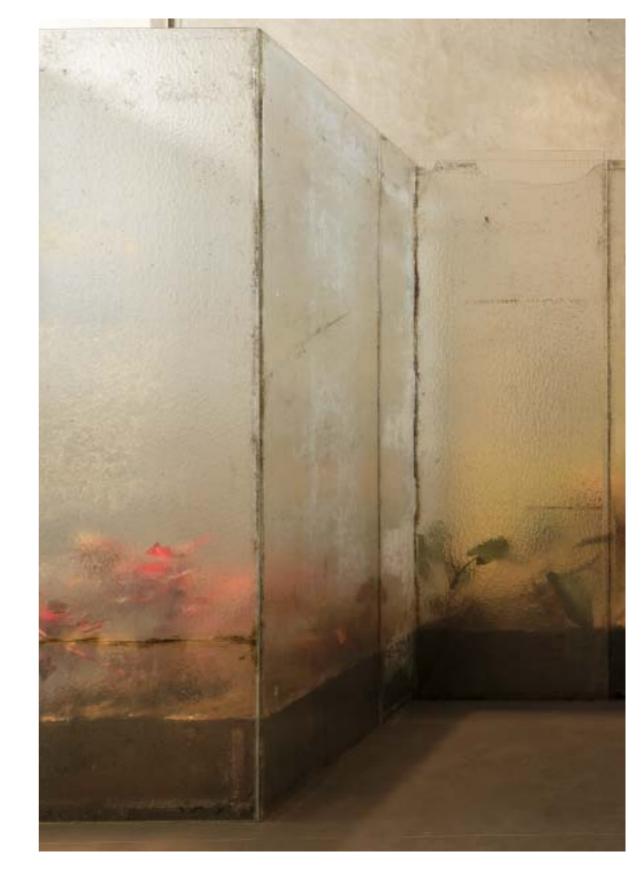


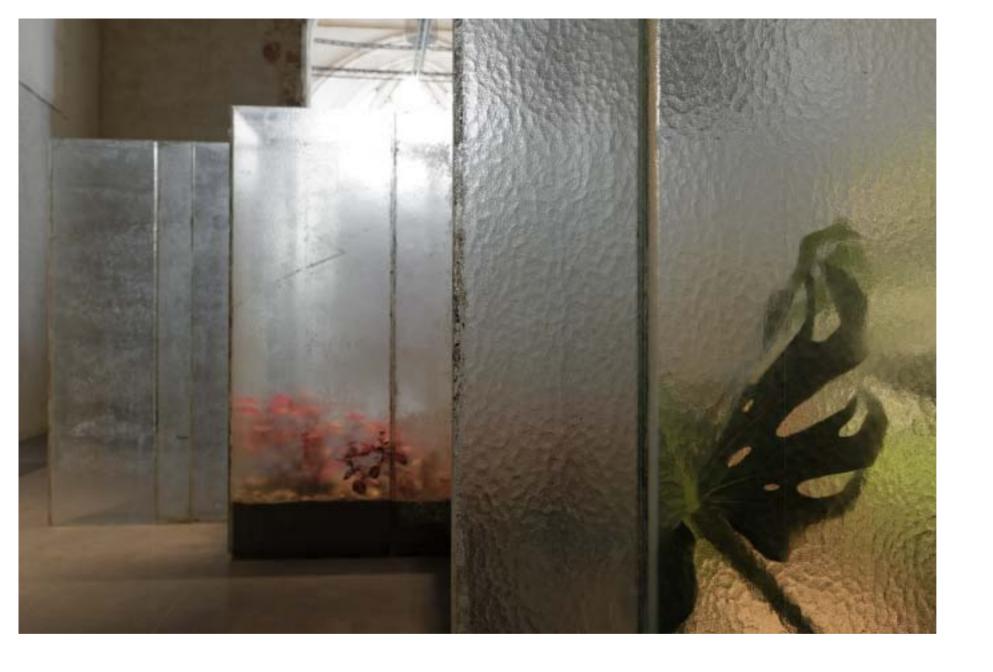


Wilfrid Almendra Between the Tree and Seeing It (détail), 2014 © Aurélien Mole

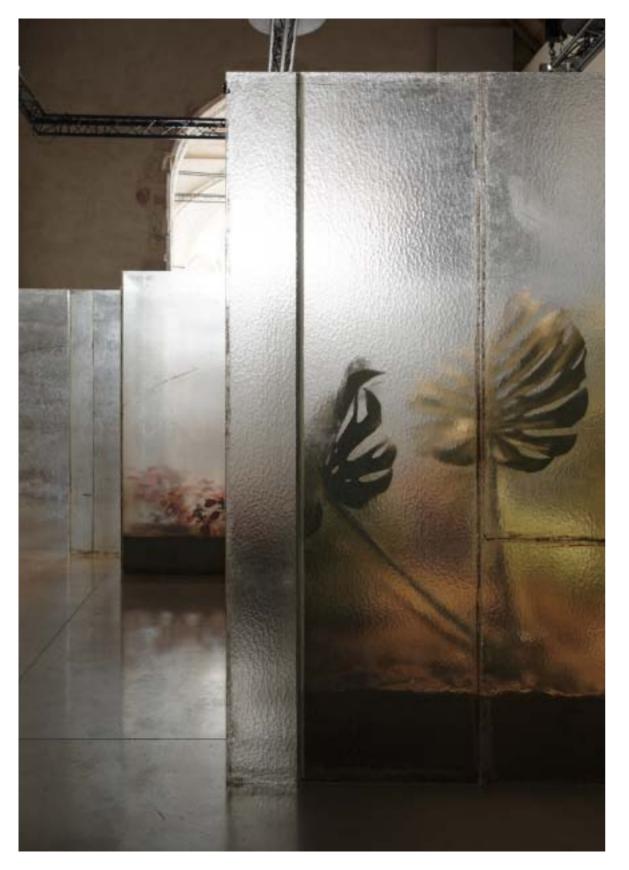


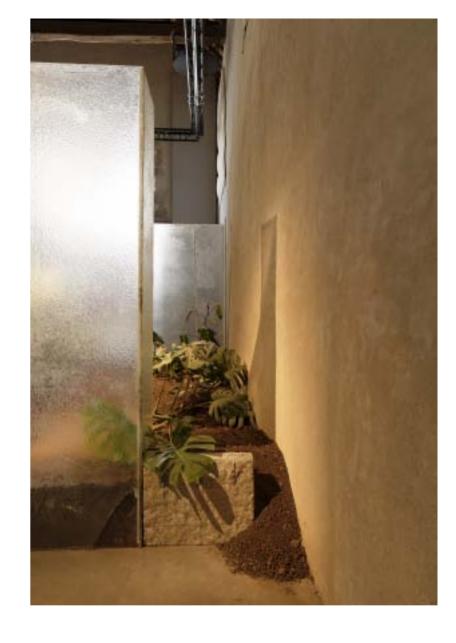






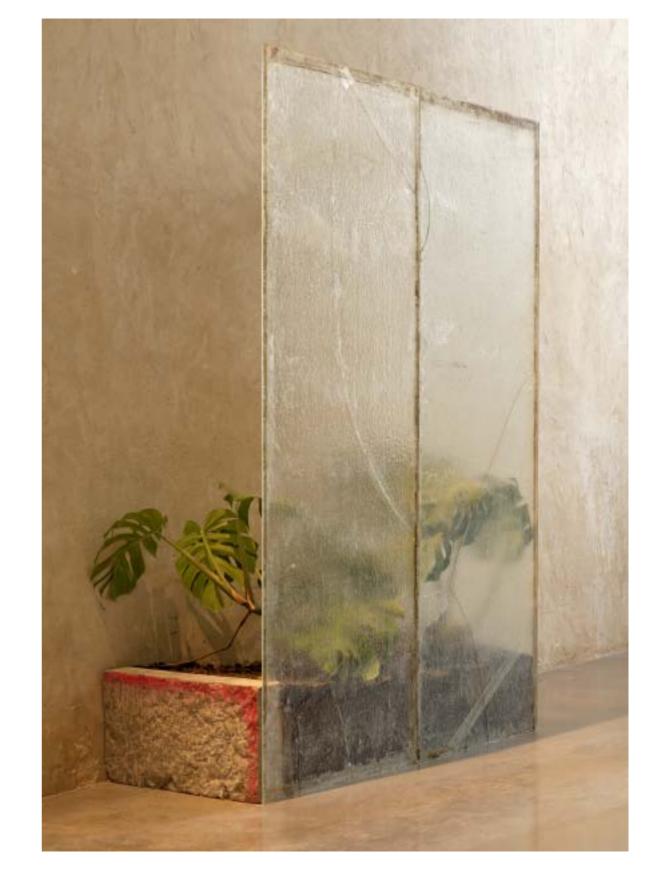
Wilfrid Almendra
Between the Tree and Seeing It, 2014
Verre, silicone, béton, terre, plantes (philodendrons, crotons, irésines), papillons / glass, silicon, concrete, earth, plants (philodendrons, crotons, irésines), butterflies
753x360x202 cm
Vue d'exposition / Exhibition view,
les églises centre d'art contemporain de la Ville de Chelles
© Aurélien Mole

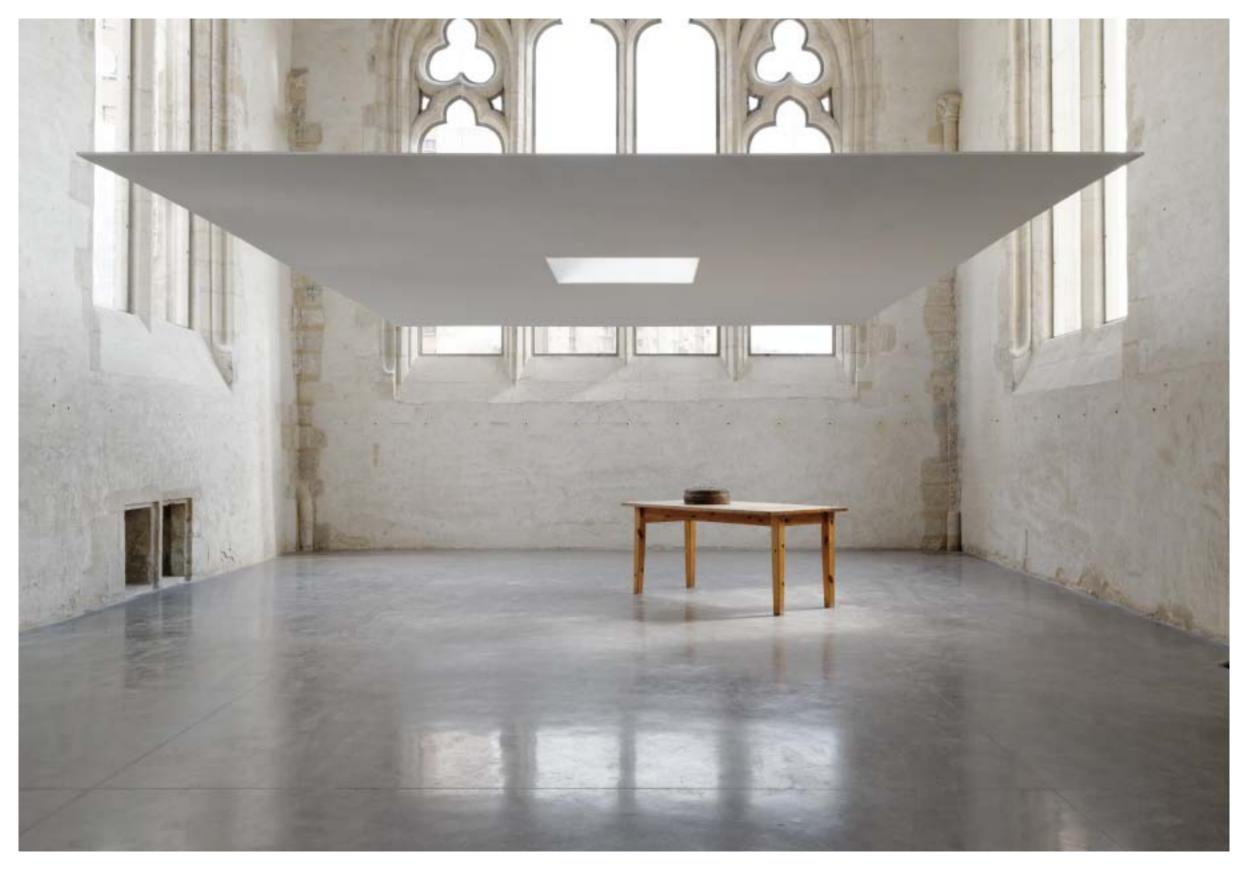




Wilfrid Almendra Between the Tree and Seeing It, (détail), 2014 © Aurélien Mole













Wilfrid Almendra
George, 2014
Poste radio, émetteur radio pirate, diffusion sonore de 9 poèmes lus,
tirages noir & blanc sur papier recyclé / Radio set, pirate radio transmitter, recording of 9 poems, paper
dimensions variables / variable dimensions
Vue d'exposition / Exhibition view,
les églises centre d'art contemporain de la Ville de Chelles
© Aurélien Mole

Wilfrid Almendra
Sans titre (patates), 2014,
Fonte d'aluminium / Cast aluminium, 57x54x7 cm
Vue d'exposition / Exhibition view,
les églises centre d'art contemporain de la Ville de Chelles
© Aurélien Mole



