

Art in America



Chosen Family: Gerard & Kelly at the Glass House

By Wendy Vogel | May 18, 2016



Gerard & Kelly: *Modern Living*, 2016. Courtesy of the Glass House. Photo Max Lakner/BFA.com.

“The family is a system of regeneration,” chanted a group of dancers, huddled on the lawn next to Philip Johnson’s modernist Glass House, toward the end of Gerard & Kelly’s *Modern Living*. Performed last weekend on the grounds of Johnson’s estate in New Canaan, Connecticut, the 90-minute dance piece is Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly’s most ambitious work to date on the subject of queer intimacy. Starring nine highly trained dancers from Benjamin Millepied’s L.A. Dance Project, *Modern Living* grew out of Gerard & Kelly’s research on living experiments practiced in both Johnson’s compound and the Schindler House in West Hollywood, California. The piece debuted at the Schindler House, which is now part of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, in January. It marks the first project staged across the two modernist sites, and a new method of working for Gerard & Kelly.

Though Philip Johnson (1906-2005) famously lived in a transparent structure that he built in 1949, his sexuality remained opaque for most of his life. The architect shared his residence with his partner David Whitney for decades, hosting lavish soirées for gay art-world icons like Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham. But he didn’t officially come out until 1994. Rudolph Schindler (1887-1953), on the other hand, built an L-shaped two-family structure in 1922 for himself, his wife Pauline, and the artist couple Clyde and Marian Chace. The

nontraditional design accommodated communal living spaces, semi-discrete studios and sleeping baskets on the roof. The families’ intimate life was equally unusual; Pauline Gibling Schindler left Rudolph for John Cage, later lived as a lesbian, and returned to the house to live platonically with her husband in the late thirties.

Rather than a didactic presentation, *Modern Living* is a composition informed by progressive aesthetics and social theory. The dance activated the Glass House with the presence of breathing and sweating young bodies, recounting their own lived memories. What Gerard & Kelly strove to elicit in their performers was not an interpretation of Johnson’s coterie, but rather an affinity with its lifestyle.

Queerness and the performativity of memory are key themes for Gerard & Kelly, who have been working together since 2003. An earlier series, variously titled *You Call This Progress?* and *Reusable Parts/Endless Love*, features reconstructions of German artist Tino Sehgal’s make-out performance *Kiss* (2002). In Gerard & Kelly’s piece, audio instructions for performers’ embraces are transmitted anew in each rendition via headsets. The work’s looped, evolving structure and queer cast challenges the heteronormativity of the male-female couples in Sehgal’s *Kiss*. In

2015, Gerard & Kelly explored the feminist and queer reclaiming of pole dancing during a residency at the New Museum. A recent work, *Timelining*, was staged last summer on the ramp of the Guggenheim Museum, which acquired the piece. In the performance, pairs of people—siblings, friends, and Gerard & Kelly themselves (who share both a creative and romantic history)—remember their past in reverse chronological order.

Modern Living featured five men and four women channeling the decadent spirit of the Glass House's heyday via collaboratively scripted actions. On Friday afternoon, the day I attended, the weather was dark and drizzly. The performance began as the visitors exited a shuttle bus at the top of a hill across from Da Monsta, a whimsical building of swooping forms Johnson designed in 1995. A man sporting rich shades of mustard and orange stood beside it, performing controlled modern-dance movements that a woman in brilliant fuchsia echoed downhill. The gloomy day made for clear views of the house, which is sometimes obstructed in daylight with reflections of the surrounding landscape.

The crowd meandered down to the house, passing performers in distinct monochrome outfits every color of the rainbow stationed in the landscape, executing quasi-militaristic motions. In the Glass House itself, a man and woman began a "duet" in the living room. They traded off performing movements and recounting memories based on the hour of the day. Each of the twelve hours was assigned a specific action—for instance, the extension of the arm or rotation of the hips—that one performer repeated. The orientation of the dancers' bodies loosely mimicked the hands of a clock, keeping a tight circle. Their rhythms played off each other as they were joined by other dancers, who filled the house with their voices and bodies. The memories they recounted spanned the spectrum from wholesome daytime pursuits (summer camp activities, a milkshake before bed) to sexy late-night pastimes (a partner asking if "Icelandic girls give head.")

As several dozen spectators filled the house with the performers, the building felt alive. It was thrilling to see the performers occupy the spaces that Johnson and his companions once did—sitting at the table, rolling in the bed, removing outfits from his walnut armoire and changing in the bathroom (the one windowless place in the Glass House). Their movements highlighted what Gerard & Kelly called the "campiness" of the house, from the gridded leather on the bathroom ceiling to Elie Nadelman's sculpture *Two Circus Women* (1930), a pair of twinned, voluptuous queer sirens. The cluster of people highlighted how unlivable the house is, as condensation creeped up the walls and the temperature rose with so much body heat.

Vignettes throughout the performance focused on both the pleasures and difficulties of love, queer or otherwise. "Relationships are like clockwork," a duo repeats in the bedroom area, alternately supporting each other's weight and practically shoving one another. Later, two women interpret "Gospel Noble Truths," a poem written by Allen Ginsberg on the subway in 1975, as a harmonized folk song, intermittently caressing each other's hair. The poem begins with bitterness ("Born in this world / You got to suffer"), switching to advice ("Try to be gay / Ignorant Happy") to Zen-like resignation ("Talk when you talk / Cry when you cry / Lie down you lie down / Die when you die.") Other sequences on the lawn suggested various sexual configurations—grinding threesomes of various genders, pairs flopping down in the wet grass, a huddled mass of bodies rolling over one another. (This last movement references the work of Simone Forti, with whom Gerard once worked.)

Most of the action obliquely references the Brick House, some 50 feet from the Glass House, where perhaps most of the "living" was done. The structure, equal in length to the Glass House, appears windowless from the front, and contains the necessary internal functions that the transparent house lacks. From certain angles, the brick masks the glass structure behind it. And yet, this monastic "guest residence," currently closed to the public for renovations, has its flourishes, including an arched bedroom and shag carpet. In a 1991 tour, Johnson explained: "I learned from Sir John Soane the wonderful thing of lighting coming in from around a curved surface to make you cuddle. This was a bedroom, why not get cuddly. So, I had silk—no, it was cotton—put on the walls, and the plaster dome filters the lighting." The Brick House, a brick-and-mortar representation of the metaphorical closet,

in other words, could be seen as the place for ultimate intimacy and indulgence.

However, Johnson had another semi-closeted past—his affiliation with the Fascist movement in the 1930s—that he tried to keep hidden in his later years. New elements in the Glass House version of *Modern Living* reference this dark episode in Johnson's life. There are sequences scored with a version of Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, inspired in part by Nazi goose-stepping. (The symphony became the score for an athletic "leotard ballet" by George Balanchine that premiered at the New York City Ballet in 1972.)

A final sequence in *Modern Living* sees the dancers in black sharp-shouldered suits designed by Uri Minkoff, their previous colorful costumes indicated by discreet tuxedo stripes. It begins with the dancers facing the audience in strict rows, then gathering around two women, who angrily circle each other around a glass coffee table. Their slow-motion voguing poses—wagging fingers, hands on hips while bending at the waist—evoked club culture, or "RuPaul's Drag Race." A house music soundtrack picks up speed, as the company begins to improvise, shouting the words "Yas" and "Gurl." The movements appeared to connect Johnson's attraction to fascism, which Walter Benjamin once called the aestheticization of politics, with camp. The suited figures marched out of the house and onto the promontory, just beyond the gridded Harry Bertoia Diamond loungers. As it was raining heavily, the audience instinctively stayed inside the Glass House. The vantage point framed the figures, who seemed like ghostly silhouettes against the pastoral vista—a chosen family, perfect and flawed, like any other.