

# frieze

## Gerard & Kelly

By Evan Moffitt | July 16, 2016



### The Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut, USA

The modernist philosophy of Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and their contemporaries was democratic and utopian – at least until it was realized in concrete, glass and steel. Despite its intention to produce affordable designs for better living, modernism became the principle style for major corporations and government offices, for the architecture of capital and war. Are its original ideals still a worthy goal?

I found myself asking that question at the Philip Johnson Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, while watching *Modern Living* (2016), the latest work by performance artist duo Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly. As I followed the sloping path to Johnson's jewel box, pairs of dancers dressed in colourful, loose-fitting garments, mimicking each other's balletic movements, appeared in emerald folds of lawn. With no accompaniment but the chirping of birds and the crunch of gravel underfoot, I could've been watching tai chi at a West Coast meditation retreat. The influence of postmodern California choreographers, such as the artists' mentor Simone Forti, was clear.



Gerard & Kelly, *Modern Living*, 2016, documentation of performance, The Glass House, New Canaan; pictured: Nathan Makolandra and Stephanie Amurao. Courtesy: Max Lakner/BFA.com

When the Glass House was first completed in 1949, Johnson was criticised for producing a voyeuristic domestic space in an intensely private era governed by strict sexual mores. Like a fishbowl, the house gave its inhabitants nowhere to hide. But if Johnson invited the gaze of others, he also gave himself a space to perform before their eyes. That suburban domestic ideal – the middle class 'American dream' – was unattainable then for gay men. In the Glass House's 'theatre in the round', heteronormative behaviour is revealed to be a set of learned and habituated gestures, which Johnson amplified to absurdity in a kind of drag performance. The house thus provides a perfect stage for Gerard & Kelly's exploration of queer bodies within the legacy of modernism.

Johnson was a camp appropriator, famous for inhabiting the styles of other architects and designers in exaggerated fashion. His Glass House refines the elements of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House to extremity; his 1984 AT&T Building in Manhattan, with its oppressively weighty Chippendale roofline, merged the historical pastiche of postmodernism with 1980s corporate bombast, perversely turning a macho office building into a gigantic closet. As the primary space of queer life that lies at the dark heart of the home, the closet is not simply a rhetorical device but links (domestic) interiority with (public) appearance, personal secrets with dress and social behaviour. Structurally and materially, the Glass House embodies this paradox; fully transparent yet exceptionally private, the building gave Johnson and his partner, David Whitney, exactly what they could never have beyond the property – the freedom to be openly intimate without fear of assault.



Gerard & Kelly, *Modern Living*, 2016, documentation of performance, The Glass House, New Canaan; pictured: Morgan Lugo and Nathan Makolandra. Courtesy; The Glass House

As rain began to fall, the dancers entered the living room, where their movements grew less synchronized. Like human clocks, each performer announced the 'arrival' of an hour, their awkwardly staggered voices suggesting a gradual temporal slip. These were followed by brief personal memories associated with each hour: 'eleven' for some meant 'sweeping the floor'; for others, 'the taste of coffee' or 'holding him close'. As more bodies gathered in the house, their recitations thickened into a palimpsest which recalled that tender tribute to romantic disconnection, Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991). Gerard & Kelly borrowed the move from their 2014 performance *Timelining*, but at the Glass House it took on new meaning: modern life cages bodies in the vicious clockwork of daily labour – a mathematical system that cares little for our subjective experiences of time. As dancers slowly merged and separated, the erotic magnetism of their movements left me somewhat melancholic, reminded of how difficult it can be to find real love when 'matches' are determined by dating-app algorithms.

With no score, *Modern Living* is organized around three maxims, which the dancers chant in unison at regular intervals throughout the 70-minute performance. The first ('clockwork, clockwork, relationships like clockwork') captures the quiet violence our daily routines inflict on those we love. The second ('the home is a mathematical equation'), recited by dancers seated at Johnson's dining table, is a paean to the stiff precision commonly associated with middle-class propriety. And the third ('the family is a system of regeneration') ascribes the sole purpose of procreation to the nuclear family, explicitly denying queer people its graces. This last axiom was spoken outside, as the dancers extended their arms rigidly out or up towards the sky and twirled together in dense clusters, like skyscrapers of human flesh.



Gerard & Kelly, *Modern Living*, 2016, documentation of performance, The Glass House, New Canaan; pictured: Morgan Lugo, Nathan Makolandra, Anthony Bryant, Julia Eichten, Rachelle Rafeiledes, and Lilja Rúriksdóttir. Courtesy: The Glass House

At the climax, dancers assembled around the coffee table in black tailored suits to perform a hybrid goose-step and vogue to Igor Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* (1945), a suite inspired by the sight of marching Nazi soldiers, here remixed by music producer SOPHIE. It seemed a clear excoriation of Johnson's crypto-fascist politics and refusal to come out during the AIDS epidemic, when he turned a blind eye to a gay community in crisis and built lavish office towers for the homophobic barons of Wall Street.

As I left the Glass House, I recalled that 'utopia' means 'no place'. Gerard & Kelly traced Johnson's development from modern purist to corporate hack, but they also revealed the fallacy of a one-size-fits-all architecture. If the modernist project can be resuscitated to accommodate queer bodies, it won't be by doubling down on its high ideals, but by acknowledging those principles as just another performative gesture – another manifestation of style.