NEW CANAAN, Conn. — A man and a woman are separated by a grassy hill. He makes one movement — a snap, a jump — and she repeats it. They playfully signal to one another, flirting, perhaps like birds would do.

We are instructed to move down the driveway — the road that leads to Philip Johnson’s famed Glass House, completed in 1949. We are watching Modern Living, a performance centered on romantic relationships and how they develop within the home, staged by the artist duo Gerard & Kelly in collaboration with Benjamin Millepied’s L.A. Dance Project and Art Production Fund. For two hours, nine dancers explore the house and grounds where Johnson lived with his partner, David Whitney, largely in secrecy, concealing their homosexuality from the world in a glass box.

Moving down the driveway, we encounter a man dressed in blue, encircled by a stone wall. He is stern, angry about something. He reaches for a knee, raises an arm, and takes his hands to his ears, the motions like accents to an unheard conversation. Walking further along, we find another man standing on a ledge and notice that he is repeating the same movements as the man in the circle. They look intently at one another.

The two people who were on the hill reappear, still standing feet apart, though closer than before. Distances seem to lessen as we approach the house, whose glass walls invite our voyeurism. In the sparsely furnished living room, a woman stands and a man sits on the floor. “9pm,” she says. They snap their fingers, hit their chests, constantly twisting their bodies. “The smell of cigarettes,” she says. “She threw her ring at you like clockwork,” he says.
There are three couples and one threesome, with each relationship guided by its own clock. As we choose which dancers to follow inside and around the house, they tell and describe time (“11pm: your second margarita”; “10pm: time to get the fire going”; “4am: You asked, ‘do Icelandic girls go down on people?’”; “11pm: You wiped your lipstick all over my hand towel”). The formula can feel overbearing and the dialogue sometimes trite, but the dancers are convincing in their performance as they become slaves to time. Each group sticks to 12 different movements, lending a repetitive and nervous energy to their dancing. “They use this physical tool to draw out memories based on the hours of a day,” Kelly informs me later. “Modernity has shaped our most intimate experience by certain timings. This includes our relationships.”

Yet the dancers’ dialogue is uncensored, vulnerable, impassioned — straining to break out of the mold they’ve entered. In previous works, Gerard and Kelly have explored the expectations we impose upon relationships, the differences between contrived and uninhibited forms of intimacy. Those lines are constantly being blurred here, and are mirrored by the setting. “Every room … a transit to another room,” reads a distributed floor plan of the Glass House. The building, like relationships and clocks, is structured like an endless cycle, a place where you can find release but that also binds you. We often say the things we are otherwise afraid to say, or are angry or sad about — the things we tend to keep inside — in the home. Like a relationship, it creates structure, a system of support for the part of ourselves we can no longer stand to contain.

As the performance progresses, however, this sense of safety seems to waver. The dancers frantically weave in and out of the house, developing a symbiotic but toxic relationship with it, oscillating between rigidity and freedom, intimacy and distance.

Gerard has said that Modern Living, a two-part series, is designed to “open … queer spaces up” by reinhabiting them. Prior to the Glass House, the dancers performed at the Schindler House, a dwelling in West Hollywood that once housed two families and is considered a failed experiment in communal living. In addition to being home to atypical relationships, these buildings embody, in Kelly’s words, the “harder moment of modernism” the duo is interested in. Spaces that are generally clean, polished, bare, and clear become messy, filled with memory, disrupted by bodies and noise.

The Glass House seems to wear many façades: Those of Johnson’s sexuality and architecture, but also his politics — he was a Nazi sympathizer, a fact that has largely been kept under the rug. In a puzzling closing sequence, the dancers emerge dressed in black, hard-edged suits designed by Uri Minkoff; Kelly has described them as “fascistic.” The dancers move their bodies like the hands of a clock before breaking loose, dancing and goofily
contorting their faces to what sounds like Berlin club music (composed by SOPHIE). They are released from
the strictures of time and regimented life — but the reference to Johnson’s politics feels tenuous, if not forced.
Afterward, the dancers rush outside to the edge of the hill on which the Glass House sits. In trying to reinhabit
Johnson’s house, they have found catharsis and unleashed the pent-up secrets of the place. In complete silence,
they turn their backs to the house — a space, it seems, that is no longer habitable.

Gerard & Kelly’s Modern Living took place at the Glass House (199 Elm St, New Canaan, CT) on May 13 and 14.