



Reflections on Glass Houses

Noam M. Elcott

0696, 2006

I. A LENS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Among the countless reflections and refractions that layer the often impenetrable photographs in James Welling's *Glass House* (2006–09), one figure is conspicuously absent: James Welling. The glass panes that once revealed or reflected the visages and silhouettes of Philip Johnson, the house's architect, and Andy Warhol, one its frequent guests, refuse—seemingly in defiance of the laws of optics—to yield the reflection of their most recent and multifarious chronicle. Welling's *0696* (2006), among the earliest images in the series, is a fully frontal photograph taken from the far side of the house looking back toward the Brick House and the street. The most proximate glass wall reflects the trunks, branches, autumnal leaves, and sky behind Welling, but the photographer himself vanishes. One may expect to find Welling in *5912* (2008). Yet he is cloaked in a bright reflection (or prismatic refraction) that radiates not from the Glass House, but from a transparent pane interposed between the structure and the camera. If we catch a glimpse of him, crouching behind his tripod, in the Glass House's door within a door in *0467* (2009), it is merely the set-up for his eventual disappearance in *8167* (2009). In the antiquated and recently vogueish language of magicians, *0467* is the pledge or the

set-up: Welling's silhouette is clearly visible within a completely transparent structure. *6075* (2008) is the turn: with the click of a camera, he suddenly vanishes. But the real trick arrives only at the conclusion or the prestige: the photographer reappears not *in* but *as* the Glass House. "A lens in the landscape" is how Welling described Johnson's glass box, but he might as well have been speaking of himself.

Welling can afford to occlude his own image because the Glass House serves as his double. As Johnson learned from his mentor and collaborator Mies van der Rohe:

The multiple reflections on the 18' pieces of plate glass, which seem superimposed on the view through the house, help give the glass a type of solidity; a direct Miesian aim which he expressed twenty-five years ago: "I discovered by working with actual glass models that the important thing is the play of reflections and not the effect of light and shadow as in ordinary buildings."¹

Johnson chose these words to accompany the most captivating photograph in his pathbreaking essay of 1950 detailing the influences on his new home. The photograph of the north end of the

63



5912, 2008

west wall depicts Johnson reading at his desk. More importantly, the giant pane of glass absorbs the entire landscape and sweeping trees onto its reflective surface—what Johnson irreverently referred to as “very expensive wallpaper.” Welling’s photographs are no latter-day rehearsal of Mies’s thesis or Johnson’s 1950 article. Welling does not merely document the reflections and refractions endlessly engendered by the Glass House. Rather, he creates his own reflections by photographing through a range of colored filters, clear or fogged plastics, pieces of clear, uneven, or tinted glass, and a diffraction filter that breaks light into spectra. These filters point to the panes of glass that constitute Johnson’s house as well as to the photographic lenses that mount Welling’s many cameras. Welling’s photographs multiply the “lens in the landscape” that is the Glass House by a factor of three: the house, the filters, and the camera itself. Welling’s visage need not appear in the reflective surfaces of the Glass House. The reflections and refractions of his many filters occupy the Glass House from within.

II. MODERNISM WITH A SENSE OF HISTORY

Modern architecture began as a multifaceted movement—at once utopian and banal—aimed at the creation of a new society through new forms and new technologies. As a rule, the word “style” was assiduously avoided during the movement’s rise in Europe in the 1920s. Modern architecture fancied itself not a style, but a constellation of convictions: truth to materials (in particular, glass, steel, and reinforced concrete) and the logic of construction, pleasure linked to purpose, and architecture as a social palliative, if not panacea. The transformation of Modern architecture from a movement to a style was repeatedly punctuated by the words and deeds of Philip Johnson. The first such moment arrived in 1932, when, as the young founding curator of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, Johnson helped introduce American audiences to what he—and Henry-Russell Hitchcock—dubbed the International Style. (The insistence on capitalization appears to have been that of founding MoMA director Alfred Barr.) Whatever the adjective—Johnson and Hitchcock also availed themselves of “contemporary” and “current”—the modified noun was invariably “style.” The ramifications of this turn to style were drawn early on. As Johnson later reminisced about the publication that accompanied the exhibition: “One of the points

65



0467, 2009

that the book made was a key one—that the Modern movement was a ‘style’ similar to Gothic or Baroque, and it was that point which caused the objections from practicing architects.”²

The second moment was less descriptive than demonstrative. MoMA’s *International Style* exhibition (1932) was the work of a young curator, critic, and historian. Johnson would wait nearly a decade to return to Harvard to earn an architecture degree and begin to put his words into architectural practice. His first major statement—a pair of houses on his own five-acre plot of land in New Canaan, Connecticut—distilled Mies’s brand of Modernism now unburdened by social or monetary constraints, bureaucratic hurdles or recalcitrant clients. The result—completed in 1949 after three years of design work—was at once the summa and end of Modern architecture. Glass House—coupled with the Brick House—was the *reductio ad perfectum* of the materials from which Modern architecture had sprung. This culmination, however, was also a capitulation to the evolution of style. Henceforth, for Johnson, the Modern movement was a “style” like any other. As he expanded his New Canaan estate, he would repeatedly raid the history of architecture—a history in which he was exceptionally well versed—for inspiration.

And if the Modern movement was singled out at all, it was primarily for a lethal dose of derision couched as architectural whimsy.

The first major architectural addition to Johnson’s estate—and the only other structure to receive serious photographic attention by Welling—was the pavilion erected in 1962 in an artificial lake surveyed from above by the Glass House. Designed to free him from the shackles of Modernism, Johnson’s Lake Pavilion was made of concrete—the most significant Modern material absent from the Glass House—but it unabashedly revived Classical forms. As if this sacrilegious combination were not bad enough, the structure’s notoriety derived primarily from its scale. Although it is impossible to discern when the pavilion is viewed from the Glass House or in Welling’s photographs, it is rendered in three-quarter scale (its ostensible inspiration, the dwarves’ quarters in the Renaissance ducal palace of Mantua), such that an adult must crouch down to navigate its densely pillared platforms. Johnson described the structure as a “folly,” and accompanied by the artificial lake and its soaring fountain, it helped marginalize him from “serious” architects on college campuses during the 1960s and early 1970s. Critical interest was revived in the late 1970s, as postmodernists

67



belatedly recognized Johnson's practice as an essential—if questionable—break with Modernism. By 1984, when he crowned his 647-foot-tall AT&T building with a neo-Georgian pediment (more immediately identifiable as oversized Chippendale furniture), Johnson had become the public face of a reactionary postmodernism. This heady, conflicted, postmodernist cauldron was the precise milieu that greeted Welling, a young graduate of California Institute of the Arts, when he first exhibited in New York in the early 1980s. And it served as the backdrop against which Welling would define his own postmodernist project as “something like redoing Modernism, but with a sense of history.”³

The phrase is something of a contradiction in terms. Early twentieth-century avant-gardes declared an absolute rupture with the past. F. T. Marinetti spoke for many avant-garde artists when in 1909 he exclaimed: “Do you, then, wish to waste all your best powers in this eternal and futile worship of the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, shrunken, beaten down?”⁴ Modernism meant the negation of the past, an annihilation of history. How could one hope to redo Modernism, but with a sense of history?

Johnson's Glass House—the structure and the estate—can be seen as one attempt to answer this question. The Glass House embodies a Modernism born not of necessity, ideology, or functionality, but rather of exhibitions, books—in a word: history. Where Modernists fancied themselves creators *ex nihilo*, Johnson's 1950 essay on the Glass House eagerly cited source after source, from the Acropolis and Karl Friedrich Schinkel to Le Corbusier and Mies. Johnson turned his estate into something of a personal museum, or in his words, the “diary of an eccentric architect.” In a 1970 *TIME Magazine* article entitled “The Duke of Xanadu at Home,” art critic Robert Hughes emphasized that, “most of all, in Johnson's view, people need a sense of history.”⁵

Welling's recent return to the Glass House—no longer occupied by Johnson, but instead operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation—is a historical revisitation of Modernism with a sense of history. But rather than spiral into a metahistory of Modernism and its historicization, Welling's photographs provide glimpses of another Modernism, one occluded by the house's transparent panes. Rather than Modernism as a historical style, *à la* Johnson, Welling's photographs imbue Modern architecture with a sense of history, one which its own ahistorical tenets forced it to deny.



0775, 2006

III. FROM TRANSPARENCY TO RADIANCE, OR, MODERNISM IN REVERSE

A traditional Modernist genealogy of the Glass House follows the bread crumbs left by Mies in his Farnsworth House (1945–51), through Pierre Chareau’s *Maison de Verre* (1928–32), all the way back to Joseph Paxton’s *Crystal Palace* (1851). One might add Walter Gropius’s *Dessau Bauhaus* (1925–26) or the *Galérie des machines* (1889) and the other great glass and iron constructions clustered around world exhibitions in the late nineteenth century. The story remains the same. The maxim is light, air, openness—in a word, transparency.

But that narrative—the narrative of Modern architecture, where the beauty and function of industrial design is judiciously, if belatedly, adopted by architectural pioneers—proves myopic and amnesiac. The 1914 *Werkbund* exhibition in Cologne, for example, is widely understood to be a watershed moment in the history of Modern architecture. But in “the Modern Movement’s view of its own history,” as Reyner Banham pegged the writings of Sigfried Giedion, the *Werkbund* exhibition triumphs because of the transparent glass curtain wall and glass staircase erected by Gropius and Adolf Meyer as a development of their work on the *Fagus shoe factory* (1911–13). Equally important, however, was Bruno Taut’s pavilion

for the glass manufacturing industry, inspired by and dedicated to the fantastical novelist and glass architecture evangelist Paul Scheerbart. This temporary structure—famously named the *Glass House*—incorporated glass brick construction, colored glass mosaic walls, colored glass plates laid into the concrete exterior, and was crowned by a prismatic, multicolored glass dome. Couplets by Scheerbart decorated the narrow architrave beneath the dome, which in turn answered Scheerbart’s dictat, issued in the most important glass manifesto to date, *Glass Architecture* (1914), which he dedicated to Taut: “Not more light!—‘more colored light!’ must be the watchword.”⁶ This direct repudiation of Goethe’s famous last words could also have been directed at Gropius and the Modern emphasis on transparency that would soon overtake the multicolored Expressionism advocated by Scheerbart and Taut.

At the surface, Welling’s photographs restore color to the center of the avant-garde preoccupation with glass: refraction instead of transparency, prisms in lieu of plates, Romantic radiance in place of scientific enlightenment, spectral dispersion rather than unified clarity, crystals not glass. *0775* (2006) dispenses an artificial rainbow across Mies’s famous *Barcelona chairs* and couch,

71

the reflective surface of the glass and steel coffee table, the white carpet, and the grass that surrounds the Glass House. *9818* (2009) forgoes any naturalistic associations and superimposes upon the Glass House a flayed pyramid of yellow, red, and violet facets. At its apex, a yellow solar oculus—as if marking the cultic site of an ancient sun god—pierces the clouds and is mirrored, at the bottom center, by one end of a prismatic spectrum that splits sunlight into its constituent visible lengths. Even as the top right corner retains the naturalistic coloring of contemporary digital photography, the Glass House is converted from a transparent box into a lustrous crystal, and from a minimalist articulation of materials and construction to a maximalist expression of colored light.

IV. TINTED PHOTOGRAPHS

As a young artist, Welling worked in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, first as an art handler, and eventually as a photographer. In the late 1980s, he began to photograph the buildings of H. H. Richardson, a late nineteenth-century architect. Uncanny architecture figures prominently into his Los Angeles nightscapes (1976–78). But Welling is not, by training or habit, an architectural photographer. Rather, he takes his measure from the history of photography, its subjects and genres, technologies and techniques. Early twentieth-century artists believed fervently in their own radical originality. This *legerdemain*—whereby all precedents and predecessors magically disappeared—was the foundational act of the avant-garde. Welling’s Modernism with a sense of history is, at least in part, the continued exploration of medium and technology, form and signification, without the pretense of creation *ex nihilo*. More than Modernism with a sense of modesty, Welling’s insistence on history allows him to extract meaning from the historical embeddedness of media, forms, genres, and technologies, all the way down the line.

In *Glass House*, Welling not only takes on the history of Modern architecture, but also grapples more powerfully, if less directly, with



the history of photography. *Glass House* grew out of a previous project, *Hexachromes* (2005), which developed from the trichromatic basis of human vision and color photography. In the *Hexachromes*, a single photograph is composed of multiple exposures with up to six filters; subtle movements induced by wind and furtive shadows that move across the visual field create delicate variations that appear in striking, colorful contrast. The *Hexachromes* defamiliarize the color photographic processes that we readily accept as all too natural.

Color photography, like most media technologies, can be deployed across a range of applications. At one pole are techniques of verisimilitude: colors that approximate the images we expect to see with our own eyes. Invariably, these familiar applications produce an excess or the potential for excess, for example, supersaturated colors more vivid than anything experienced in everyday life. This excess is often packaged as spectacle—think of the Technicolor landscapes of *The Wizard of Oz*, where there is little “natural” color in the yellow brick road or the ruby slippers. The *Hexachromes* succeed by forcing these two poles—verisimilitude and spectacle—into open and dynamic tension.

Glass House functions differently. Here, the claims to naturalistic color are few. *0806* (2006) creates the impression of a sunset perhaps only moderately enhanced so as to rival the fireballs of great Westerns. *0818* (2006) offers green trees, yellow sun, and blue skies. But these colors seem positively cartoonish compared to the “unfiltered” red bricks, green grass, and brown leaves at the bottom of the image. Where the *Hexachromes* take on the “naturalness” of color photography, *Glass House* wrestles with its artificiality, its conventionality. *Glass House* revels in color for color’s sake, spectacle rather than verisimilitude. The addition of colored filters opens the door of the Glass House to the history of spectacular color—not only in architecture, but in photography and film as well.

In the same moment that Bruno Taut and members of the Crystal Chain envisioned architecture as a lustrous cathedral, a polyphonic symphony of color, filmmakers worldwide worked to remedy the lack of color film stock through various postproduction tinting and toning processes. The results were never consistent, but certain conventions predominated: yellow or brown tinting for indoors and out, red for fire, and most fascinating of all, blue for nighttime or darkness. Limited photosensitivity required that all



filming be done in full daylight (later, powerful electric light); nighttime shooting was not an option. The solution was to tint supposedly nocturnal sequences blue—ostensibly in an approximation of the moon’s bluish light. Film tinting could lay claim to a limited naturalism: sunshine tends to be yellow, fire red, moonlight blue. But flashes of red also served spectacular ends in the civil war battles of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), just as deep blue added an air of mystery to the gratuitous violence and righteous sleuthing in Louis Feuillade’s *Fantômas* films (1913–14).

Intentionally or not, Welling’s *Glass House* photographs pick up where silent film left off. *8067* (2008) and *8050* (2008) convincingly set the Glass House aflame, as if the Yankees or Klansmen have just done fiery battle. *4580* (2007) collapses yellow and sunshine and takes up the historical confusion whereby yellow also signified interiors. This chromo-cinematic collapse of interior and exterior could find no better home than the Glass House, that space in which Frank Lloyd Wright famously did not know whether to take his hat off or leave it on. In Welling’s photograph, the refraction at the top left mimics conventional renderings of the sun’s rays, further confusing the natural and the artificial. This collapse of interior and

exterior is initiated by the glass walls and their foliage reflections, but it is enhanced by the uniform yellow that levels the color palettes of bedroom dressers and forest canopy. Rather than anchor our faith in naturalistic color, the hint of blue at the top right forces us to question the motivation of every speck of color: are we looking at blue sky or merely sky blue?

For the blue of *5500* (2008) most certainly is not the blue of the sky. Claims to the bluish hue of moonlight are betrayed by piercing rays of sunlight (not dissimilar to the strong shadows of much day-for-night shooting, also known as *la nuit américaine*). But the most spectacular attractions are reserved for images like *6109* (2008), where a blue filter and positive-negative reversal create an uncanny forest of white trees, incandescent rocks, and black skies straight out of the haunted woodlands of F. W. Murnau’s inaugural vampire film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922). Naturalism is shown the door in favor of fantasy as Bauhaus transparency gives way to Expressionist terror. If “The Glass House” were the title of a horror flick, *6109* could be its movie poster.

Many of the photographs in *Glass House*—the better part of the Lake Pavilion images, for instance—exhibit colors that adhere





6109, 2008

neither to the dicta of naturalism, nor to any media conventions. But, in the works addressed above, color is neither wholly unmoored from its subject, nor firmly secured to its referents. Between these two poles—what semioticians might call arbitrary and motivated signs—lies history. At various historical moments, certain colors carry specific significations and specific physical properties—each of which can appear mutable and transient, but not infinitely so. Contemporary equivalents of early twentieth-century filmic tinting can be found in color renderings of Hubble Space Telescope photographs taken outside the visible spectrum, or to choose an example closer to Welling's own practice, magnetic resonance and other medical imaging technologies. Where early film stock captured an impoverished part of the electromagnetic spectrum, visual data now arrives from parts of the spectrum well outside visible light. In either case, however, the application of color is neither completely arbitrary nor wholly motivated. Color's ambivalent hold on reality is revealed by Welling through a firm grip on history.

V. MULTI-COLORED GLASS HOUSE

The positive-negative reversal employed in *6109* is among the few digital manipulations in a series constituted exclusively by digital photographs printed with inkjet printers. Welling's intervention—and in this regard he is swimming against the tide of art and commercial photographic practices—lies almost exclusively in the manipulation of that which lies before the camera. And yet unlike fashion or film shoots, or a certain branch of contemporary photographic art, Welling does not reconfigure his photographic subject: he does not dress up the Glass House to look younger or older, add or eliminate trees to accentuate the vistas, nor rearrange Mies's furniture in a sly overture toward an historical episode; all this was done by Johnson himself or by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Welling's intervention lies neither in postproduction, nor, properly speaking, in *mis-en-scène*. Instead, his intervention resides primarily in the manipulation of that which mediates between the subject and the photosensitive receptors: light. And this insistence on the manipulation of light through colored filters inextricably links Welling's photographs to the ultimate photographic glass house: the nineteenth-century portrait studio.

79



Until the invention and commercial manufacture of panchromatic film in the early twentieth century, diverse photographic plates exhibited variable photosensitivities across the electromagnetic spectrum. On the whole, Daguerreotypes, calotypes, wet collodion, and other early photographic processes proved much more sensitive to the blue than the red end of the visible spectrum. Tomatoes and oranges often appeared black; a cloud speckled sky, uniformly white. The imbalanced sensitivity of photography, however, also had its advantages, not least of which was darkroom safety lights. Well-appointed nineteenth-century darkrooms invariably included a window of reasonable size, facing north to avoid direct sunlight, and outfitted with several panes of colored glass: red, orange, yellow, green, or some combination thereof, depending on the precise photographic process utilized and the predilections of the individual photographer. So long as the actinic rays—that is, those rays which produce a photochemical effect—were removed, a photographer could carry out darkroom work by sunlight.

This darkroom principle held equally, if invertedly, in the portrait studio as well. Aspiring photographic portraitists were encouraged to erect glass studios—or, to use the nineteenth-century parlance, glass houses—atop an urban building or on an undeveloped

rural site. In either case, northern exposure was preferred and sophisticated systems of shades and scrims were installed to avoid direct sunlight. Yellow or green—let alone orange or red—glass was strongly discouraged, as these colors would only lengthen what were already uncomfortably long sittings. Conversely, a fad emerged among early photographic studios to tint the atelier glass cobalt blue, as photographic plates were known to be more sensitive to the blue end of the spectrum. (Naturally, the total amount of actinic light was diminished by this effort and the practice was eventually abandoned. For a time, however, and this is the crucial point, professional photographic portrait studios were recognizable as multicolored glass houses. These glass houses manipulated neither subject nor image (though this was *de rigueur* at any portrait studio worthy of the name), but rather that which mediated between the two: once again, light.

Welling transforms Johnson's Glass House into its nineteenth-century photographic forbear—a conversion made all the easier given the architect's sophisticated system of scrims and shades, as evident in *5237* (2008). Functionally, of course, a complete and perfect inversion has taken place. Rather than construct a colored glass house to make black-and-white photographs, Welling mobilizes

a transparent glass house to create multicolored photographs. The inversion is also a form of externalization.

In the nineteenth century, photography was overwhelmingly an art of the darkroom. For example, wet collodion plates, as the name suggests, lost their sensitivity when dry. Photography out in the field, therefore, necessitated a portable darkroom—usually a more or less elaborate tent, though extended photographic journeys were often accompanied by a horse drawn photographic wagon. Roland Barthes' late twentieth-century insistence on the chemical—rather than optical—foundation of photography would have met resounding approval among nineteenth-century amateurs and professionals. With the popularization of Kodak cameras at the end of the century, “you press a button, we do the rest”, mainstream photographic processing shifted from amateur, artisanal practice to specialized, industrial product. But the processing site—as Tacita Dean's recent film *Kodak* (2006) makes clear—consequently became even more specialized. Digital photography has largely, though not entirely, put an end to photochemistry and the sites of photo-processing. Dean's 16mm film is an elegy. Tellingly, not film but brown paper runs through the Kodak plant during her shoot.

Welling prints the *Glass House* photographs directly from his camera using inkjet printers. Safety lights, developers, and actinic rays have been excised; the sites of photographic processing have been elided. Or rather, they have been externalized. Welling transforms the Glass House—that paragon of cool, transparent Modernism—into a nineteenth-century photographic studio with its clear or blue glass house and its red, yellow, orange, or green darkroom. The colored filters are all that remain of the highly choreographed production of nineteenth-century photographs, but they suffice. Dean's film is a nostalgic, if blunt, ode to a dying practice. Her film is shot and projected in 16mm in order to accentuate the preciousness of the loss. Unlike Dean's *Kodak*, or Philip Johnson's Glass House, Welling's photographs are neither nostalgic nor preservationist. Quite the contrary. They take a Modernism widely considered monolithic and embalmed, and breathe into it the complexity and contradiction that marked its most salient moments. That breath is color. The watchword is Modernism with a sense of history. Welling understandably views the Glass House as a metaphoric lens in the landscape, but in his hands, it speaks even more profoundly as a literal, multicolored glass house.

VI. ANTI-PROCESSIONAL VIDEOGRAPHY

84

In his commentary on Philip Johnson's 1965 essay "Whence and Whither: The Processional Element in Architecture," as it was republished in *Phillip Johnson Writings* in 1979, Robert A. M. Stern wrote:

The false lure of photography is a theme Johnson returns to from time to time. Much as he admires the very cool, super-real photography of Ezra Stoller (he used to say that no building of his was "official" until it had been "Stollerized"), he, like his colleague, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, is critical of those who judge buildings from photographs, and, like Hitchcock, he almost never comments on a building he has not seen at firsthand, that is, experienced "processionally."⁷

Processional architecture, according to Johnson, is a game of hide and reveal; an unfolding not only in space, but also in time; anticipation and revelation, arrivals and departures. As he expanded the New Canaan property, Johnson moved the driveway. But the final approach to the Glass House retained its essential quality: never head on, the diagonal advance provides a perspective revealing the depth of the building. Inspired by Auguste Choisy's turn-of-the-century analysis of the Acropolis, wherein the orientation of the Propylaea in relation to the Parthenon ensures that visitors

immediately perceive three corners of the temple and thus conceive it in its full depth, Johnson did the Acropolis one better. Speeding their way along the wooded road, visitors first fully apprehend the Glass House on foot, just to the left of the perspective adopted in *0865* (2009). In addition to the most proximate corner and the two corners to either side, namely, the three corners also visible in the Parthenon, a visitor can peer *through* the structure and *see*—rather than merely conceive—the fourth corner as well. It is as if Johnson provides the visitor with x-ray vision or presents a building and its blueprints simultaneously. And yet no single view—not even the omnibus view first presented—constitutes the processional aspect Johnson demanded. "Architecture exists only in *time*,"⁸ he exclaimed. Instantaneous photography and architecture are forever at odds.

But what about a *series* of photographs? What about a film or video? Like Johnson, the great Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein builds on Choisy's analysis. Eisenstein asks us to look at Choisy's text with the eye of a filmmaker: "[I]t is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one which our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis."⁹ Might Welling's *series* of photographs

pages 85–88, 90
Lake Pavilion, 2009









and two videos of the Glass House estate comprise the processional aspect demanded by Johnson?

As Welling has readily admitted, “One of the problems I have with the house as a piece of architecture is that, although it is symmetrical and the front is the same as the back, I work with very few views of it. I use a frontal view primarily (because you can see through the house), and occasionally I can get something out of a diagonal view.”¹⁰ Welling gives the viewer almost nothing by way of hide and reveal, approaches or departures. If anything, he actively negates the processional aspects embedded in the landscape surrounding the Glass House. However one describes the photographs (Cubism, Orphism, Expressionism all seem approximations, at best), they are resolutely frontal, even when shot at an angle. The intervening filters and prisms—coupled with the natural reflections of the Glass House—create facet planes that flatten the visual field, often leaving one stranded at the surface. This is the source of their tendency to impenetrability.

The choice to abandon the processional is telling. Modern housing projects—affordable, uniform, prefabricated housing

for the masses—unfold according to their own processional logic. As Sigfried Giedion described the houses in Le Corbusier’s 1920s workers’ settlement in Pessac, near Bordeaux: “Still photography does not capture them clearly. One would have to accompany the eye as it moves: only film can make the new architecture intelligible!”¹¹ The industrially produced and disseminated mass-medium of film had a unique purchase on industrially fabricated and propagated housing for the masses.

Johnson’s processional architecture is of an entirely different nature. At the Glass House estate, picturesque vistas, hide and reveal pathways, private studies, galleries for paintings and sculptures, whimsical pavilions, and an imposing entrance gate all speak to the individual or a small entourage. The masses can visit the Acropolis and they did. Pessac still houses workers. The Glass House estate, however, was built as a private retreat; contemporary tour groups remain intimate. The Glass House is an elite affair and always was. Processional architecture, as developed at the Glass House estate, is akin to that of eighteenth-century English baronial mansions. The “Duke of Xanadu” is not quite specific enough a moniker.



Welling's rejection of processional Modern architecture—whether for the masses or the elites—is evident in his photographs, and even more so in his two videos, *Lake Pavilion* (2009) and *Sun Pavilion* (2010).¹² The videos were shot with a Canon G6 camera—that is, a still camera with limited low-definition video capability. (Welling had previously shot and rejected high-definition footage.) As with the photographs, he shot them through a range of colored gels and a diffraction filter, further muddying the crystal clear image we have come to expect from even amateur video.

The structure of *Lake Pavilion* is simple: fade in from monochromatic cyan blue to the Glass House, perched on a bluff overlooking the lake and pavilion from which the video is shot; pan slowly down the hillside and across the surface of the lake; spend approximately five minutes exploring the pavilion and its most immediate surroundings; pan back up the hill to the Glass House; fade to cyan blue. But this simple structure is thwarted at every turn. Welling opens and closes with the Glass House, but at the core of the video, he flirts repeatedly with the picturesque view of Johnson's house, only to frustrate the viewer and stymie the

processional stroll. Every time the Glass House should appear, it is blocked by the pavilion's concrete pillars or the glare of the blinding sunlight. Without a human in the picture, there is no way to detect the three-quarter scale of Johnson's architectural "folly." Rather, the open yet claustrophobic space leaves its mark in the videography, which is more groping than sweeping, suspended uncomfortably between blindness and sudden visibility.

In Welling's hands, the *Lake Pavilion* becomes illegible architecture, rendered abstract by the camera angles, bleached out by the sun's vigor and the camera's debility, and colored by filters that selectively confuse the pavilion, the landscape, and the lake, as well as the surface of the water, the sheen of the filter, and the refractions of the camera lens. The ultimate resolution—a slow pan up the hillside revealing the Glass House in all its majesty—is so perfect as to be utterly unsatisfying. A parody of happy endings, the video loops back to the beginning and into the unhurried whirl of the unintelligible pavilion. Rather than Eisenstein, Welling channels Stan Brakhage. Brakhage in the age of YouTube. Welling rejects the revolutionary processions of the proletariat and the processional

ramble of patricians. His is a quieter revolution. Annette Michelson came close to naming it forty years ago in a passage that could just as well have described Welling (past and present):

Within the structure of our culture, ten-year-olds are now filming 8mm serials ... in their own backyards. This, perhaps is the single most interesting fact about cinema. Given the new accessibility of the medium, anything can happen. Astruc's dream of the camera as fountain pen is transcended, the camera becomes a toy, and the element of play is restored to cinematic enterprise. ... Here, I do believe, lies the excitement of cinema's future, its ultimate radical potential.¹³

Welling's videos are utterly individualistic, but also strangely democratic, or at the very least, populist—backyard video, if backyards had not been colonized by Hollywood and reality TV. *Lake Pavilion* and *Sun Pavilion* may not go viral, but they successfully inhabit Modern architecture from within, and in so doing, turn it against itself, invoking Modernism—with a sense of history.

- 1 Philip Johnson, "House at New Canaan, Connecticut" (1950). Reprinted in David Whitney and Jeffrey Kipnis, *Philip Johnson: The Glass House* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 13.
- 2 Philip Johnson, foreword to Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 16.
- 3 James Welling, "80's Then: James Welling Talks to Jan Tumlir," *Artforum* (April 2003): 255.
- 4 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909," *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), 23.
- 5 Robert Hughes, "The Duke of Xanadu at Home" (1970). Reprinted in Whitney and Kipnis, *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*, 56.
- 6 Paul Scheerbarth, *Glass Architecture*, ed. Dennis Sharp, trans. James Palmes (New York: Praeger, 1972), 72.
- 7 Robert A. M. Stern on Philip Johnson's "Whence and Whither: The Processional Element in Architecture" (1965). Reprinted in Whitney and Kipnis, *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*, 28.
- 8 Philip Johnson, "Whence and Whither: The Processional Element in Architecture" (1965). Reprinted in Whitney and Kipnis, *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*, 28.
- 9 Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," in *Sergei M. Eisenstein Selected Works, vol. 2: Towards a Theory of Montage*, ed. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor, trans. Michael Glenny (London: BFI and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 60.
- 10 Unpublished statement by James Welling, March 2010.
- 11 Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 176.
- 12 *Lake Pavilion* (2009), 6:15 minutes, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjIFdd-OP8M>
Sun Pavilion (2010), 4:30 minutes, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tow6eqr-ik>
- 13 Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration" (1966). Reprinted in *The Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 421.





4580, 2007

I extend my sincere thanks to Jody Quon at *New York Magazine* for first challenging me to photograph the Glass House differently; to everyone at the Glass House, Irene Allen, Susan Sayre Batton, Dorothy Dunn, Meri Erikson, Amy Grabowski, Christy MacLear, Martin Skrelunas, and Brendan Tobin, thank you so much for making my experience in New Canaan productive and enjoyable; to my studio team, Valerie Green, Lisa Ohlweiler, John Sisley, J. R. Valenzuela, and Farley Ziegler, thank you for everything you do to make my photographs possible; to Karen McHugh and Niki Mustain at Samy's Camera, and to my framer Russ Roberts at Art Services Melrose, thank you so very much for your help in printing, mounting, and framing the photographs.

To the galleries and exhibition spaces that showed *Glass House*, my deepest thanks: Galerie Nächst St. Stephan/Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, Elisabeth Madlener, Cornelia Offergeld, Erika Plattner, and Rosemarie Schwarzwälder; Galerie Nelson-Freeman, Cécile Barrault, Peter Freeman, and Luise Kaunert; Wako Works of Art, Renna Okubo, and Kiyoshi Wako; Regen Projects, Jennifer Loh and Shaun Caley Regen; David Zwirner, Justine Durrett,

Julia Joern, Hanna Schouwink, and David Zwirner; Donald Young Gallery, Stevie Greco, Emily Le Tourneau, and Donald Young; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, DeAnn Dankowski, Laura DeBiaso, Kaywin Feldman, David E. Little, and Jennifer Starbright; Maureen Paley, Susanna Chisholm, Oliver Evans, and Maureen Paley.

To Sylvia Lavin and to Noam Elcott, my continuing thanks for your enthusiasm and your knowledge. For this beautiful book, my heartfelt thanks to Alice Rose George for bringing me to Damiani; to Andrea Albertini and Enrico Costanza at Damiani Editore for your expertise in printing and publishing *Glass House*; to Lorraine Wild and Victor Hu my profound thanks for designing *Glass House*; to Denise Bratton for your intelligent care with the texts; and to Tony Manzella and Rusty Sena for your inspired work on the color separations.

Finally, to Jane Weinstock, as ever, I thank you for your vision.

95