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Space, Time, and a House by the Sea

Author(s): Vincent Honoré

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by the sea***



Irish-born artist Laura Gannon recently showed her latest video installation, a two-screen film work, at the Whitechapel Project Space, London. *A House in Cap-Martin* (2007) was shot in the seminal modernist house, E.1027, designed by Eileen Gray in 1929 and built in the south of France. The house quickly became a myth, both for its historical artistic importance and its long story of ownership claims, vandalism and even murder, until it was bought in 1999 by the French government and fenced off. The non-narrative and evocative film plays with dualities, temporalities and memories, making time its main setting, and turning space into a time investigation.

The following conversation took place in London in September 2007.

**Vincent Honoré:** The set in *A House in Cap-Martin* has a particular history. This monument of modern architecture, was designed by Eileen Gray in 1926 but, as the title of your work states (the title refuses to name the house), you are not illustrating this history (and its multiple stories). On the contrary, you keep a certain distance from the myth, from the house as a monument: you treat it as a habitat and in doing so you adopt a different angle from that of other filmmakers interested in Modernist architecture (Daria Martin or Ursula Mayer). At the same time, and opposite to what Pierre Huyghe did with Le Corbusier in *This not a time for dreaming*, you avoid the anecdote, be it your personal relationship to the house or the numerous legends surrounding it. How did you come across this building and why did you choose this particular distanced point of view?

Laura Gannon: Growing up in Ireland, I was always aware of Eileen Gray and the iconic photographs of E.1027. In a country not renowned for producing many international architects in the early twentieth century, E.1027 occupied a unique place in cultural history, as a house designed by an Irishwoman that addressed the modern movement. Its neglected state was occasionally referred to in cultural texts. Despite an ongoing campaign in the 1980s by various architects, the Irish government refused to purchase the house on behalf of the Irish state.

On October 25, 1999, the town of Roquebrune Cap-Martin and the French government – through a national agency, Conservatoire du Littoral – bought the villa. It is currently being restored with a planned opening in 2009. In 2000 the National Museum of Ireland purchased a collection of Eileen Gray's furniture; some of the pieces were designed specifically for E.1027. This purchase was considered to go some distance in reinstating the reputation of Eileen Gray.

I was curious to find out what happened to the house, and while visiting Cap-Martin in 2001, I tried to get access to the house. It was closed to the public. I often thought about the house subsequently and on a return visit to the area in 2005, I started to research how I could gain access to the property and find out about the ownership of the house. My films are set in site-specific architectural locations; a particular space can have a gestation time of three to four years in my mind before the work begins. I like giving the idea time to develop and seeing if it survives over the course of a few years. In this case the space that I had not even entered, but had just seen through the front gate, had firmly lodged in my mind. I was interested in the house's abandonment, the fact that its ownership was debated at international governmental level, yet it was in a state of in-between. In 2001, while there was a commitment to restore the building, the funds were not yet in place.

The neglected condition of the building clashed with the iconic image of a white house which remains intact in an often-reproduced black-and-white photograph. The house, built into a cliff, sitting still, high over a shimmering Mediterranean sea, is preserved in print complete with striped awnings over the windows and a lifebuoy attached to the gable wall, suggesting a play on a moored ship. These accessories are long gone, leaving a skeleton framework in their wake. In the film, I chose to work against the myth of the image and focus on the current condition of the house before restoration begins.

In my work I am interested in slippage, the things that happen to buildings and people that are failures, or out of synch with expectations. How time and memory often rewrite histories and how, through the layers, the original story is overwritten. E.1027 is perched above the Mediterranean, overlooking Monaco, and is only accessible by a public footpath, the location virtually unchanged since Gray discovered the site in the 1920s. The house's neglect and uninhabited state seemed out of synch with the location which suggests glamour, leisure and sensuality.

The house itself is accessed through a small gate, and a path leading down to the entrance is suggestive of a stage setting, a place of mixed histories and unfinished business.

The title for the work, *A House in Cap-Martin*, refers to how, when Le Corbusier published the murals he had painted in the house in his *Oeuvre complète* (1946) and in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (1948), Eileen Gray's house is referred to as "a house in Cap-Martin" – her name is not even mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

Did this house have a particular resonance with your creation as a female Irish artist? The house is now a ruin, and you're documenting this decay, the enduring history of violence and violation permeating the work of Eileen Gray, starting with the murals by Le Corbusier who – without her permission – decided to paint the walls of the house and even appropriated the ownership of this work. This house is the subject of some feminist approach: how did you react to these?

While I am documenting the decay of the building I am also interested in Gray's concepts for the house and the 'ghost' of this ideal in its original state. For many modernist architects the interior was of less relevance than the façade. Gray built E.1027 from the inside out. She also designed the furniture, the floor coverings and the wall hangings; her approach was about creating a complete inhabited space. This contrast to the clinical urban functionalism of modernism created a new way of living.

The house could be read first through its relationship with the body. Gray strove to heighten bodily awareness, providing a profusion of glinting materials in the bathroom – tiled walls, folding mirrors, porcelain sinks – whose cool surfaces provided a respite from the relentless Mediterranean sun. Such material palpability invoked a sense of the erotic, the sensual.

This film examines female creativity and a different understanding of space. I wanted to pull back from the existing feminist discourse and the debates about the presence of Le Corbusier's murals. I would have wanted to film this house even if the murals didn't exist.

There are five characters in your film, two women, two men and the house. Yet there is no narrativity per se; we perceive that each of them bears a symbolic weight, like a ghost memory haunting them. More precisely, the characters in your film are not acting like symbols, but like signs: they index a previous situation and an otherness. The two men echo Jean Badovici (the lover) and Le Corbusier (the thief or the rapper), while the two women echo Eileen Gray. The men are inside, they occupy the house and have a conversation about it, they rationalise it; the women are outside, they observe and one of them says a quote from Eileen Gray. In the film, the men and the women are separated and never meet.

E.1027 was designed and built by Eileen Gray for Jean Badovici and herself between 1926 and 1929. She named the house E.1027: *E* for *Eileen*, *10* for *J* (the tenth letter of the alphabet), *2* for *B* and *7* for *G*. They both lived there most of the summer months until Gray built her own house in Castellar in 1934.

The original concept of the film was to create a fictional revisit by Gray to the house. I wanted to have a character representing the older Gray revisiting the grounds of the house but never crossing the threshold to the interior.

As the visit didn't take place in reality, I wanted to use the fictional performance to 'enter' into the history of the house. As there is an extensive amount of architectural theory written about Le Corbusier's murals in the house and Grays's response, calling them vandalism. I wanted to create an opening in an already heavily mediated story. The story itself has become a myth, as there is little written by the protagonists.

By fictionalising Gray's revisit to the house, the character's old age echoes the deterioration of the building and the disintegration of the pristine finish.

At a later stage I decided to have male characters in the interior. It evolved from the idea of playing with temporality. Badovici, Le Corbusier and Gray were peers from the same generation. By choosing two middle-aged men to suggest the characters of Badovici and Le Corbusier, while choosing a significantly older woman to take the part of Gray, the characters are no longer occupying the same time and temporality. This may suggest that they are trapped within time and the building while Gray has left, moved on.

Although the two male characters are engaged in a discussion, the viewer never gets to hear what they are saying. The only audible spoken words are from Gray's character who states, "Il y a un chemin vers le haut et un chemin vers le bas. Le chemin d'en haut et le chemin d'en bas ne sont qu'une seule et meme route" ("there is a road which leads upwards and there is a road which leads downward. Both are one and the same").<sup>2</sup>

I would agree that there are five characters in the film; however, the second female is a representation of Grays's long-time housekeeper and companion, Louise. This figure is not meant to represent Gray. This woman was an unplanned fifth character. She was actually the clapperboard woman on set and was caught in the frame next to the Le Corbusier mural. I debated about her inclusion as she had made an unintentional appearance. I also thought that her role as housekeeper-companion shed a chink of light on Gray's background as an Irish-Scottish aristocrat.



Laura Gannon  
*A house in Cap-Martin*, 2007  
film stills  
courtesy the artist

*A House in Cap-Martin* is essentially based on a series of metaphors and images: resurgences, pairing, echoes. The surface of a tree echoing the skin of the older woman, echoing the walls in the house. Beyond the narrativity, the work is formally rich: fading, repetitions, marks on the film, the sound of the sea during the whole movie. How important was the notion of time and its capturing in your project?

The film originally was conceived as a one-screen work. During the editing process, a shift took place, in order to accommodate the placement of the characters. A duality in the narrative is created by the two screens shown side by side. There is a division between exterior, interior, time, age, male and female.

**38** Although Le Corbusier painted eight murals in the house, only one features prominently in the film. When it appears it is what I call an interruption, it flashes in silence in and out of the screen.

It also appears in both screens at different times, breaking with the structure of opposites (male, female, interior, exterior). The woman standing beside the mural thus appears in both screens, breaking through the structure of left screen – exterior, female; right screen – interior, male.

The notion of time is the backbone around which the work is built. The effects of time are evident throughout the work. Breaking down linear time is an important element of the film, both by changing the age gap between the characters and by having Gray 'revisit' in old age. The edit choices echo this. The fading and the repetitions are included to reinforce the effects of time in the building and the protagonists. While it is obvious that the female figure in the left screen is aged, the flashes and fades in the film also point to mortality and fallibility.

The slowing down of the speed of the film in the right screen removes the male characters from the now. They occupy another time which is not defined, as they themselves are not; they are suggestive of spectres destined to repeat their gestures remaining trapped in the interior.

I also wanted to make oblique references to modernist history. The single tree in the entrance yard of the house is a reference to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and this reference, I believe, is evoked in the suggestion of time held in stasis and again reinforces the idea of repeated gestures and being trapped in time and memory.

Indeed, you firmly link space and time. Is time the space, the setting of this film, one could even say of most of your projects (*Sala della musica*, 2004–7)?

That is a good way of describing it; the time is the space and the space is time. They are a single and double entity that I stage my work around.

The off-frame and ellipse are extremely important in the film; they structure the film. How do they resonate together?

The off-frame operates as a device to remind the viewer that no story is a straight one-dimensional narrative; equally there is more than one character involved with the existence of E.1027. This device hints at unsolved histories, a layering of events that have taken place over time and have contributed to the current energy of the house.

As the house is familiar and 'recognised' by one famous iconic photograph, the framing of the film is intentional, in showing details of the house rather than a long shot. The viewer never directly sees the situation of the house within a wider frame that would give exact information of its geographical location.

The viewer is invited to examine the here and now of a building in decline and in doing so, is aligning the reality with the myth.

Vincent Honoré is a Paris-based independent curator whose previous positions include curator at Tate Modern and Palais de Tokyo.

- 1 Peter Adam, *Eileen Gray: Architect/ Designer*, Harry N Abrams, 2000, p 33–335. No caption of the photographs of the murals published in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* mentions Eileen Gray. In subsequent publications, the house is either simply described as "Maison Badovici" or credited directly to him. The first recognition of Gray in architecture since the twenties came from Joseph Rykwert, 'Eileen Gray: pioneer of design', *Architectural Review*, December 1972, pp 357–361.
- 2 This was one of Gray's notes; see Adam, op cit, p 378.