Sarah Morris
Sarah Morris continues her investigations of the built environment, and of the connections and power structures that shape it, in her recent film, *Points on a Line*. The film utilizes several buildings designed by two of the best-known figures of twentieth-century architecture: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), a pioneer in the development of the International Style, and Philip Johnson (1906–2005), one of the foremost early champions of modernist architecture and later a practicing architect whose own work encompassed modernist and postmodernist designs.

At the center of Morris’s film are the Glass House, designed by Johnson as his own residence in New Canaan, Connecticut, and the Farnsworth House, designed by Mies as a country home for a Chicago doctor, Edith Farnsworth, in Plano, Illinois. Both are among the major landmarks of modern architecture, and their similarities, differences, influences, and controversies have been discussed and debated since their completion, in 1949 and 1951, respectively. Morris’s film questions the notions of authorship and originality while exploring the social and political underpinnings of the architectural codes that surround us.
A sprightly bird pesters a hawk sitting, almost stoically, on a branch. Probably annoyed, the hawk still bears the inconvenience. Later, two sets of feet square off under a table. One pair taps the ground in frustration then pushes off.

Animals infrequently communicate to humans in words, and often, people may obfuscate their own motives and agendas. And yet, both of these images of interrelationship—depicted in detail in Points on a Line, a 2010 film by Sarah Morris centered on the story of two architects, Philip Johnson and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe—offer a compound set of lenses with which to reflect on a greater parable of precedent and partnership.

Our stage begins with Philip Johnson, a dashing man, born of means. With no immediate need to get to work after his Harvard education, our curious student embarked on tours of Europe to polish his cosmopolitan profile. After visits to Chartres Cathedral, the Pantheon, and so on, Johnson began to foster an awareness of architecture, an awareness in all likelihood he wanted to demonstrate to others as a sign of refinement.

But even for a wealthy man, a building is a bulky thing to collect. Turning to another way to develop the necessary trappings, Johnson first become a journalist—in lieu of collecting buildings, he could collect architects’ discourses. In order to separate himself from the pack of other critics, Johnson needed two practical things: to get the scoop and then to deliver it via a major vehicle.

Connected as he was, Johnson sought out the avant-garde German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, among others, while traveling in Europe in the late 1920s. A few years later, Johnson teamed with the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock to be the first to introduce Mies and his contemporaries’ groundbreaking work to the general American public through the “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932.

In a series of shots, Points on a Line scans Johnson’s library to ultimately fix on several chapters of a catalogue published to complement the exhibition, The International Style. Tellingly, the book played up the role of visual aesthetics, while conversely playing down the social aims of the architecture, by listing things like rules for detailing—a concern editorialized by the director Sarah Morris as the narrative moves from here toward the social contexts and constructs of the buildings in the film.

Opening on an image of bees buzzing around flowers on Johnson’s estate—the site of his famed Glass House (1949) and other structures—Points on a Line implicates a narrative that can be read via a myriad of tropes: the cross-pollination and hybridity of forms and ideas and their categorization, adaptation, reinvention, and more importantly, their attraction and the role it plays in creating and maintaining interactions. An idea of “environment” is teased further as the camera situates the house within the
mini-universe of Johnson’s estate—complete with several other buildings that were built after and play off the vocabulary of the Glass House. This field, where a brick guesthouse inverts and contrapuntally complements the transparency of the Glass House, for example, is a highly manicured constellation of kaleidoscopic riffs and puns which the camera ducks and weaves the audience through. Johnson, a consummate entertainer, delighted in the play of this fantasy as well and hosted many A-list parties and tours of his grounds and impressive art holdings—amassed with his companion David Whitney.

Points on a Line begins to invoke this mood by treating the audience to a filmic tour of the estate cut with documents and photographs detailing the great lengths Johnson went to have the “best” guest lists, the “best” refreshments, and the price he paid to own the “best” artworks. Paradoxically, the film begins to suggest that what or who was on view amplified the inhibited minimalism of the sparsely detailed Glass House. To this end, the film diggs into Johnson’s own Rolodex—in which artists, nobility, drug stores, and even door repairmen, are all at Johnson’s disposal to maintain his refined world—not to mention a surveillance of the grounds crew and squeegee brigades needed to make sure that nothing falls out of place in the house’s currently preserved state as a museum. Pausing on a pensive portrait of Johnson done by Andy Warhol and included in Johnson’s art collection, Points on a Line seems to tease that this representation of a cinematic “close-up” is really an apparition, as the house is now a ghost’s shell of past lives lived, and thus is something “other” than it was. In a strange reversal of roles, Johnson is now a subject to be called upon by curators and other artists.

The desire to regulate a public image is something that Mies van der Rohe had been dealing with after lending a study model of his as-yet-unbuilt Farnsworth House (1945–1951) for a 1947 retrospective at MoMA—curated by none other than Johnson. Hidden from Mies, however, Johnson, who had recently turned his hand to architectural design outright, was quick to make use of the model as a source from which to design the Glass House—and to make sure that it, the Glass House, was built first. After such events unfolded, Mies was invited to see Johnson’s craft, and was angered to the point of storming off during this first visit. Was Mies concerned the public might think his design was derivative? Adding insult to injury, Johnson used his connections to have his house profiled in Life magazine.

Potentially more an act of usurpation than of inspiration, Points on a Line pauses on the ethics of the model’s appropriated design and instead segues to how the two architects later worked together on a project, a project that fittingly enough became a prototypical model for future skyscraper design, the Seagram Building in midtown Manhattan. In so doing, the film may be eschewing the egotistical issue of an original and its imitation by posturing that knowledge’s greatest power is in its circulation, or even more so, that the joint circulation of certain designs and their related theories can also be a powerful way to advertise a new social imaginary through shared projections of agreed upon signs, symbols, forms, and desires.

Inside the Seagram Building, the film moves from Johnson and Mies to the daily habitués currently being wine’d and dined over power lunches in the building’s restaurant, The Four Seasons, and yet it is also a possible mirror of Johnson and Mies who often conducted business meetings in this establishment as well. Like the priming of the Glass House, the audience is treated to a behind-the-scenes look at the support staff that labors to make sure the table settings and food are beyond question. And yet, eyebrows are raised and hands gesticulate in taut negotiations within these idealized confines. Lurking behind the posh veneer, various kinks are suggested, as a rack-focus reveals a shred-it truck—a machine that destroys old documents for storage purposes, and can also be illegally employed to destroy evidence of deals gone sour—sitting just outside. Do all of these dealings, awash with signs of granting and withholding and the tint of shady business, share a correlation to our protagonists jockeying each other for position and fame? Or, for that matter, does such bargaining hint at the necessary alliances and compromises needed to foster a base of power and
with it broke a legacy? Proving another pole to this wager, *Points on a Line* comes full circle in its final episode, the tale of the Farnsworth House.

Echoing its treatment of the "other" glass house, the film scans the grounds and the home to then cut to a set of documents. Not books this time, but legal papers. These pages evidence a falling out between Mies and his client, Dr. Edith Farnsworth—possibly at the close of an affair—as Dr. Farnsworth sued for incompetence. Farnsworth lost, yet railed against the house with statements in *House Beautiful* about its "glit, false sophistication." This conflict, like the appropriations at Johnson’s Glass House, raises another question about illegitimacy, as the Farnsworth House may be the original design, but it also carries the name of an owner who vocally rejected it—and with such action besmirched its patrimony.1 Due to their conflicts, the house was finalized without Mies's direct supervision and was later renovated by its next owner, Peter Palumbo. *Points on a Line* reflexively returns to archival footage showing historic images of the house, which do not match the museum state in which the house is preserved today—replete with constant conservation such as the squeegeeing of dirt from its glass façade, and the removal of Dr. Farnsworth's possessions. With such changes, it would be impossible to visit the house and declare a pure authentic vision of it—instead, maybe you would be the witness to a story still being written?

Playing both homes against each other and their tales of antecedents, alterations, and alterations, *Points on a Line* begins to question the subject formation of the architects and the image of the structures. Considering the multiple inputs that lead to the design and construction of each house and the textured media, which constitutes and reconstitutes their public perception, how would it be possible to say that the Farnsworth House is, possessively, "Mies's," and that the Glass House is "Johnson’s"? This first and second telling, in which camera movements and editorial direction are duplicated throughout, layers a conjoned narrative that is crafted through the former’s involvement with the latter and reminds us that although we, as visitors to the houses—or to a film for that matter—are granted access to the sites, a total access to their history is not contained exclusively therein.

To buckend the film, and thus to show the film’s own narrative indebtedness to its telling, Morris closes not on bees circling flowers, but on a flutter of butterflies around the Farnsworth House. Here, a narrative of cross-pollination and attraction is twined to an idea of narrative transformation akin to how artists—or architects—may revisit and reinvest sources with new meaning on one level, but also exposes a deeper synthesis, namely, the coming together of players and interests so as to draft a collaborative history.

1. Among other innovations, the Seagram Building introduced a novel management procedure, "Fast Tracking," in which the design and construction periods overlapped so as to reduce the amount of time needed to complete the project.

2. Extending this parallel further and self-reflexively, Morris is here also returning to her own continuing investigation of the area visited in her work *Matters* (3 minutes, 1998), as well as in *Reborn Town* (2006), a 90,000 square foot public installation in the plaza of the nearby Lever House, designed by architect Gordon Bunshaft as one of the first "International Style" skyscrapers.

3. Recasting the effigy found in Wehle's portrait of Johnson, this segment presents a proxy for Mies in the image of his grandson, architect Dirk Lohan, the executor of Mies's estate, who, like Mies, characteristically partakes in cigar smoking.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST


ON VIEW JANUARY 28 THROUGH APRIL 15, 2012

The Wexner Center receives generous support from the Greater Columbus Arts Council, The Columbus Foundation, Nationwide Foundation, and the Ohio Arts Council, as well as from the Corporate Annual Fund of the Wexner Center Foundation and Wexner Center members.
VII. A THIRD PRINCIPLE: 
THE AVOIDANCE 
OF APPLIED DECORATION

Absence of ornament serves as much as regular horizontality to differentiate superficially the current style from the styles of the past and from the various manners of the last century and a half. Applied ornament may not have been significant or important in the architecture of the past, but it certainly existed. It is easier to defend the idea that the houses built since 1850 were more least ornamented. The future of architecture

SARAH MORRIS
Points on a Line, 2010
Red, MPEG 2
35 minutes, 48 seconds
Photos courtesy of the artist
and Friedrich Petzel Gallery,
New York