

War on Architecture: E.1027

Author(s): Beatriz Colomina

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War on Architecture: E.1027

E. 1027. A modern white house is perched on the rocks, a hundred feet above the Mediterranean sea, in a remote place, in Roquebrune at Cap Martin. The site is "inaccessible and not overlooked from anywhere." No road leads to this house. It 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. After the death of Badovici in 1956, the house was sold to the Swiss architect Marie Louise Schelbert. She found the walls riddled with bullet holes. The house had clearly been the site of some considerable violence. In a 1969 letter, she comments on the state of the house: "Corbu did not want anything repaired and urged me to leave it as it is as a reminder of war." But what kind of war? Most obviously, it was World War II. The bullet holes are wounds from the German occupation. But what violence is there to the house before the bullets, and even before the inevitable relationship of modern architecture to the military? And anyway, to start with, what is Le Corbusier doing here? What brings him to this isolated spot, this remote house that will eventually be the site of his own death?

"As a young man he had traveled in the Balkans and the near East and had made sketches of strange, inaccessible places and scenes. It was perhaps through a natural, anti-romantic reaction of maturity that later, as a Purist, he proposed to paint what was duplicable and near-at-hand." (James T. Soby) We will have to go back to Le Corbusier's earlier travels, to the "strange, inaccessible places and scenes" that he had "conquered" through drawing. At the very least, to Le Corbusier's trip to Algiers in the Spring of 1931. First encounter in what will become a long relationship to this city, or in Le Corbusier's words: "twelve years of uninterrupted study of Algiers." By all accounts, this study begun with his drawing of Algerian women. He said later that he had been "profoundly seduced by a type of woman particularly well built" of which he made many nude studies. He also acquired a big collection of colored postcards representing naked women surrounded by accoutrements from the Oriental bazaar. Jean de Maisonseul (later the director of the Musée National des Beaux Arts d'Algier), who as an eighteen year old boy had guided Le Corbusier through the Casbah will later recall their tour: "Our wanderings through the side streets led us at the end of the day to the rue Kataroudji where he [Le Corbusier] was fascinated by the beauty of two young girls, one Spanish and the other Algerian. They brought us up a narrow stairway to their room; there he sketched some nudes on—to my amazement—some schoolbook graph paper with colored pencils; the sketches of the Spanish girl lying both alone on the bed and beautifully grouped together with the Algerian turned out accurate and realistic; but he said that they were very bad and refused to show them." Le Corbusier filled three notebooks of sketches in Algiers which he

later claimed were stolen from his atelier in Paris. But Ozenfant denies it, saying that Le Corbusier himself either destroyed them or hid them, considering them a "secret d'atelier." The Algerian sketches and postcards appear to be a rather ordinary instance of the ingrained mode of a fetishistic appropriation of women, of the East, of "the other." But Le Corbusier, as Samir Rafi and Stanislaus von Moos have noted, turned this material into preparatory studies for a projected monumental figure composition, "the plans for which seem to have preoccupied Le Corbusier during many years, if not his entire life." (von Moos)

From the months immediately following his return from Algiers up to his death, Le Corbusier seems to have made hundreds and hundreds of sketches on yellow tracing paper by laying it over the original sketches and retracing the contours of the figures. Ozenfant believed that Le Corbusier had redrawn his own sketches with the help of photographs or postcards. He also exhaustively studied Delacroix's famous painting *Femmes d'Alger*, producing a series of sketches of the outlines of the figures in this painting, divested of their "exotic clothing" and the "surrounding decor." Soon the two projects merged, he modified the gestures of Delacroix's figures, gradually making them correspond to the figures in his own sketches. He said that he would have called the final composition "Femmes de la Casbah." But, in fact, he never finished it. He kept redrawing it. That the drawing and redrawing of these images became a life time obsession indicates that something was at stake. This becomes even more obvious when in 1963-4, shortly before his death, Le Corbusier, unhappy with the visible aging of the yellow tracing paper, copies a selection of 26 drawings onto transparent paper and symptomatically, for someone who kept everything, burns the rest.

But the process of drawing and redrawing the "Femmes de la Casbah" reached its most intense, if not hysterical, moment when Le Corbusier's studies found their way into a mural that he completed in 1938 in E.1027. Le Corbusier referred to the mural as *Sous les pilotis* or *Graffiti à Cap Martin*, (it is also sometimes labeled "Three Women.") According to Schelbert: "Le Corbusier explained to his friends that 'Badou' was depicted on the right, his friend Eileen Gray on the left; the outline of the head and the hairpiece of the sitting figure in the middle, he claimed, was 'the desired child, which was never born.'" This extraordi-



nary scene, a defacement of Gray's architecture and perhaps even an effacement of her sexuality since, her relationship to Badovici notwithstanding, Gray was openly gay (but inasmuch as Badovici is here represented as one of the three women, the mural may reveal as much as it conceals), is clearly a "theme for a psychiatrist," as Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* says of the nightmares with which people invest their houses. Particularly if we also take into account Le Corbusier's obsessive relationship to this house as manifest—and this is only one example—in his quasi-occupation of the site after World War II, when he built a small wooden shack, the "Cabanon," for himself at the very limits of the adjacent property, right behind Eileen Gray's house. He occupied and controlled the site by overlooking it, the cabin being little more than an observation platform, a sort of "watchdog house." The imposition of this appropriating gaze is even more brutal if we remember that Eileen Gray had chosen the site because it was, in Peter Adam's words, "inaccessible and not overlooked from anywhere." But the violence of this occupation has already been established when Le Corbusier painted the murals in this house (there were eight altogether) without the permission of Eileen Gray, who had already moved out. She considered it an act of vandalism, indeed, as Adam has put it, "it was a rape. A fellow architect, a man she admired, had without her consent defaced her design."

The defacement of the house went hand in hand with the effacement of Gray as an architect. When Le Corbusier published the murals 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. Le Corbusier will end up, later on, getting credit for the design of the house and even for some of its furniture. Still today the confusion continues with many writers attributing the house to Badovici, or at best, to Badovici and Gray, and some still suggesting that Le Corbusier had collaborated on the project. Even more sad, Eileen Gray's name does not figure, even as footnote, in most histories of modern architecture, including the most recent, and ostensibly critical ones.) "What a narrow prison you have built for me over a number of years, and particularly this year through your vanity," Badovici wrote to Le Corbusier in 1949 about the whole episode (in a letter that Adam thinks may have been dictated by Gray herself). Le Corbusier replied in a way that makes it clear that he is replying to Gray: "You want a statement from me based on my worldwide authority to show—if I correctly understand your innermost thoughts—to demonstrate 'the quality of pure and functional architecture' which is manifested by you in the house at Cap Martin, and has been destroyed by my pictorial interventions. OK, you send me some photographic documents of this manipulation of pure functionalism Also send some documents on Castellar, this U-boat of functionalism; then I will spread this debate in front of the whole world." Now Le Corbusier was threatening to carry the battle from the house into the newspapers and archi-

tektural periodicals. But his public position completely contradicted what he had expressed privately. In 1938, the same year he will paint the mural *Graffiti à Cap Martin*, Le Corbusier had written a letter to Eileen Gray, after spending some days in E. 1027 with Badovici, where not only does he acknowledge her sole authorship but also how much he likes the house: "I am so happy to tell you how much those few days spent in your house have made me appreciate the rare spirit which has dictated all the dispositions, inside and outside, and given to the modern furniture—the equipment—such dignified form, so charming, so full of spirit."

Why then did Le Corbusier vandalize the very house he loved? Did he think the murals will enhance it? Certainly not. Le Corbusier had repeatedly stated that the role of the mural in architecture is to "destroy" the wall, to dematerialize it. In a letter to Vladimir Nekrassov in 1932, he writes: "I admit the mural not to enhance a wall, but on the contrary, as a means to violently destroy the wall, to remove from it all sense of stability, of weight, etc." The mural for Le Corbusier is a weapon against architecture, a bomb. But "why then to paint on the walls... at the risk of killing architecture?," he asks in the same letter, and then answers: "It is when one is pursuing another task, that of telling stories." So what then is the story that he so urgently needs to tell with *Graffiti à Cap Martin*?

We will have to go back once more to Algiers. In fact, Le Corbusier's complimentary letter to Eileen Gray, sent from Cap Martin on 28/4/38, wears the letter head: "Hôtel Aletti Alger." Le Corbusier's violation of Eileen Gray's house and history is consistent with his fetishization of Algerian women. One might even argue that the child in this mural reconstitutes the missing (maternal) phallus, whose absence, Freud argues, organizes fetishism. In these terms, the endless drawing and redrawing is the scene of a violent substitution that in Le Corbusier would seem to require the house, domestic space, as prop. Violence is organized around or through the house. In both circumstances (Algiers or Cap Martin) the scene starts with an intrusion, the carefully orchestrated occupation of a house. But the house is in the end effaced (erased from the Algiers's drawings, defaced at Cap Martin).

Significantly, Le Corbusier describes drawing itself as the occupation of a "stranger's house." In his last book, *Creation is a Patient Search*, he writes: "By working with our hands, by drawing, we enter the house of a stranger, we are enriched by the experience, we learn." Drawing, as has often been noted, plays a crucial part in Le Corbusier's process of "appropriation" of the exterior world. He repeatedly opposes his technique of drawing to photography: "When one travels and works with visual things—architecture, painting or sculpture—one uses one's eyes and draws, so as to fix deep down in one's experience what is seen. Once the impression has been recorded by the pencil, it stays for good—entered, registered, inscribed. The camera is a tool for idlers, who use a machine to do their seeing for them." Clearly, it is statements such as this that have gained Le Corbusier the reputation of having a phobia for the camera—despite the crucial role of photography in his work. But what is the specific relation between photography and drawing in Le Corbusier?

The sketches of the Algerian women were not only redrawings of live models but also redrawings of postcards. One could even argue that the construction of the Algerian women in French postcards, widely diffused at the time, would have informed Le Corbusier's live drawings, in the same way that, as Zeynep Çelik notes, Le Corbusier precisely reproduces in his physical entrance to foreign cities (Istanbul or Algiers, for example), the images of these cities constructed by postcards and tourist guides. In these terms, not only did "he knew what he wanted to see," as Çelik says, but he saw what he had already seen (in pictures). He "enters" those pictures. He inhabits the photographs. The redrawings of the *Femme de Algiers* are also more likely to have been realized, as von Moos points out, from postcards and reproductions than from the original painting in the Louvre. So what, then, will be the specific role of the photographic image as such in the fetishistic scene of the "Femme d'Algiers" project?

The fetish is always about "presence," writes Victor Burgin, "and how many times have I been told that photographs 'lack presence,' that paintings are to be valued *because of their presence!*" Clearly this separation between painting and photography is what organizes the dominant understanding of Le Corbusier's relation to photography. What these accounts seem to ignore is that here the drawing, the hand-crafted artistic meditation, is done "after" the photograph: the art reproduction, the postcard, the photograph?

In fact, the whole mentality of the "Femmes de la Casbah" drawings is photographic. Not only are they made from photographs. They are developed according to a repetitive process where the images are systematically reproduced on transparent paper, the grid of the original graph paper allowing the image to be enlarged to any scale. This photographic sensibility becomes most obvious with the murals at Cap Martin. Traditionally, they have been understood as paradigm of Le Corbusier the painter, the craftsman detached from mechanical reproduction, an interpretation to which Le Corbusier himself has contributed with the circulation of that famous photograph of him, naked, working at one of the murals. (Do you realize that this is the only nudist image of him that we know? That it had to be here, in this scene, is in itself telling). But what is normally omitted is that *Graffiti à Cap Martin* was not conceived on the wall itself. Le Corbusier used an electric projector to enlarge the image of a small drawing onto the 2.50m x 4m white wall where he etched the mural in black.

[They say that, in using black, Le Corbusier was thinking about Picasso's *Guernica* of the year before, and that Picasso, in his turn, was so impressed with the mural at Cap Martin that it prompted him to do his own versions of the *Femmes d'Alger*. Apparently, he drew Delacroix's painting from memory and was "frappé" to find out later that the figure he had painted in the middle, lying down, with her legs crossed, was not in Delacroix. (Rafi). It was, of course, *Graffiti à Cap Martin* that he remembered, the reclining crossed-legged women (inviting but inaccessible) Le Corbusier's symptomatic representation of Eileen Gray. But if Le Corbusier's mural had so impressed him, how come Picasso

chose not to see that a swastika was inscribed into the chest of the woman on the right? The swastika may be yet one more sign of Le Corbusier's political opportunism. (Remember that the mural was done in 1938.) But the German soldiers, who occupied the house during WWII, may not have seen the swastika either, for it was this very wall that was found riddled with bullet holes, as if it had been the site of some execution. These, as so many other questions, will have to remain unanswered here, the narrow space of these two facing pages closing down on me.]

The mural was a black and white photograph. Le Corbusier's fetish is photographic. Afterall, photography too has been read in term of the fetish. Victor Burgin writes: "Fetishism (...) accomplishes that separation of knowledge from belief characteristic of representation; its motive is the unity of the subject (...). The photograph stands to the subject-viewer as does the fetishized object (...). We know we see a two-dimensional surface, we believe we look through it into three-dimensional space, we cannot do both at the same time—there is a coming and going between knowledge and belief."

So if Le Corbusier "enters the house of a stranger" by drawing, could "the house" be standing in here for the photograph? By drawing he enters the photograph that is itself a stranger's house, occupying and reterritorializing the space, the city, the sexualities of the other by reworking the image. Drawing on and in photography is the instrument of colonization. The entry to the house of a stranger is always a breaking and entering—there being no entry without force no matter how many invitations. Le Corbusier's architecture depends in some way on specific techniques of occupying and yet gradually effacing the domestic space of the other.

Like all colonists, Le Corbusier does not think of it as an invasion but as a gift. When recapitulating his life's work five years before his death, he symptomatically writes about Algiers and Cap Martin in the same terms: "1930. Algiers... seven great schemes (seven enormous studies), free of charge." And later, "1938–39. Eight mural paintings (free of charge) in the Badovici and Helen Grey house at Cap Martin." No charge for the discharge. Gray was outraged, now even her name had been defaced. And renaming is, after all, the first act of colonization. Such gifts can not be returned.

P.S. In 1944, the retreating German Army blew up Eileen Gray's apartment in Menton (Saint-Tropez) having vandalized E. 1027 and Temple a Paiella (her house in Castellar). She lost everything. Her drawings and plans were used to light fires.

P.P.S. On August 26, 1965, the endless redrawing of the "Femmes d'Alger" still unfinished, Le Corbusier went down from E. 1027 to the sea and swam to his death.

P.P.P.S. In 1977 a local mason in charge of some work in the house "mistakenly" demolished the murals. I like to think that he did it on purpose. Eileen Gray had spend almost three years living on the site in complete isolation, building the house with the masons, having lunch with them everyday. Then again, she did the same thing when building her own house at Castellar. The masons knew her well. In fact, they loved her, and hated the arrogant Badovici. They understood perfectly what the murals were about. They destroyed them. In so doing, they showed more enlightenment than most critics and historians of architecture.

P.P.P.P.S. Since then, the murals have been reconstructed in the house from the basis of photographs. They re-emerged from their original medium. The occupation continues.