

Jimmy Robert, *Imitation of Lives, The Glass House, New Canaan*

Didier Morelli

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Jimmy Robert

Imitations of Lives, Performa 17, 2017.

Photos : Paula Court, courtesy of Performa and the Glass House

Jimmy Robert *Imitation of Lives*

The flaws in Philip Johnson's iconic Glass House, his personal residence built in 1949 in New Canaan, Connecticut, are beyond physical. Once you look past the water-stained ceiling, modernism's oppressive legacy is pristinely contained in the building's architectural vernacular. The translucence of its floor-to-ceiling glass walls offer a privileged relinquishment of privacy by blurring interior and exterior space in a forty-nine-acre landscape couched in "Connecticut's Gold Coast."

It is from this very notion of domestic transparency that the visual artist Jimmy Robert staged *Imitation of Lives*, a fifty-minute performance exploring the incommensurability of the Black body in a "modernist masterpiece." Curated by Charles Aubin (Performa) and Cole Akers (The Glass House), and part of Performa 17's special *Circulations* program which sought to reveal how performance can be a radical tool to rethink architecture's uses and aesthetics, the event highlighted how space is constructed by performative relations. With the help of dancers NIC Kaye and Quenton Stuckey, Robert destabilized the spatial regularity of The Glass House with enlivening aural and physical presence. Citing Johnson's short-lived amorous relationship with Jimmie Daniels (1933–1935), the cabaret singer from Harlem, the event presented compelling movement scenes depicting and confronting the incredulous white gaze.

Greeted at the Glass House visitor centre in downtown New Canaan with a Mercedes Benz shuttle to travel to the historic site a few miles away, the performance's impact was as much a product of its magnificent use of bodies, props, sounds, and spoken word as its awareness of the procedural realities of architectural tours. On site, Robert and Stuckey appeared in grey security guard uniforms with walkie-talkies, effectively blending into the space. Once it became apparent that *they* were the performers, a pair of elderly white docents intently overlooking the entire event became starkly obvious in their

bright sweaters. The looming presence of disarmingly gentle in-house security personnel acted as a constant reminder of the boundaries with which any performance—aesthetic and quotidian—unfolds. Playing on the audience's expectations of the ascetic environment, Robert quickly displaced power by focusing our attention on bodies that have historically been subject to *(in)visible* spatial surveillance.

By appearing variously in uniforms, hoodies, and an African print shirt, the performers took on predefined racialized roles yet broke from them repeatedly. Moving in, out, and through these garments, the fluidity of their actions transformed the space from a static historical landmark to a dynamic and self-reflexive archive. Literally wrestling to determine what a true *Chez Moi* might look like, the performance referenced the title of a Daniels song amongst others who have looked to articulate the complexities of race, space, and identity. Culminating in explosive voguing to the sound of "Burn the block" by Bro Safari x UFO!, Robert called out Johnson's own documented bigotry and anti-Semitic behaviour. Slipping into the impermissible by drawing attention to the cracks in The Glass House's foundation, *Imitation of Lives* presented a critical and timely revisiting of Johnson's gilded architectural career in affluent Fairfield County, where many of New York City's wealthiest residents have found weekend respite since the 1850s.

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The Glass House: A Performa 17 Commission, New Canaan, Connecticut, November 3–5, 2017