

## E.1027: murder and mystery of the camera Gems on the history of the house E.1027 created by Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici

BY CHRISTIAN MÜLLER

The bouquet of stories related to E.1027, the house built 1926–1929 by the Irish architect and furniture designer Eileen Gray with the support of Jean Badovici, is colorful and intriguing. In “E.1027: Murder and Mystery of the Camera”, gems on the history of the house, new research material and previously unpublished facts related to E.1027 are revealed. Above all, the search for an answer to the question “Which photo camera was used to take the original pictures of E.1027”.

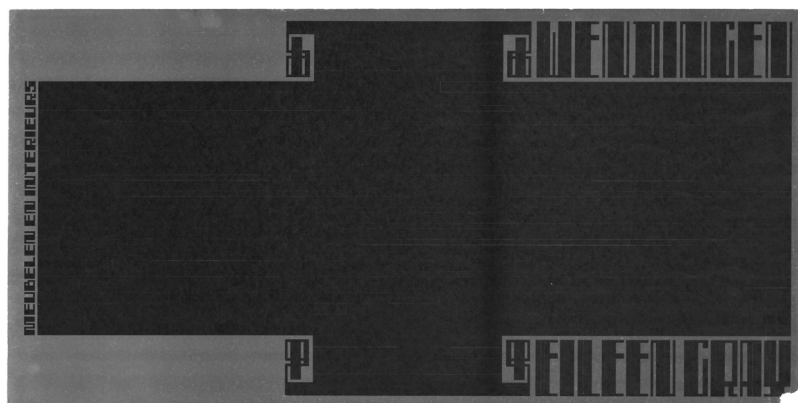
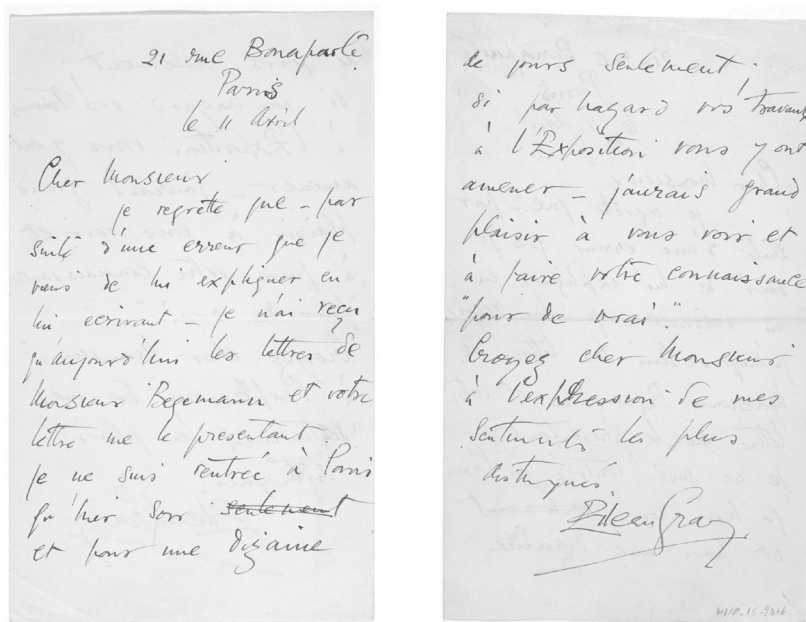
Thirty years ago, as a student of architecture from the ETH Zürich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich), I stepped up a staircase to the attic of a house in the city center of Zürich. The name at the doorbell said: “Kägi”. I remember the inside, a completely darkened room, lit only by a fluorescent aquarium where some skeletons of small-scale human bodies made their appearance. A rather strange reception for a doctor’s practice. My school mate, Stefan Hecker, and I, were not here for the doctor, but for a key. The key to his property E.1027 (1926–1929) where, in the following summer of 1990, we were fortunate to spend several weeks in the *Maison en bord de mer* [House at the seaside] at the French Côte-d’Azur. It was the key to my year-long fascination, scientific research, comprehensive survey of the building and furniture<sup>1</sup>, explorations, discoveries, publications<sup>2</sup>, surprises and — still — remaining mysteries on E.1027.

Dr. Peter Kägi was always correct and very generous to Stefan Hecker and me. Whenever we wished, we could stay in E.1027, for longer periods too. We had a key. Like so many architectural monuments fate was against E.1027. In 1991 Peter Kägi put a unique set of twenty-eight pieces of original furniture, temporarily stored at a secret location in Zürich, up for an auction at Sotheby’s in Monaco. Stefan Hecker and I immediately initiated a campaign to have the sale canceled, or at least to preserve the set as an entity. Through Arthur Rüegg (b. 1942) and Swiss **docomomo** coordinator Ruggero Tropeano (b. 1955), **docomomo** International became alarmed by the situation a few days before the sale was scheduled. In just three days an international campaign which they launched was unable to prevent the furniture being dispersed<sup>3</sup>. Stefan Hecker and I had no choice but to document the furniture taking measurements and photos for a later re-edition by ClassiCon, Munich.

In September 1994, Peter Kägi’s attorneys at law contacted me with the request to actively support them in writing a sales document for E.1027 that expressed the importance of the architectural achievement represented by the house E.1027<sup>4</sup>. The house owner got into financial difficulties. Morphine and a divorce demanded payment.

Once again, history took a grotesque turn. Dr. Peter Kägi was murdered in 1996 in the living room of his property E.1027. A sad ending. The official verdict stated: he did not pay his gardener. The local rumor said: he did not pay the gardener for additional services of homoerotic provocation. The gardener was arrested on his way to Nice, whilst escaping in Dr. Peter Kägi’s Rolls Royce.

Peter Kägi’s children, uncertain whether to accept or to reject the heritage of their father, proceeded for the time being with the sale of E.1027. The legal vacuum attracted the most diverse clientele. From northern Italian businessmen to Irish dandies, they all showed up pretending an interest in buying. A local architect, temporarily in charge of some renovation works at E.1027, claimed ownership of the house and went to court<sup>5</sup>. Thomas Rebutato (1907–1971), called Robert, offered his restaurant “L’Etoile de Mer”, just a few steps from E.1027, in exchange for E.1027<sup>6</sup>. Simultaneously, the French authorities tried to classify E.1027 as a historic monument: “*nous envisageons de classer la villa d’Eileen Gray parmi les monuments historiques à assurer dans l’avenir sa bonne conservation*” [we plan to classify the Eileen Gray’s villa as an historical monument to assure its future conservation]<sup>7</sup>. In September 1998, the French Ministry of Culture and Communication approached Stefan Hecker and me, if we were “kind enough to help them in preparing the dossier for the classification”<sup>8</sup>. This procedure of the French authorities was opposed by the heirs, as they preferred a sale of the house without restriction or servitudes. Two years later, there was still no



02 Cover of Wendingen 1924, issue 6, H.Th. Wijdeveld (red.) et al., *Eileen Gray meubelen en interieurs*, Santpoort, Uitgever C.A. Mees, 1924. © Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam/ WIJD\_736-13.

progress in this matter. The regional conservator of historic monuments clarified:

*I was able to present the file created in preparation for the classification of the villa firstly at the regional cultural heritage commission in Aix-en-Provence, ..., then to the superior commission in Paris, ... These two bodies have pronounced in unanimity in favor of the classification of the villa E.1027 among the historical monuments, the classification being the highest measure existing in the French legislation.*

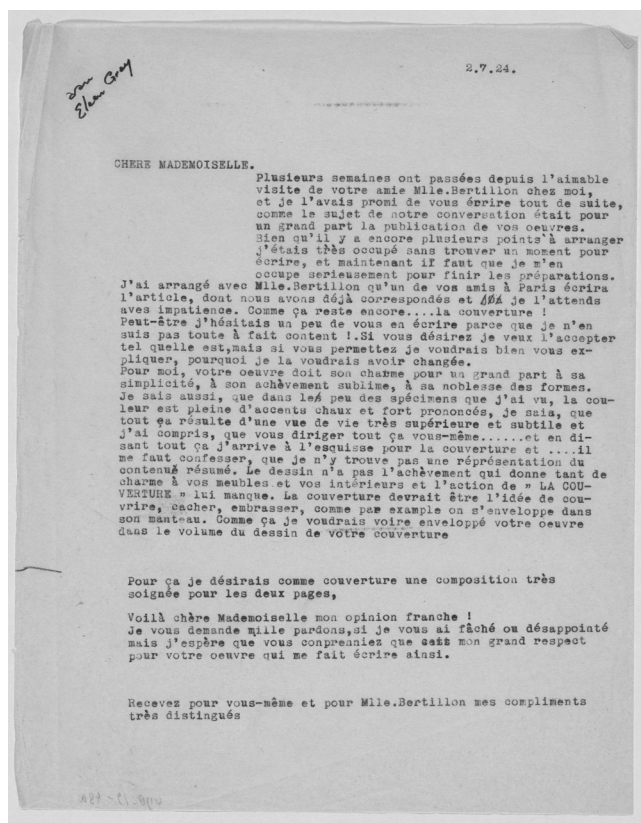
*However, representatives of Kagi's inheritance, owner of the house, still refuse this proposal, thus prohibiting the signature of the order by the Minister of Culture. As the villa is for sale, the outcome of the current procedure remains subordinate to the change of ownership<sup>9</sup>.*

After three years of tug-of-war, E.1027 was given for a symbolic amount — via the national agency “Conservatoire du littoral” — to the state of France and the city of

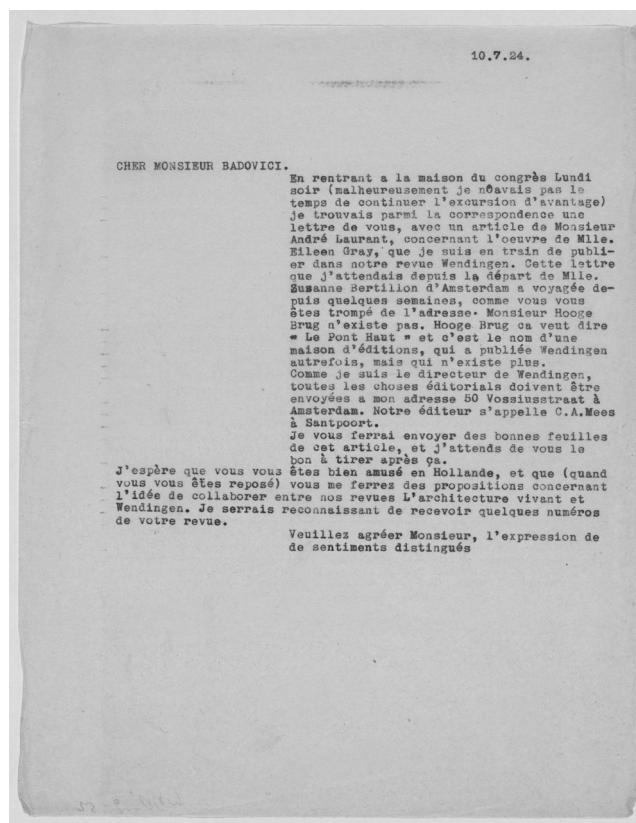
Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. The house was declared an historic monument. In all those years E.1027 remained, albeit in very poor condition as it was left open to vandalism.

What would Eileen Gray think of all the bickering, if she were still alive? After she left Roquebrune in the early 1930s, all the major interventions and decisions were done by men who claimed to know best how to deal with this house. Their motives may have been well-intentioned, but did they match those of the introspective creator? Eileen Gray herself appraised E.1027 with the following words: “The house to be described should not be considered a perfect house, where all problems are resolved. It is only an attempt, a moment in a more general research”<sup>10</sup>. When time came to build E.1027, Eileen Gray constructed the house on the same principles as her lacquered screens and decorative panels: adding layer upon layer<sup>11</sup>. Each layer (primary architectural shell, secondary architectural shell with infill elements, built-in furniture, movable furniture, colors, textures and decorations) completely changed the

03 Letter from H.Th. Wijdeveld to Eileen Gray, Amsterdam, 2 July 1924.  
© Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam/ WIJD\_19-48a.



04 Letter from H.Th. Wijdeveld to Jean Badovici, Amsterdam, 10 July 1924.  
© Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam/ WIJD\_15-9a and WIJD\_19-52.



spatial perception anew. She experimented on site, thus improving to the desired result.

Joseph Rykwert (b. 1926) was one of the earliest to re-discover Eileen Gray in the 1960s. He reflects:

*To the end, Eileen Gray remained relatively indifferent to a past which seemed awesomely impressive to those of us much younger than herself, and insistent that the present and the immediate future were so much more interesting than anything she might summon to reminiscence. She was always keen to hear about new materials, new techniques, new designs.... It was always its "modernity" — the way her work related to that of the young — which seemed to her to provide a sanction, a validation of designs which were sometimes regarded as far-fetched or eccentric by her contemporaries<sup>12</sup>.*

The tragic ending of Dr. Peter Kägi, the controversy over Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and his murals, a container loaded with marihuana belonging to Eileen Gray and shipped to the UK: the bouquet of stories is inevitably related to E.1027, like pieces of an obscure jigsaw puzzle. A jigsaw puzzle where pieces are appearing, and others seem to be wrong ones.

In the words of Prunella Clough (1919–1999) "That little house seems to have a 'hex' on it: bad luck, and very like so much in Eileen's life"<sup>13</sup>.

However, not all the pieces of the E.1027-puzzle are found yet. One question still hasn't been answered. Which camera was used to take the original pictures of E.1027 that were published in 1929 in *L'Architecture Vivante*? They

were pictures of the highest quality and were well-considered compositions. I'm convinced Eileen Gray took those pictures herself. As she instructed Jean Badovici (1893–1956) with "Defense de Rire" [laughing prohibited] when entering their house, and as she showed him where to store his shoes in the closet, Eileen Gray always was in control of the scenography.

Which camera was used to achieve these results? There is a reflection of parts of the camera in a mirror of the master bedroom at E.1027, this is the only hint Eileen Gray is giving us<sup>14</sup>. A wink by the photographer? Eileen Gray had no institutional education as an architect when she started building her houses and had no institutional education when she started photography. Eileen Gray was "a person of unaffected modesty"<sup>15</sup>. She always learned from the masters. Stefan Hecker and I pointed out her learning method and inspirations in our publication *Archithese 4-91*, dedicated to the work of Eileen Gray. She worked on *Villa Moissi* (1923) by Adolf Loos (1870–1933) for the facades, on *Petit Hotel Particulier*, in Paris (1924) by A & G Perret for the floor plan and on *Villa Baizeau*, in Carthage (1927) by Le Corbusier for the interior perspective<sup>16</sup>.

However, Eileen Gray had rarely desired physical contact, when invited to meet superiors in person. She remained on the side-lines:

*On being asked whether she had met Guillaume Apollinaire, "Ah oui" [Oh yes], she answered "j'étais invitée à dîner avec lui un soir; puis j'ai réfléchi: qu'est-ce que j'avais à dire à ce grand*





poète? et alors j'ai appelé et j'ai dit que j'avais la grippe..."[I was invited to dinner with him one evening; then I reflected: what could I have to say to this great poet? and then I called and said I had the flu ...]¹⁷.

I dare to make a comparison to the novel *“Les Dimanches de Jean Désert”* by Jean de La Ville de Mirmont (1886–1914), a book published in Paris in 1914. The novel tells, with hopeless irony, the life of the main character, Jean Désert, and the character's ability to blend in with absolute anonymity. Eileen Gray, in 1922, named her shop located on the fashionable *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré* in Paris with the same phonetic name *“Jean Désert”* — fortuitously or deliberately¹⁸?

Again, my question: how did Eileen Gray attain the professional photographic skills and who provided her with the state-of-the-art equipment to take the photographs of E.1027?

Architects of the Dutch group *De Stijl*, such as Jan Wils (1891–1972), played an incubator role in Eileen Gray's professional career. The most intriguing one was, undoubtedly, Hendricus Wijdeveld (1885–1987), the chief editor of the Dutch magazine *Wendingen*. He has so far been underestimated in importance, barely being given the credit for being a key person in Eileen Gray's career. With this in mind, my investigations regarding the camera led me to the “State Archive for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning”, *het nieuwe instituut*, in Rotterdam. I discovered a written conversation between Hendricus Wijdeveld and Eileen Gray. These letters remained unknown sources for almost 100 years¹⁹. In a published version they appear for the first time in this issue of *docomomo Journal*. The earliest letter dates from 11 April 1922. In that handwritten letter²⁰, Eileen Gray sent Hendricus Wijdeveld her excuses not having met him in Paris. Hendricus Wijdeveld arranged the Dutch Pavilions at the various Salons in Paris.

Hendricus Wijdeveld and Eileen Gray remained in written contact. Hendricus Wijdeveld recognised, as nobody else in the beginning of the 1920s, the design talent of Eileen Gray. And he softly pushed her to the edge, stimulating her not to hesitate to include tactility and charm in her work. When discussing the cover of the magazine *Wendingen*, devoted to her work (mainly pieces of furniture), Hendricus Wijdeveld criticized and advised her on

the cover, which Eileen Gray proposed to him in a preliminary graphic design version:

*As it still remains ... The cover! Perhaps I hesitate a little to write to you because I'm not quite satisfied! If you wish I would like to accept it as it is, but if you permit I would like to explain to you why I wish it had changed. For me, your work owes its charm in a large part to its simplicity, its sublime completion, its noble forms. I also know that in the few specimens that I have seen, the color is full of lime accents and very pronounced, I know, that all this results from a view of life very superior and subtle and I understood that you are directing all that yourself ... and by saying all that, I get to the sketch for the cover and ...*

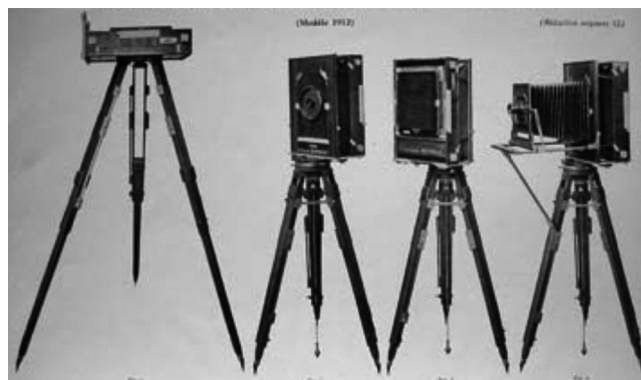
*I must confess, that I do not find a representation of the contents summarized. The drawing does not have the completion that gives so much charm to your furniture and interiors and the action of “THE COVER” is missing. The cover should be the idea of covering, hiding, embracing, as for example one wraps himself in his coat. That way, I would like to have your work enveloped in the drawing volume of your cover.*²¹

Embracing charm and tactility, it must have pleased Eileen Gray to read it. A path in the opposite direction than the discourse of that time. To remember: Le Corbusier's manifesto *Vers une architecture*, demanding an architecture based on function and an aesthetic based on pure form was published just one year before, 1923.

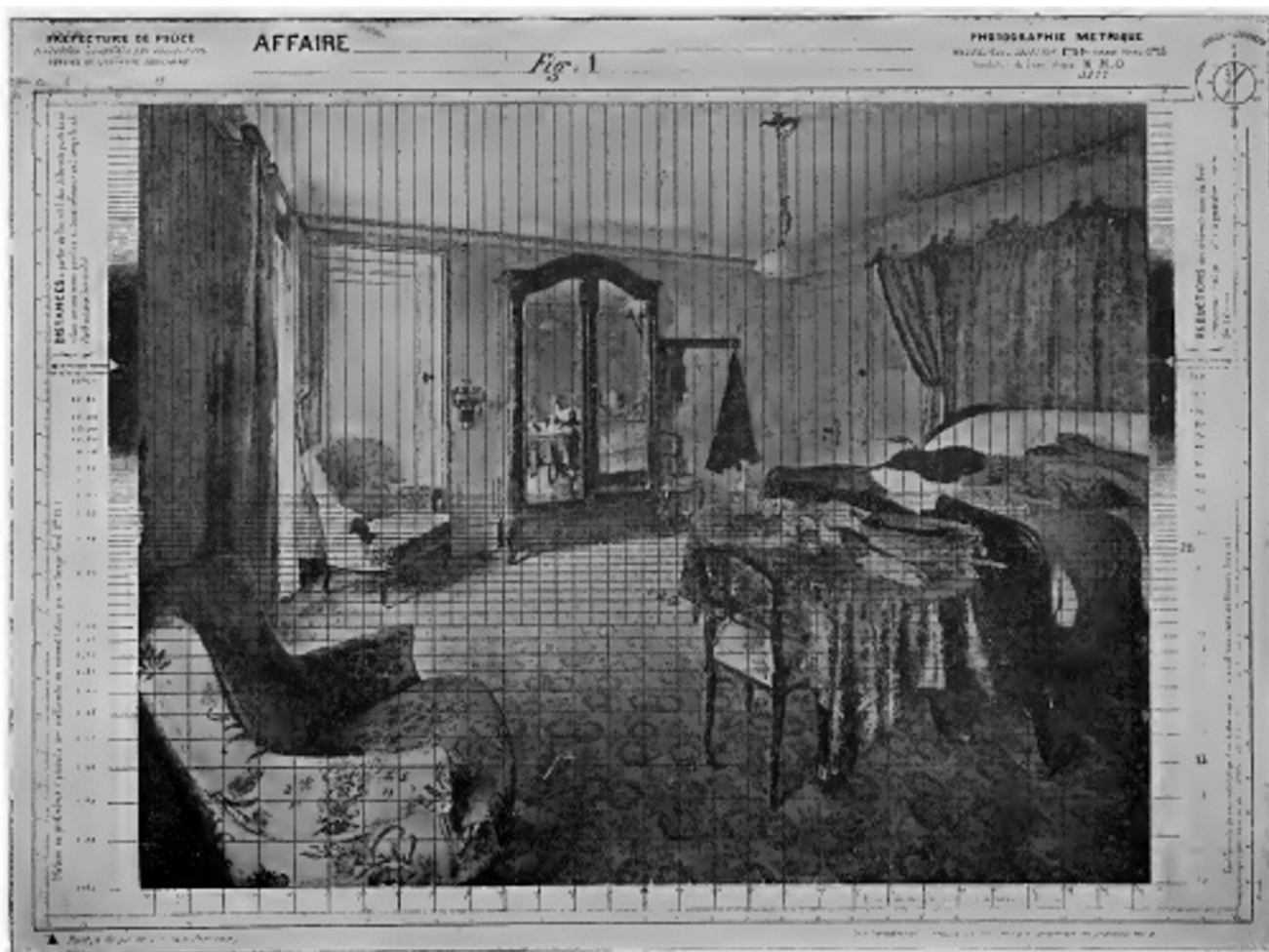
That same letter of Hendricus Wijdeveld, written on 2 July 1924 to Eileen Gray, offers us another surprise.

Contrary to what I thought until I encountered those letters, Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici did not appear as “a couple” to Hendricus Wijdeveld. It was surprisingly Hendricus Wijdeveld who proposed Badovici as author of the article in *Wendingen*²². It seems as if Jean Badovici until then did not have a close relationship with Eileen Gray as was the case soon after. Was the writing of the *Wendingen*-article in the summer of 1924 the beginning of the deeper professional and personal relationship between Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici?

Hendricus Wijdeveld suggested a personal meeting with Eileen Gray in order to discuss the *Wendingen* publication. Again, Eileen Gray preferred to send another person on her behalf to meet Hendricus Wijdeveld in Amsterdam.



06 “Appareil de Photographie métrique avec mise en plaque de l'image à l'arrière, format 24 x 30”. © Alphonse Bertillon *Photographie Métrique de Alphonse Bertillon. Identification judiciaire*, Paris, Établissement Locour-Berthiot, 1913, 4.



Who was this person and why is it important to know? The answer may lead us to the camera which is used some five years later to photograph E.1027.

The mysterious contact person, Mademoiselle Bertillon, must have been a close acquaintance of Eileen Gray. Hendricus Wijdeveld wrote in his letter to Eileen Gray, “votre amie Mlle Bertillon” [your friend Miss Bertillon]<sup>23</sup>. The letter does not mention a first name of Mlle Bertillon and a Mlle Bertillon is not known in the biography of Eileen Gray. I cannot draw a conclusion other than that person must be Suzanne Bertillon. A decorative artist, designer of furnishing fabrics, clothes and wall coverings. Suzanne Bertillon exhibited her works at the *Salon d'Automne* and at the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs* in the 1920s. Exactly the same two places and dates, where Eileen Gray exhibited her own works in Paris. Suzanne Marguerite Bertillon had her studio at 14, *Rue Visconti*, in Paris from 1920 until 1938. Eileen Gray had her atelier, with Evelyn Wyld (1882–1973), in the overlapping time period (1910–1924) right across the street at 17, *Rue Visconti*.

Is the correlation of Eileen Gray to this Mlle Bertillon wishful thinking? Does a family name without a first name meet scientific requirements? I didn't want to leave the field to speculation and dug into the archives again.

After days of browsing papers and letters I had the proof in my hands — a letter from Hendricus Wijdeveld to Jean Badovici — in easy-to-read typescript it says “Mlle. Susanne Bertillon”<sup>24</sup>. Eureka!

The artist Suzanne Bertillon was the niece of Alphonse Bertillon (1853–1914), inventor of anthropometrical photography which was the leading investigative method to photograph criminals. A typical mug shot is two-part, with one side-view photo, and one front-view. The background is usually stark and simple. Alphonse Bertillon developed standards for recording crime scenes. Overview shots, where every piece of furniture and every detail is important in order to tell the story of the total. The story of the crime-scene. In his book, to be read as a user-manual, the translated legend of one illustration says: “Transforming photography into an architect's plan using the perspective chart”<sup>25</sup>. The telling of a story by taking care for all the details and the *mise-en-scène* of the place of action is stunning between Alphonse Bertillon's photographs of a crime scene and Eileen Gray's photographs of her interiors.

In later years, Suzanne Bertillon wrote the biography of her famous uncle, a book, that is a major source of the family's history. Obviously, Suzanne Bertillon stayed in close contact with Alphonse Bertillon.



Was Alphonse Bertillon the “master photographer” for Eileen Gray? Yes, his photos were a source of inspiration for Eileen Gray, his manuals the key to gain knowledge. The Bertillon family was the best advisor for Eileen Gray when it came to buying professional equipment. Professional cameras, which Eileen Gray could order and buy in Paris such as a custom-made camera of the “Bertillon-camera” type manufactured by “Lacour-Berthiot”. The equipment used by the French police officer Alphonse Bertillon. Crime and Photography — CSI E.1027 — The floor to further investigate is yours.

### Notes

- 1 In August 2006, Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller donated all their research material on Eileen Gray, including more than 700 photos of E.1027, to the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.
- 2 Select publications by Stefan Hecker and Christian Müller on the work of Eileen Gray:  
Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, *archibese 4-91*, “Eileen Gray”, CH-Heiden, Arthur Niggli Verlag, 1991.  
Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, *Eileen Gray Works and Projects*, Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gili S.A., 1993.  
Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, “Eine virtuelle Rekonstruktion des Maison en Bord de Mer”, in Caroline Constant, Wilfried Wang, *Eileen Gray, Eine Architektur für alle Sinne*, D-Tübingen, Wasmuth Verlag, 1996, 118–127.  
Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, “Virtual reality and conservation. Eileen Gray’s Maison en Bord de Mer”, *ARCHIS 6/1996*, Rotterdam, Misset uitgeverij bv, 1996, 37–41.  
Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, “Villa E-1027 Roquebrune digitalised”, in Allen Cunningham, *Modern Movement Heritage*, London, E & FN SPON, 1998, 159–162.
- 3 Wessel de Jonge, “Blitz-campaign for set of furniture by Eileen Gray”, *docomomo International Newsletter* No. 6, Eindhoven 1991, 9–10.
- 4 Archive of the author, letter from Dr. Peter Kägi’s attorneys at law to Christian Müller, Zürich, 21 September 1994.
- 5 Archive of the author, memorandum of the phone call conversation of Mr. B. Kägi (son of Dr. Peter Kägi) with Christian Müller, 4 November 1996.
- 6 Archive of the author, memorandum of the phone call conversation of Bruno Reichlin with Christian Müller, 19 September 1995.
- 7 Archive of the author, letter from Mr. F. Goven, *Le Conservateur régional des Monuments historiques*, Ministère de la culture et de la communication to Christian Müller, Aix-en-Provence, 23 December 1996.
- 8 Archive of the author, letter from Mr. J. Marx, *p/o Le Conservateur régional des Monuments historiques*, Ministère de la culture et de la communication to Christian Müller, Aix-en-Provence, 9 September 1998.
- 9 Free translation from the editors from the original: “J’ai pu présenter le dossier constitué en vue du classement de la villa d’abord à la commission régionale du patrimoine à Aix-en-Provence, ..., puis à la commission supérieure à Paris, ... Ces deux instances se sont prononcées à l’unanimité en faveur du classement de la villa E.1027 parmi les monuments historiques, le classement étant la mesure la plus élevée existant dans la législation française. Toutefois les représentants de la succession Kagi, propriétaire de la maison, refusent toujours actuellement cette proposition, interdisant ainsi la signature de l’arrêté par la ministre de la culture. La villa étant en vente, l’aboutissement de la procédure en cours reste donc subordonné au changement de propriétaire”. Archive of the author, letter from Mr. J. Marx, *p/o Le Conservateur régional des Monuments historiques*, Ministère de la culture et de la communication to Christian Müller, Aix-en-Provence, 22 January 1999.
- 10 Jean Badovici, Eileen Gray, *E-1027. Maison en Bord de Mer*, *L’Architecture Vivante* 1929, Paris, Édition Albert Morancé, 1929.
- 11 Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, “Virtual reality and conservation. Eileen Gray’s Maison en Bord de Mer”, *ARCHIS 6/1996*, Rotterdam, Misset uitgeverij bv, 1996, 38, 41.
- 12 Archive of the author, fax letter from Joseph Rykwert to Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, 21 April 1991.
- 13 Archive of the author, letter from Prunella Clough (niece of Eileen Gray) to Christian Müller, 1 January 1996.
- 14 Jean Badovici, Eileen Gray, op. cit., planche 18.
- 15 Archive of the author, fax letter from Joseph Rykwert to Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, 21 April 1991.
- 16 Stefan Hecker & Christian Müller, “Eileen Gray oder ein unbekümmerter Umgang mit der Moderne”, *archibese 4-91*, “Eileen Gray”, CH-Heiden, Arthur Niggli Verlag, 1991, 26–27.
- 17 Joseph Rykwert, “Qu’est-ce que j’avais à dire...”, *archibese 4-91*, “Eileen Gray”, CH-Heiden, Arthur Niggli Verlag, 1991, 76.
- 18 Gray gave each of her houses, rugs and furniture in a playful way names referring to geographic places or to persons: Lou Pérou, Bastide Blanche, Bibendum, E.1027, etc.
- 19 The first ever presentation of these letters in public took place at the lecture of Christian Müller in Berlin, 11 April 2019, part of the symposium *Eileen Gray E.1027 Master Bedroom*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.
- 20 Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut/ WJJD\_15-9a and WJJD\_15-9b.
- 21 Free translation from the editors from the original: “...Comme ça reste encore... La couverture! Peut-être j’hésite un peu de vous en écrire parce que je n’en suis pas toute à fait content! Si vous désirez je veux l’accepter tel quelle est, mais si vous permettez je voudrais bien vous expliquer, pourquoi je la voudrais avoir changée. Pour moi, votre œuvre doit son charme pour un grand part à sa simplicité, à son achèvement sublime, à sa noblesse des formes. Je sais aussi, que dans le peu des spécimens que j’ai vu, la couleur est pleine d’accents chauds et fort prononcés, je sais, que tout ça résulte d’une vue de vie très supérieure et subtile et j’ai compris, que vous dirigez tout ça vous-même... et en disant tout ça j’arrive à l’esquisse pour la couverture et... Il me faut confesser, que je n’y trouve pas une représentation du contenu résumé. Le dessin n’a pas l’achèvement qui donne tant de charme à vos meubles et vos intérieurs et l’action de ‘La Couverture’ lui manque. La couverture devrait être l’idée de couvrir, cacher, embrasser, comme par exemple on s’enveloppe dans son manteau. Comme ça je voudrais voire enveloppé votre œuvre dans le volume du dessin de votre couverture.” Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut/ WJJD\_19-48a.
- 22 Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut/ WJJD\_19-48a.
- 23 Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut/ WJJD\_19-48a.
- 24 Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut/ WJJD\_19-52.
- 25 Alphonse Bertillon, *Photographie Métrique de Alphonse Bertillon. Identification judiciaire*, Paris, Établissement Lacour-Berthiot, 1913, 104.

### References

- HECKER, Stefan & MÜLLER, Christian, *archibese 4-91*, “Eileen Gray”, CH-Heiden, Arthur Niggli Verlag, 1991.
- HECKER, Stefan & MÜLLER, Christian, *Eileen Gray Works and Projects*, Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gili S.A., 1993.
- HECKER, Stefan & MÜLLER, Christian, “A virtual image of modernity”, *docomomo International* No. 14, Eindhoven 1995, 61–64.
- HECKER, Stefan & MÜLLER, Christian, “Eine virtuelle Rekonstruktion des Maison en Bord de Mer”, in Caroline Constant & Wilfried Wang, *Eileen Gray, Eine Architektur für alle Sinne*, D-Tübingen, Wasmuth Verlag, 1996, 118–127.
- HECKER, Stefan & MÜLLER, Christian, “Virtual reality and conservation. Eileen Gray’s Maison en Bord de Mer”, *ARCHIS 6/1996*, Rotterdam, Misset uitgeverij bv, 1996, 37–41.
- HECKER, Stefan & MÜLLER, Christian, “Villa E-1027 Roquebrune digitalised”, in Allen Cunningham, *Modern Movement Heritage*, London, E & FN SPON, 1998, 159–162.

### Christian Müller

(b. Switzerland, 1963) Dipl.Arch. ETH/SIA. Founding Partner at gutundgut Zürich-Rotterdam. He lives in Rotterdam.