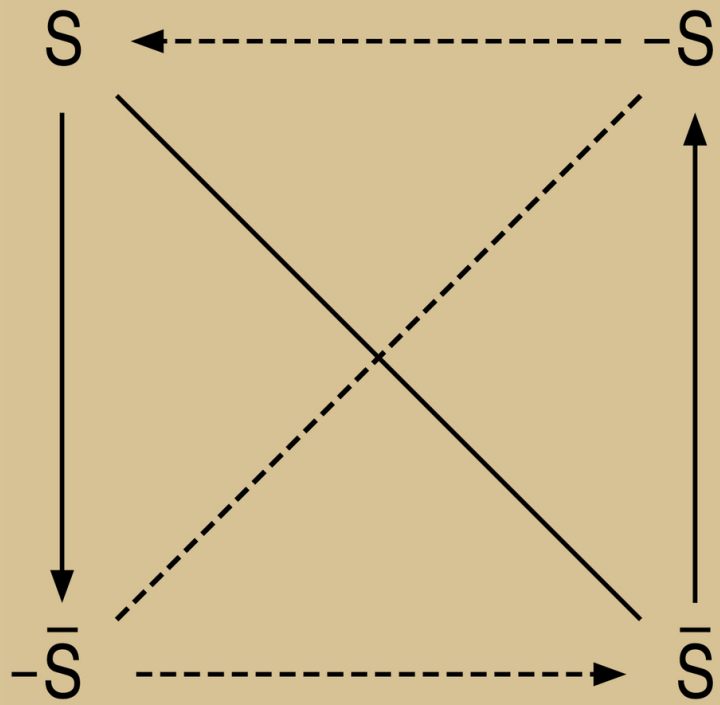


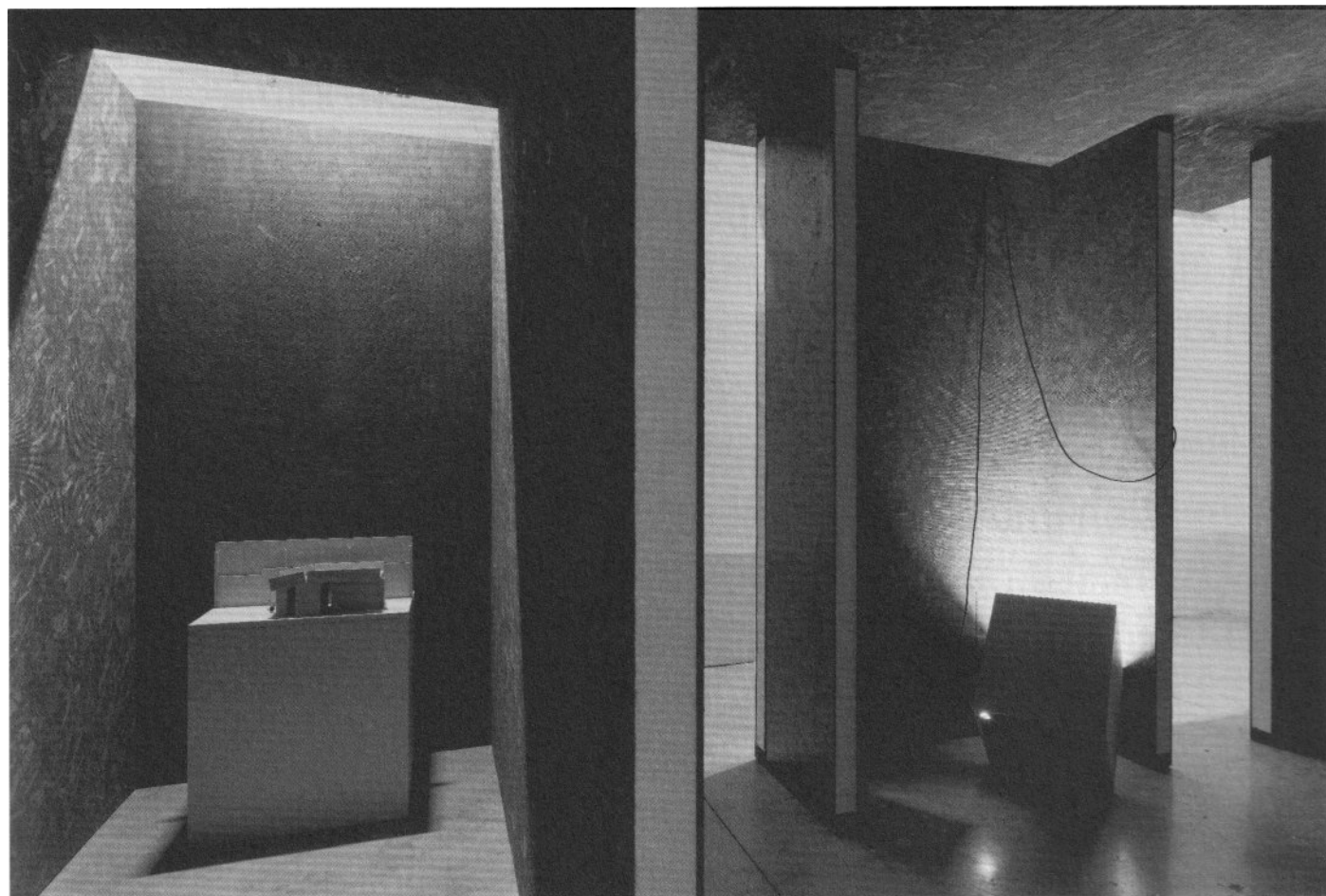
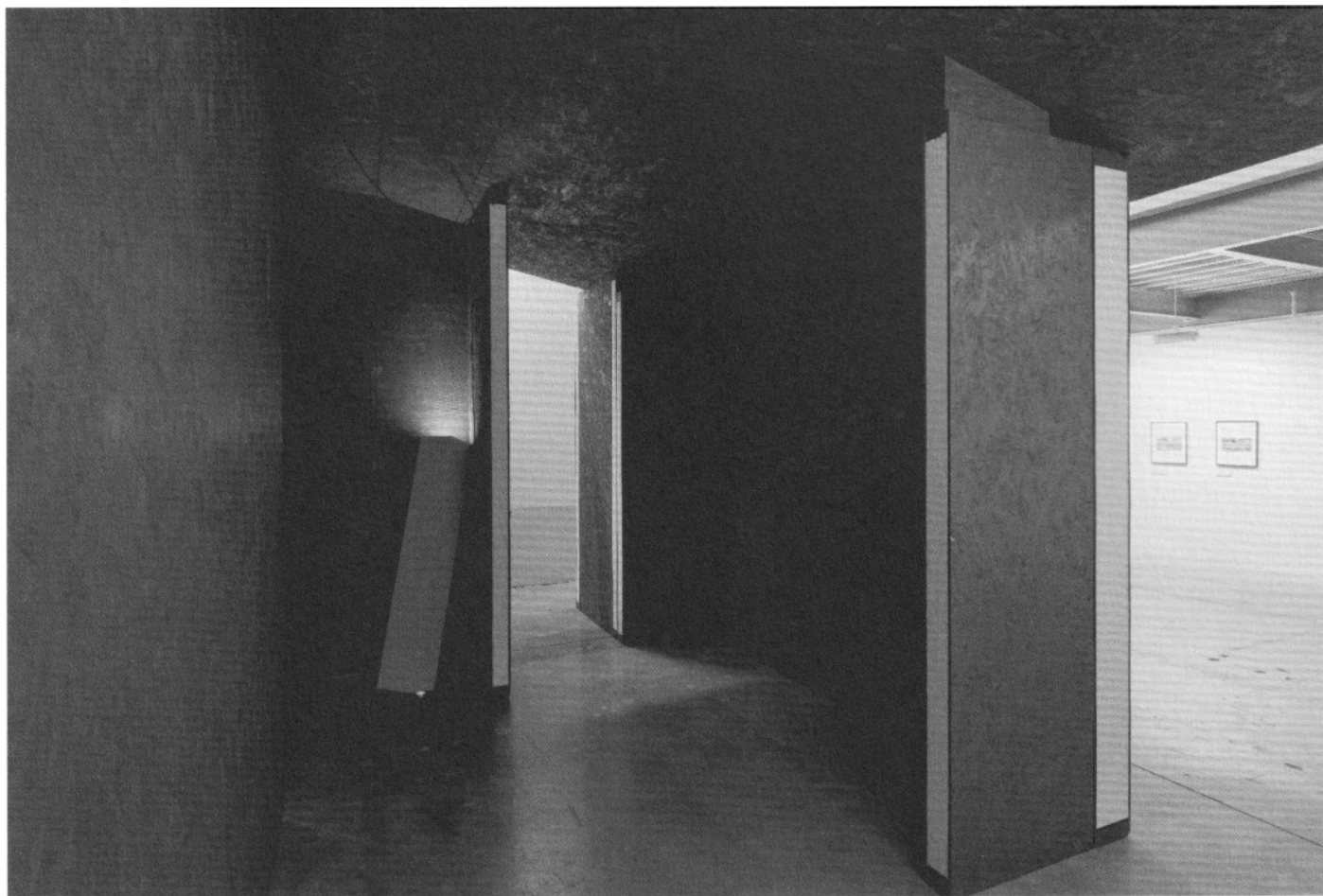


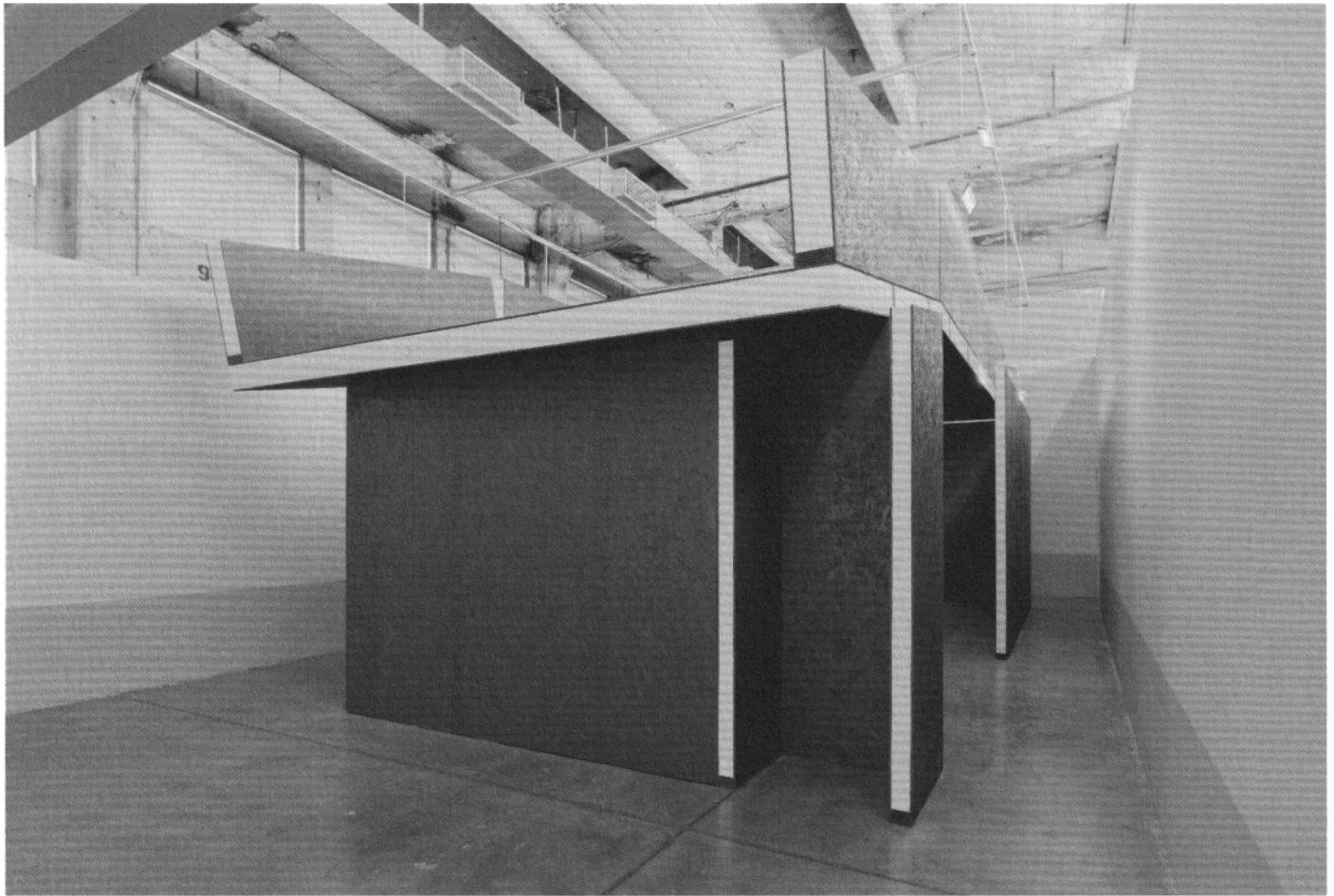
Paint tone, brush width, and canvas support were some of the attributes of what the Russian avant-gardists called the *faktura* of painting: its material practice and manufacture.¹ Even a slight difference in two white hues could produce an “irrational” gap of space, wrote Kazimir Malevich, without recourse to the calculated technique of perspective.² Following the concept of *faktura*, other modern painters and their critics collapsed these material specificities onto the flat plane of painting—the supporting framework unique to their medium. The labor of painting, its “operations and works,” thus began to define a limited and focused discourse through media.³ While parallel arguments were made for sculpture, sound, poetry, and film to define clear boundaries among the arts, architecture was initially excluded, or perhaps self-excluded, from this modern overhaul. It seemed to emerge as an impossible medium, too multifaceted to conform to any single set of techniques. The field’s diverse and changing forms of labor and material practices resulted in often contradictory forms of material support. So, while the arts entered the postwar period with a conscious effort toward self-purification, architecture avoided the encounter with its own modernity, with a few late exceptions.⁴

Yet Craig Dworkin’s close reading of multiple nearly blank artworks links two seemingly distinct artistic movements to one another: medium specificity and conceptualism. In writing that “the most conceptual works are always caught up in the most material specifics,” Dworkin showed the supporting material necessary to present nearly blank formats with extreme self-awareness.⁵ Similarly, Rosalind Krauss reads abstract grids into windows, thereby materializing the conceptualized canvas into a mundane object of building

construction. Her psychoanalytic reading of mullions as geometric lines, however, could also be understood in reverse: within her claim that behind every grid, there lies a window, is the possibility that within every window there must also necessarily be a conceptual grid.⁶ And so we cannot unsee the infinitely flat matrix of lines, made visible by two closed window panes, bisected by horizontal mullions, or that same mechanism revealing the conceptual structure of deep perspectival space when the vectors of the mullions converge on a single vanishing point. Krauss's conceptual analysis of Casper David Friedrich's *painter's window* lurks in the frames, panes, and mullions of every window in general.

Whereas medium specificity seems to have been unfit for architectural appropriation, "conceptual architecture" was hypothesized in 1970 in an issue of *Design Quarterly* put together by John Margolies. In his letter to participants, Margolies wrote that he was "not interested in the traditional magazine format of ordered text and pictures," soliciting from the authors "a more *general* and less *specific* type of communication."⁷ In this context, Peter Eisenman's erased essay, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture," may have simply been one application of those guidelines: specific text was left out, and only the general format of the page, including its marginal support, remained.⁸ Beyond its apparent obedience to the editorial directive, this act of publishing a series of nearly blank pages may have appeared quite ordinary in 1970. By that time, the art world had grown accustomed to such forms of redaction with Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* from 1953, John Cage's *4'33"* of silence composed in 1952, and Jean Cocteau's depiction of the blank poetry book titled *Nudisme* in his film *Orpheus* from 1949.⁹ What made this particular submission peculiar was that it finally made its appearance in the rather conservative and professional field of architecture.¹⁰





In all of these examples, the conceptual position produced a distance of writers from their voices, bringing them into a *structuralist* mode of production. These acts represent variations on Roland Barthes's tantalizing description of writing, after the "Death of the Author":

Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no one origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.¹¹

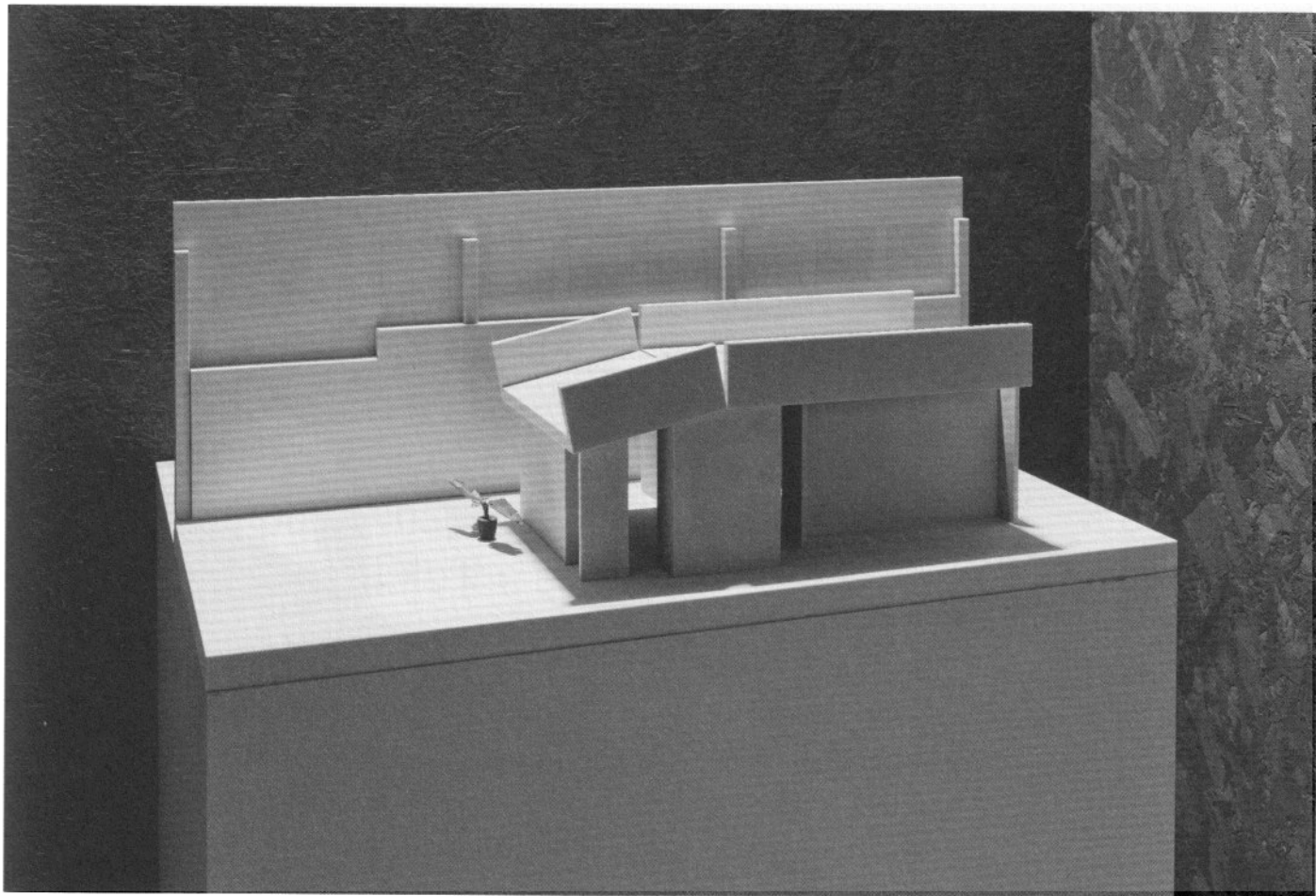
The term “scriptor,” defined to mean a mere typist or copyist, replaces the word “author” as the hand extends not “thought or passion” but a “gesture of inscription.”¹² The act of writing does not seek to produce meaning, but records the vast technicality of “language” without origin, rendering the act of writing as a sort of cultural reflex. With this dire observation, a scrivener—as we have been told about the incipient automation of architecture—might just prefer not to do it.¹³ We’ve often wondered why library copies of the *DQ* issue haven’t received cheeky pencil scribbles from other readers qua writers, as they filled in an old game of “mad libs” left behind by other scriptors.

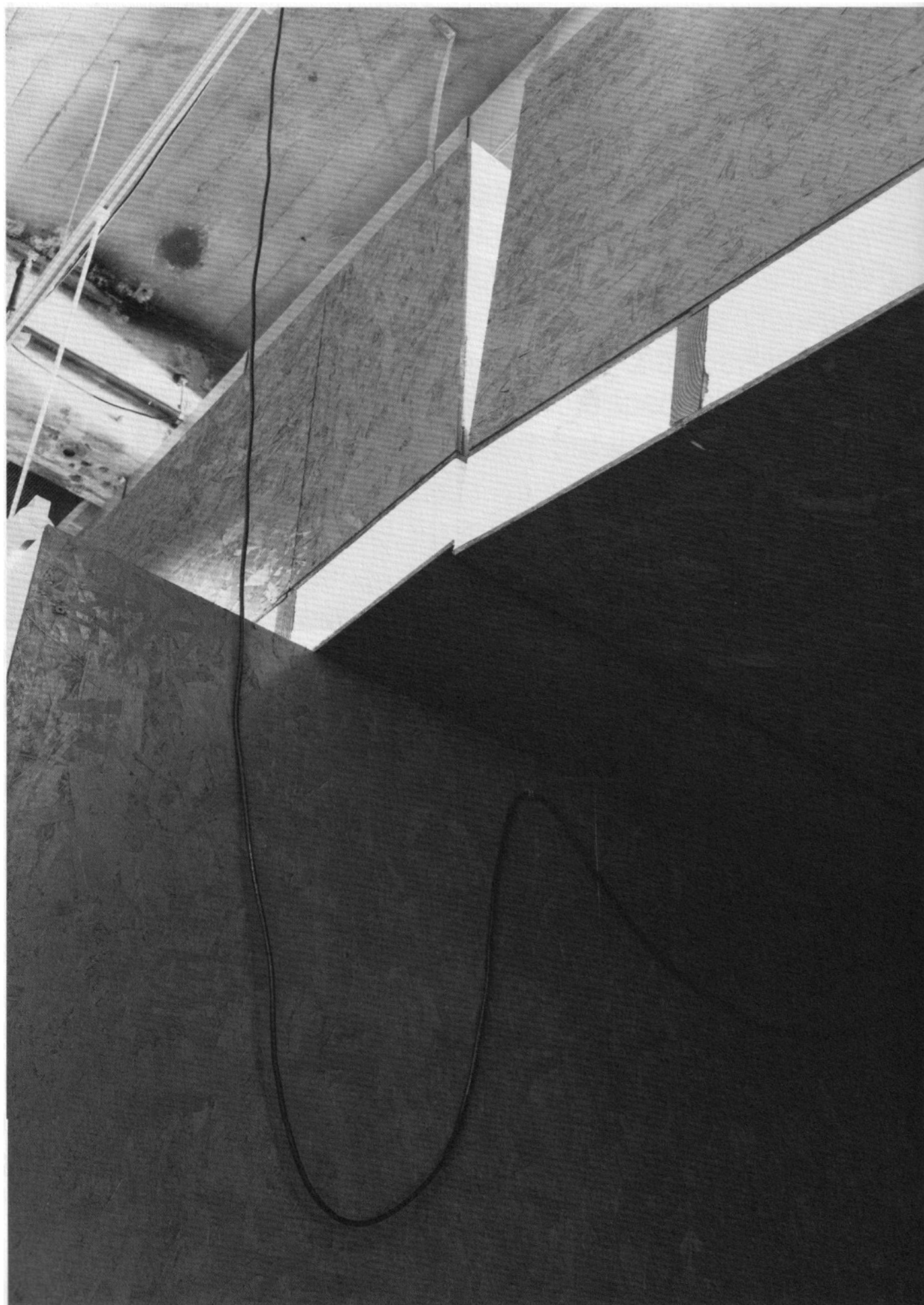
How could this conceptual-historical-structuralist act, whatever you want to call it, have not produced heightened forms of self-awareness or in-depth discussions on specifying techniques in designing buildings? The action of publishing these nearly blank pages in 1970 made any future acts of building blank surfaces, scrutinizing subfloors, designing data sheets, and formulating formats of architectural production as inevitable reenactments. So, we might be alone in this view. “Reading is nothing more than a *referendum*,” wrote Barthes in arguing against the passive consumption of text. Perhaps we can extend his statement to reading buildings’ floor plans and facades, as we reject a current trend to train an army of formal analysts as mere consumers.¹⁴

The function of a “blank form” is its capacity to reveal general categories to be filled in with specific content. In fact, we can simply use *blank* as a noun rather than an adjective here. A blank is simply a document, an empty *form-ulaire* waiting to be filled in by its reader-writer.¹⁵ We see our projects as resulting from our inscriptions of content into blanks such as these; in our documentation, paint swatches, expansion gaps, contraction joints, screw drive types, and wainscoting could be the content of an otherwise blank

form. As we fill out forms, we feel like we are certifying or making things more certain, specifying the generalities, or simply writing. If in 1970, redaction was the general form of writing—the first conceptual position—then filling in the blanks in 2020, fifty years later, is the specific form of writing—or what we are now calling the *postconceptual position*. That is, to produce a “writerly” project in architecture, we work on specifying the technicalities—formats, materials, sizes, colors, ducts, mullions, and hinges—of architecture’s blank forms.

We would like to give one example of a blank in architecture that we have attempted to fill in with the specificities of our own time and place. This blank form comes from the photographs of the 19th-century natural historian Eugène Trutat, who documented a series of megalithic monuments, often referred to as dolmens. We have adopted these six-thousand-year-old rude stone structures as the potential generality from which specific residential projects can be produced. One of these prehistoric specimens, the Dolmen de Vaour in the Tarn region of France, has especially captured our attention because of its particular posture. The first step of formal analysis would be to redact its specificity—but much of this work has already been done, simply erased by the passage of time, loss of memory, erosion, accident, and by this architecture’s existence antecedent to human writing. Still, it is relatively similar to other dolmens. Several stones form the perimeter of its nearly rectangular interior; these vertical supports are called orthostates. One orthostate is long, forming a sort-of wall-like enclosure, while the others are chunky and can almost be read as truncated columns. All vertical stones are set in from the perimeter, allowing a rather large horizontal slab to appear to float above them. This capstone appears to have broken into two unequal parts. The stones are rude, not hewn, and they are rough and textured, blending in with the grey landscape beyond. The low contrast between the monument and its

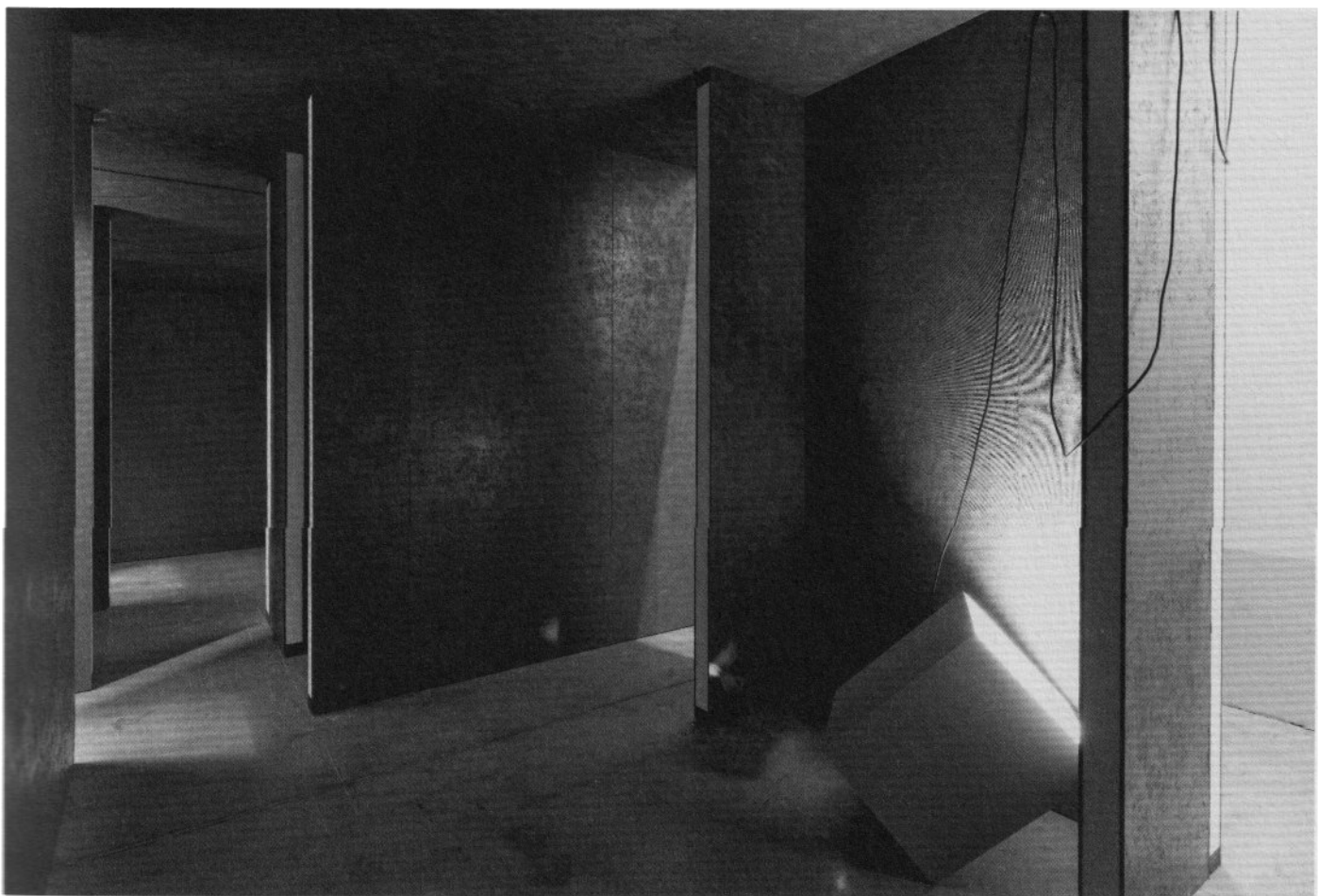
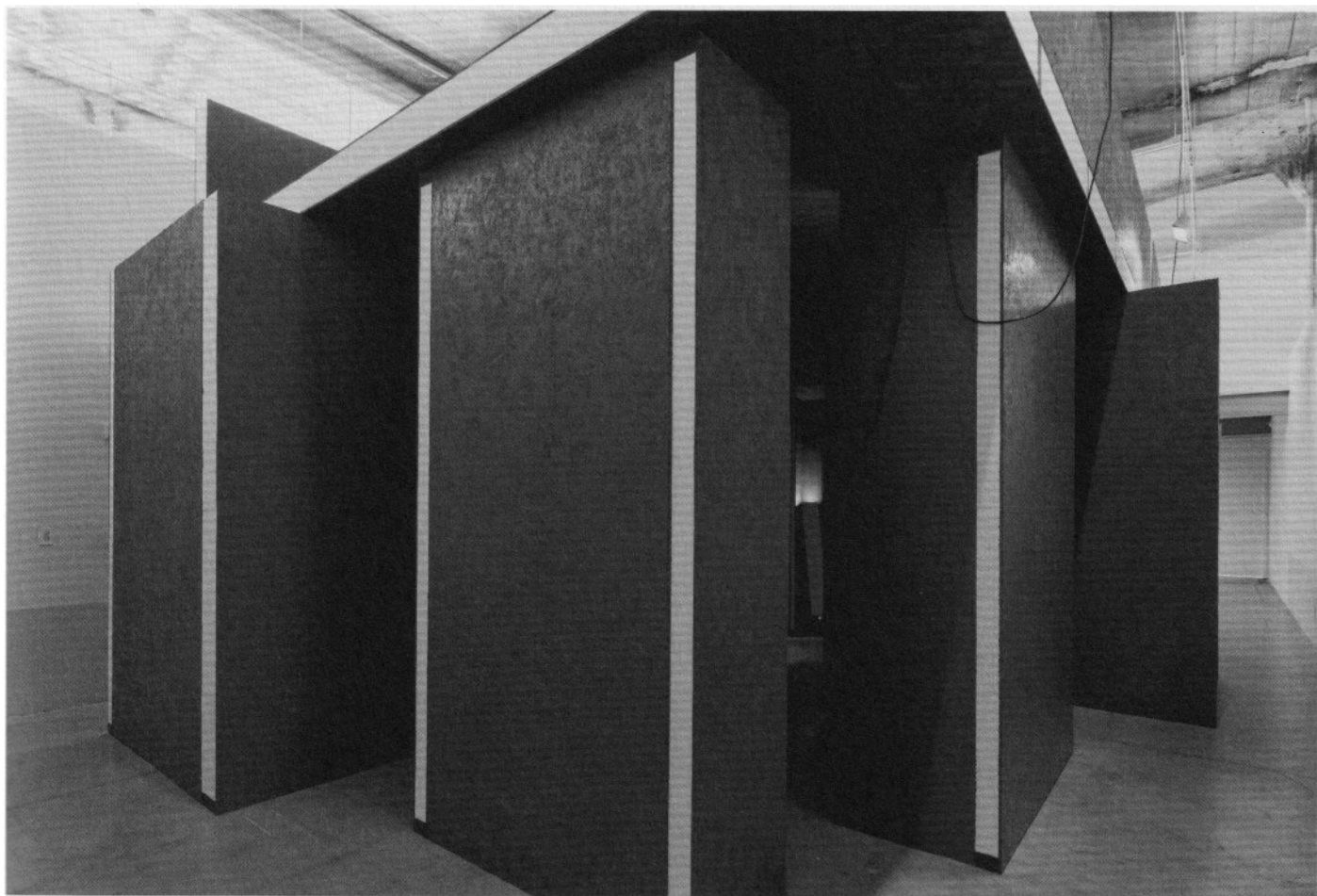


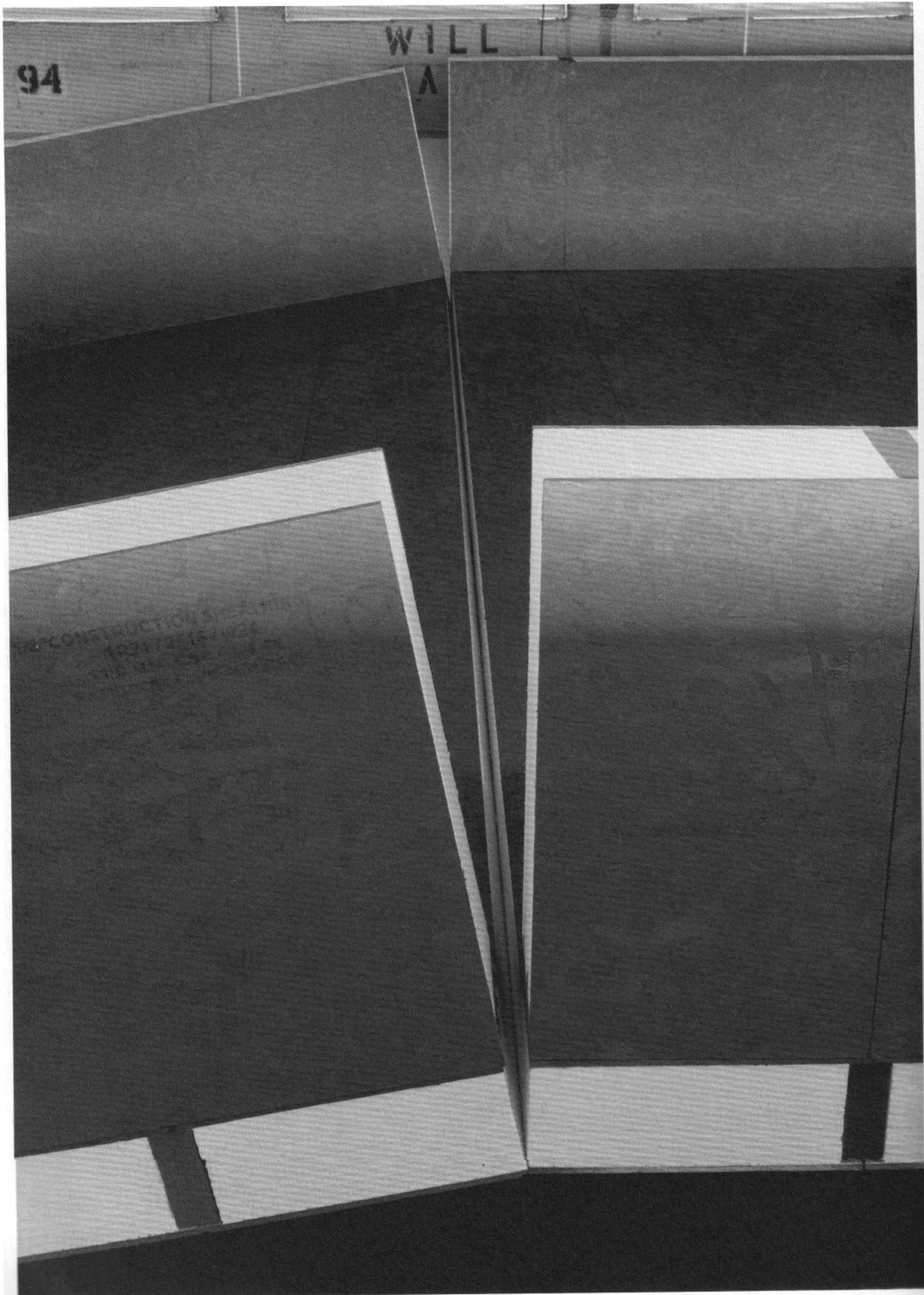


surroundings inspires us to use a tentative tone in our description. “Relatively similar,” “nearly rectangular,” “sort-of wall-like,” and “rather large” are ways of generalizing, of constructing a precedent through informal analysis. To imagine this primitive hut as a model for residential construction would require specifying what this description has left out from the mundane reality of very specific building stuff.¹⁶

The Battleship House—a two-bedroom backyard dwelling on the property of a historic home adjacent to the University of Virginia campus—inscribes the informal arrangement of the dolmen’s orthostates into the domestic interior. Its plan is not defined through the composition of rooms—the living spaces—as it would be done in a traditional project, but rather through the specification of the infrastructural cores—the mechanical walls, normally tucked away inside the walls. These cores are arranged at will, depending on site and circumstance, not unlike the ships in the gridded sea in a game of Battleship. Hence, we gave the house its name: Battleship. Kitchen counters, a powder room, a pantry or a large closet, two bathrooms, two Murphy beds, and the sofa for the living room are all developed as freestanding elements, allowing for the spaces to occupy the air among them. In this way, hallways are created simply by the gap between two things; rooms are defined by the leftover space between three things; doors are inserted for privacy purposes between two or three other things. At times, these internal ships stop short of the ceiling, exposing a slit for cove lighting. At other times, the reveals in the flashing offer similarly expanded gaps on the exterior, splintering the siding at the seams. But we call this project Battleship for yet another reason: the color “battleship grey” covers the building’s every detail. The surplus of this tone following World War II made the color choice ubiquitous, and it can still be specified for nearly every product—duct, paint, screw, or pane—such that the details of an entire house could conform to the same mute palette.

Although the house is now on hold, we brought a full-scale, but contracted, version of it into the SCI-Arc Gallery in Los Angeles for the exhibition *Rude forms among us*. The shrunken Battleship was shown alongside the photographs by Trutat, on loan from the Muséum de Toulouse, courtesy of the Head of the Photo Library and Curatorial Assistant, Frédérique Gaillard. Squeezing this awkwardly large construction into the gallery required precise measurement. The gallery walls only approximated 90-degree corners, while the floor deviated from its level condition by an incline of two inches in both axes of rotation. While measuring out the space that inexplicably seemed to elude him, master builder Austin Anderson spotted the contraction joints in the concrete floor. A normal + (plus) clearly marked the surface. This datum point became the (0, 0) coordinate for construction—the reference from which all future measurements would radiate outward. Measuring from this point, we taped out the floor and laid down the sill plates, shimming and bolting into the solid concrete floor. Of course, this house would not be made of stone. The material selected was a SIP (Structural Insulated Panel) that is composed of two sheets of OSB (Oriented Strand Board) that form a sort of ice cream sandwich filled with EPS (Expanded Polystyrene). Every panel was tied together by lumber splines that measured either four or eight inches deep and spanned the full height of the 10-foot wall or the full span of the 16-foot roof. The blocks were laid out as placeholders, eventually to be filled in with stuff: running water, electrical conduit, copper flashing, domestic appliances. Following the awkward capstone of the Dolmen de Vaour, this house's roof was similarly broken. We scored and folded the SIPs as though we were handling giant sheets of foam core. Only one thin paper layer, in this case, specified as a strand-board sheet, would clad a continuous surface of the underside of the roof, while the scored seams of the SIPs above burst open exposing the stark stupidity of the foam





within. Using a paint gun, we clad these surfaces evenly in high gloss “forest black” paint, diluted two-to-one with water. As a result, the strand boards’ appearance shifted with light conditions, ranging from a rough velvet to a reflective smooth texture, approximating a stony finish.

Working in a gallery, we are constantly reminded of the walls, the limits of the room. In Trutat’s photographs, the dolmen is located in the landscape—the horizon divides the picture into two equal halves: the upper half filled by sky and the lower half filled by earth. By contrast, the gallery’s corners—where the white walls meet the grey floor—are too low to enact the illusion of air meeting ground. Taping out a line 38” above the ground level, we delineated a new horizontal line as the backdrop to the house. The walls were then painted in two tones: the upper half clad in matte “mountain air”—a pinkish hue of dark white; and the lower half finished in glossy “SCI-Arc special”—a greenish hue of light grey. While the upper paint illuminated the interior air with soft warmth, the lower paint reflected the dirty texture and greenish tone miming the polished high sheen of the concrete floor. The addition of wainscoting to the gallery, thus, transformed an interior into a modeled landscape, extending the illusion of the ground beyond the limits of the room. We have, thus, adapted to the shrunken field of architecture.¹⁷

So, it was this dark house that you bumped into when you backed up to look at the photographs. And if only for a moment, the fleeting present and the infinite past synced up. Here, without too many explanations, we happened upon a *rude form* that brought us to a time at some remove from our own. Whether the megaliths entered our contemporary consciousness or we moved closer to the Stone Age was not all that important. What was important in these spaces was to feel a slight release from the present, to feel at ease and at home here and then.

- 1 See Yve-Alain Bois, "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zero" [Malevich, The Square, The Degree Zero], *Macula* 1 (1976); Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (Autumn 1984); and Maria Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (Autumn 1999) for an in-depth discussion and historical evolution of the term *faktura*.
- 2 El Lissitzky defines Malevich's construction of parallel space as "irrational" in "A. and Pangeometry," in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 350.
- 3 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature in Paris* (Spring 1965).
- 4 Sylvia Lavin, "Architecture Beside Itself," *Everything All at Once: The Software, Videos, and Architecture of MOS*, ed. Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 86.
- 5 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2013), 25.
- 6 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 58.
- 7 John S. Margolies's letter to participants, re: *Design Quarterly* 78/79—a special double issue on "conceptual architecture."
- 8 Peter Eisenman, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition," *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1970): 1–5.
- 9 For more on blank artforms, read Craig Dworkin "On Nothing" as well as the Nothing archive.
- 10 In writing about the "notes," Mark Jarzombek reminds us of the labor required on the part of the architect to use the historiographic apparatus of the footnote to construct this first conceptual position. "Arbeit ohne Opus," as Jarzombek would call it, takes full advantage of Margolies's promise that he would not "tamper" with the formats and ideas and print the submitted materials precisely as they were laid out by their authors. Eisenman does the work to research and buttress the potentiality of a masterpiece, to lay out on the page his thinking process as it relates to a sequence of writings past, producing minimal material for publication. The project of reference was notably termed conceptual, though Jarzombek also categorized it as "historical." See Mark Jarzombek, "A Conceptual Introduction to Architecture," *Log* 15 (Winter 2009): 89–98.
- 11 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image–Music–Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.
- 12 A definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for "scriptor," is a writer, especially a scribe, a copyist.
- 13 Edward Eigen often invokes "Bartleby, the Scrivener" by Herman Melville; some post-structural French writers have probably written similar things, but we love Edward and understand what *he* is saying.
- 14 Roland Barthes, *S-Z: An Essay* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 4.
- 15 One definition of "blank," in the *OED* is "[a] document, 'paper,' or 'form' with spaces left blank to be filled up at the pleasure of the person to whom it is given (e.g., a blank charter), or as the event may determine; a blank form." Take as an example "a death certificate," a ubiquitous bureaucratic blank that someday will be filled out on all of our behalf. On this pro forma sheet, there are discrete spaces left open for the name of the deceased, the age, the address, and the sex—all relatively easy, although increasingly nuanced, facts identifying a person. Lower, there are larger gaps that span the length of a sentence or even a paragraph, for identifying the possible causes of death. Sometimes, these can be picked from a pull-down menu of a number of identified and codified diseases and organ failures, but at other moments,

a narrative may be filled in; some evidence and poetic license may even replace the simple notion of a numerical fact in this data sheet.

- 16 We can probably trace our notion of a blank to something like the primitive hut, but with some important distinctions. The primitive hut was first described by Marc-Antoine Laugier in 1753, who, in the frontispiece to his *Essay on Architecture*, depicted four trees with intertwining branches that formed a shelter in the forest. Walking into the clearing, the architect—allegorically represented by a wandering putto—encountered this inspirational structure that would in turn guide his classical sensibility of stone construction that seemingly emerged from the syntax of wooden parts. Needless to say, rude stone monuments offer no such

grand narrative. But they are neither a myth nor a drawing; they are real stone structures that exist in the landscapes of every continent.

- 17 In another essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," (*October*, 1979) Krauss describes sculpture in relationship to "not architecture" and "not landscape," producing an expanded field along the axes of the semiotic square. We take architects' fascination with this diagram to mean its reverse: in order to participate in the institutional culture of the museum, we have allowed buildings to contract into a shrunken field by squeezing into the tight spaces of the galleries. For a similar and earlier critique of this phenomenon, see Sylvia Lavin's article "Vanishing Point: The Contemporary Pavilion" in *Artforum* 51, no. 2 (October 2012).