



Ian Jeffrey

After the Function of the Studio

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THE FUNCTION OF THE SPECTACLE

Looking across the page, you would see a sequence of polaroids documenting the changes to the architectural model. Scraps of wood along with pieces of paper spray-painted silver arranged together in various states. “Keeping a record of the sequence of moves gave the architect the freedom to [skip] ahead intuitively rather than logically, while retaining the opportunity to backtrack.” ¹

In the fall of 1992, as he was finalizing the design of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Frank Gehry realized that the exterior of the building was still unreconciled with the interior space. He returned to the architectural model, and decided to change all of the amorphous forms back into a purely functional configuration of galleries. “I always go back to a base of rectangles and boxes and the simplest idea, look at it, and then distort again.” ²

Gehry’s client, the museum director Thomas Krens, happened to see the model at this transitional stage. “I don’t want any of that,” he told the architect. “Think of Frank Lloyd Wright’s [Guggenheim] rotunda. People hate it or love it. [Dan] Flavin did an installation there[...] and when you have living artists, they’ll react to it.” ³ Krens insisted that Gehry needed to “do something else. [...] Make it better than Wright. Make a great space, and we’ll deal with it.” ⁴

Krens’ insistence that “the atrium should be a contentious piece, and should provoke artists,” ⁵ reminded Gehry of a conversation he had with the artist Daniel Buren back in the late 70s. At the time, Gehry had told Buren: “My typical stance has been that the museum should be laid-back and a simple box, in which the artist can come and do anything.” He was surprised by the artist’s reply. “In case you involve yourself in such a thing one day make the best building you can do,” Buren told him. “I think to try to make simple, neutral space would be the worst way. For what?” ⁶

Gehry needed to find an image that he could use to redefine the museum space. “[He] would call me up and say, I got another one,” Krens recalled. “One was Brancusi’s studio. We looked at books of Brancusi’s studio to try and find counterpoints that were developed.” ⁷ Gehry’s idea was that, “standing in the atrium space, one should experience more the informality of a crowded, rough-textured sculptor’s studio, something like that of Brancusi’s legendary Paris studio, filled with a multitude of works in different scales and materials.” ⁸

Brancusi stressed the importance of the spatial relationships between his sculptures by placing them in what he described as “mobile groups.” Towards the end of his life, instead of sculpting new artworks, he focused totally on their relationships within the studio, revising their positions, and documenting this process by photographing them day after day. Upon his death in 1957, Brancusi’s studio was kept intact, and converted into a museum by the French state at the artist’s bequest.

In 1971, Buren wrote a series of essays examining the art system. He concluded *The Function of the Studio* with an analysis of Brancusi’s decision to keep his studio intact. “In order to preserve the relationship between the work and its place of production [and to] demonstrate that the so-called purity of his works is no less beautiful or interesting when seen amidst the clutter of the studio—various tools; other works, some of them incomplete, others complete—than it is in the immaculate space of the sterilized museum.” ⁹

“I always believed that [Frank Lloyd Wright’s] Guggenheim’s architecture, as beautiful as it is, was designed to distract the viewer,” Buren later said. ¹⁰

Gehry remembered thinking, “Frank Lloyd Wright wasn’t interested in the kind of art I’m interested in, and he ignored it [...] he created a building that was antithetical to the art.” ¹¹

“[The artworks] that were hung on those walls were thrust far from the center by a strong centrifugal force, while the eyes of the viewer were drawn irresistibly back towards the center by centripetal force,” Buren said. “In fact, one just had to look down to see the big eye (the pool) looking back. The meaning of this design was clear to me: the museum (i.e. the architecture) looks at you.” ¹²

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1 Coosje van Bruggen, *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1999), 81, 114.

2 Ibid, 115.

3 Ibid.

4 Frank O. Gehry, *Gehry Talks: Architecture + Process* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 176.

5 Ibid.

6 Van Bruggen, *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*, 115, Van Bruggen cites this exchange to an: “unpublished transcript of conversation between Gehry and Daniel Buren [which had occurred] some fifteen years earlier.”

7 Thomas Krens, “Developing the Museum for the 21st Century: A Vision Becomes Reality,” In *Visionary Clients For New Architecture*, ed. Peter Noever (Munich: Prestel, 2000), 58–61.

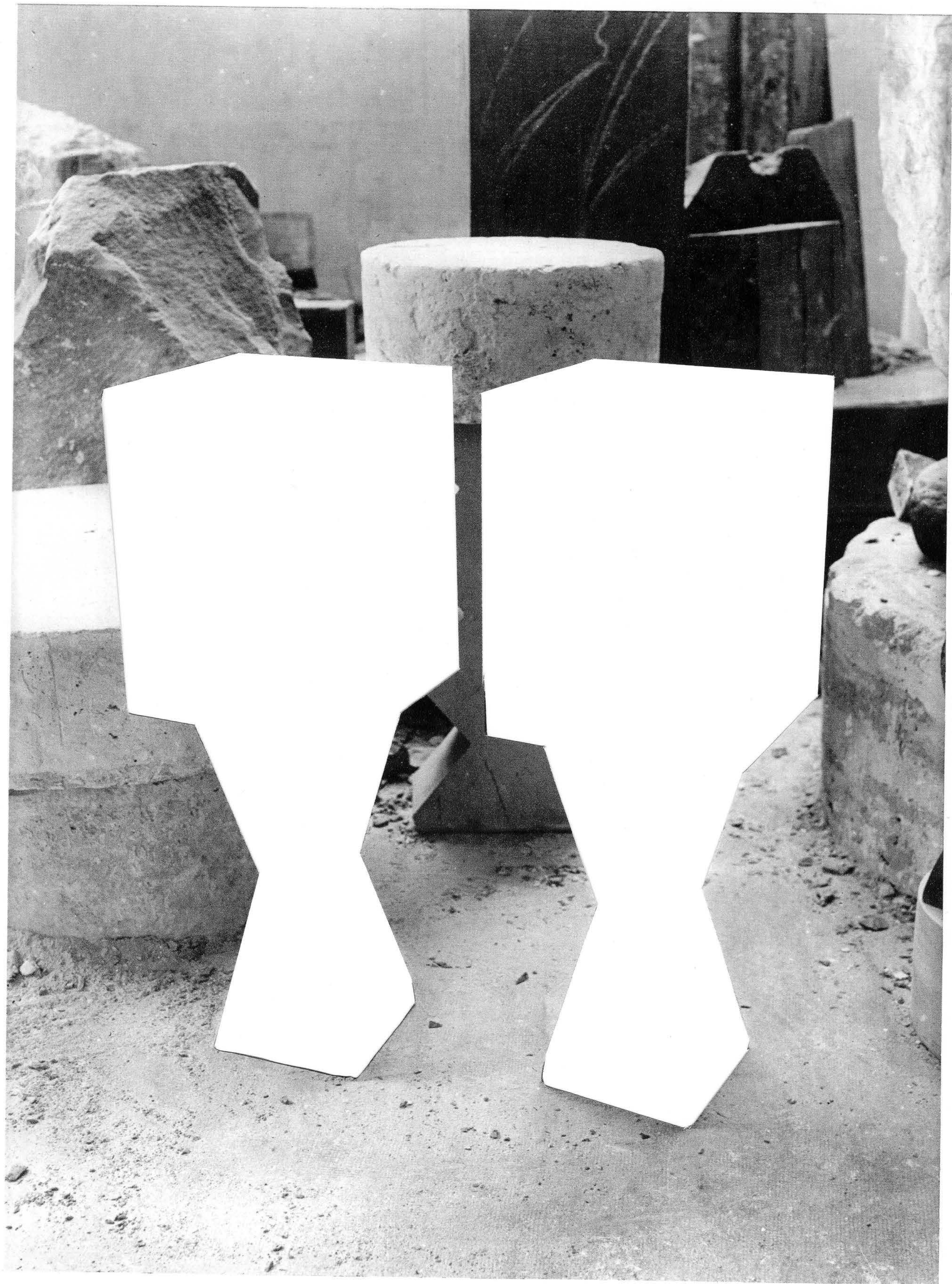
8 Van Bruggen, *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*, 121.

9 Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Studio,” trans. Thomas Respensek, *October* 10 (1979): 56-58.

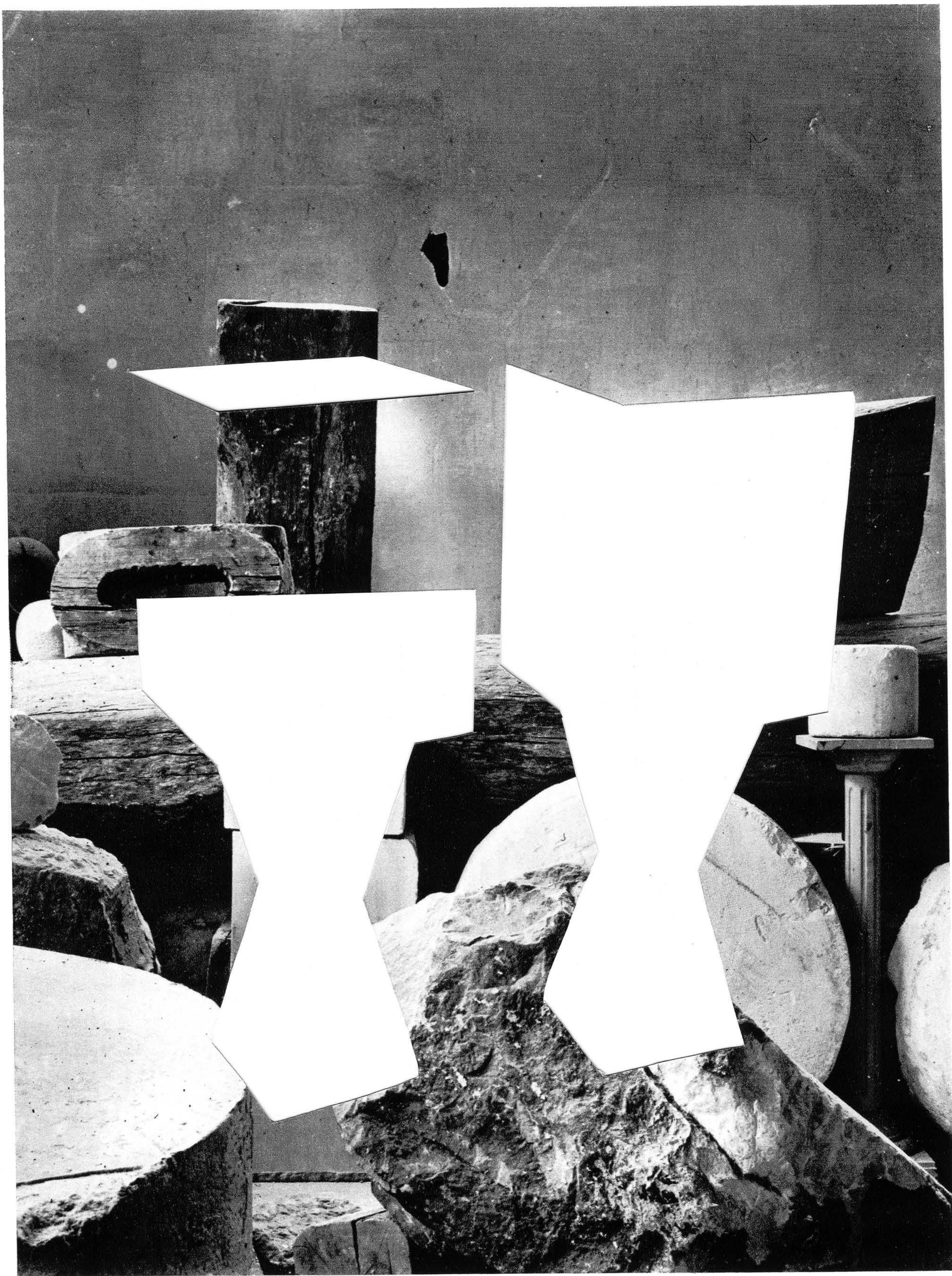
10 Daniel Buren, “A Conversation with Daniel Buren,” interview by Susan Cross, *Guggenheim Magazine*, winter 2005, 14.

11 Gehry, *Gehry Talks*, 176.

12 Buren, “A Conversation with Daniel Buren,” 14.



23 *Vue d'atelier, socles, vers 1921-1922*



24 *Vue d'atelier, vers 1922*