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Zaha Hadid, Judith Turner: A Dialogue

With an essay by Joseph Giovannini and texts by Zaha Hadid and Judith Turner. 68 pp. with 83 illus., 280 x 300 mm, hardcover, English
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The juxtapositions of Zaha Hadid's architectural models and drawings and Judith Turner's photographs of the architect's buildings in this volume reveal that Hadid and Turner are complicit. There is a clear agreement of sensibilities. Each understands the other.

In the first decades of Hadid's career, during which she collided forms and designed in the fall-out, Hadid did not design wholes, but buildings composed of fragments. Like Hadid – but unlike most architectural photographers, trained and paid to document buildings – Turner also does not photograph the whole, and rarely includes the context: her camera sees fragments instead, a collage of parts. Turner's photographs from this early period of Hadid's work are fragmentary views of Hadid's fragmented buildings. Hadid's vision lends itself to Turner's.

Hadid does not design with complete geometries in stable configurations, but designs instead with incomplete or distorted geometries that are dynamic and visually unstable. Turner does the same in her photographs, cropping before a form completes itself in a frame that leaves the rest of the form suggested outside the frame.

Hadid's work is abstract – a permutation of Modernism's triad of point, line and plane. Turner's photography, too, is abstract so that Turner's photographs of Hadid's buildings compound the abstraction, arguably intensifying the three-dimensional abstraction by compressing it into two. Hadid's neutral palette of materials, especially concrete, takes on value in Turner's graphic compositions of black, white and gray, counterintuitively giving neutrality subtle intensity.

Hadid structures her designs dynamically with diagonal lines and oblique planes playing with and against each other in three-dimensional fields. Likewise Turner works on the diagonal, always positioning herself obliquely to buildings, shooting glancingly rather than frontally: her diagonal position further dynamizes Hadid's already energized diagonals. Often Turner doubles down on the diagonality by cranking the camera's lens off its up-down axis to heighten the architectural dynamism. Turning her photographic angle lofts Hadid's already anti-gravitational architectural system off the ground.

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See also: Judith Turner, *Seeing Ambiguity. Photographs of Architecture*, Edition Axel Menges, 2012.

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»I don't think that architecture is only about shelter, is only about a simple enclosure. It should be able to excite you, to calm you, to make you think.« Zaha Hadid

»I use architecture as subject matter to create spare, ambiguous and abstract photographs that do not explain buildings, but rather interpret them.« Judith Turner

Zaha Hadid, Judith Turner **A Dialogue**



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Zaha Hadid in an Issey Myake dress, 1990. Photo: Judith Turner

Judith Turner in a Zaha Hadid outfit («Frozen Aura»), 2014. Photo: Davide Giordano



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Judith Turner
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with an essay by
Joseph Giovannini

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Joseph Giovannini

Abstracting abstraction

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Hadid often shapes building fragments in forced perspective that diverge to multiple vanishing points instead of converging on a single point, creating conflicted, irrational space that does not add up to a Renaissance whole. Turner’s eye gravitates to, and exploits, the visual mystery by focusing her lens on a spatial conundrum that challenges physical reality. She allows the forced perspectives to play against each other in her frame. Hadid’s optical illusions act like a zoom lens speeding space, and in these moments, Turner simply leaves the illusion to speak for itself by recording it, making it more intense by tightly cropping for the illusion.

With incomplete compositions and unstable geometries, Hadid creates a visual ambiguity whose indeterminacy invites conjecture: with little indication of function, the environments open themselves to visual interpretation. Weightless elements float past one another without apparent structure, anchor, or hierarchy, creating shifting compositions that recombine when seen

from changing viewpoints. Turner captures the ambiguity by never explaining the building wholly, by never indicating function, by never suggesting there is a single point of view that would pin the building down. She compounds Hadid’s ambiguities.

In her renderings, Hadid anticipates natural and artificial light and designs for it, showing how the buildings’ planes will grade light and shadow. Turner catches Hadid’s plays of light on surfaces that behave like movie screens receiving projected light. Hadid’s buildings anticipate the light that Turner captures and recomposes.

Both avoid the center and symmetry in favor of active visual fields in which no dominant form fixes the composition and locks the eye. The fields keep the eye moving.

In a true test of their fundamental abstraction and ambiguity, the images can be turned upside down or sideways with equal legibility and impact. Gravity for both Hadid and Turner is not a subject. Spaces are not directional so much as vectorial, driven by a force.

The relationship of Hadid’s and Turner’s work is poetically exponential. Turner’s aesthetic squares Hadid’s to a higher power. Conversely, as the basis of Turner’s photography, Hadid’s buildings represent the square root of Turner’s images. The photographs magnify the original architectural intensity.

Turner and Hadid are friends, but the friendship predates their collaborations. A mutual friend in Holland had asked Turner, then on her way to London, to deliver an envelope of Hadid’s drawings, which had been exhibited, to the architect. Photographer and architect met at the Architectural Association, where Hadid was teaching, and they immediately liked one another. They would later visit each other in their respective cities, London or New York. Both were at the beginning of their careers. Hadid had won The Peak competition in 1983, and in 1980 Turner had published *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects*, a book on buildings by the New York Five: Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, Michael Graves, John Hejduk and Richard Meier. The book established her reputation as an artist photographer specializing in architecture.

Over a dozen years, from 1990 to 2002, Turner photographed Hadid’s early work. The photographs in this volume, complemented by drawings and models by Hadid, date from a pre-digital time. Hadid was still drawing and painting on paper, and Turner continued to photograph on film. The sense of the hand and the eye in these historic models and photographs had not yet been vaporized by the smoothing functions of digital technology. They share a texture that has since been lost and that gives both a sense of history, even though not that much time has passed. The graininess of Turner’s images bring out the natural variegation of Hadid’s concrete, evoking the sensibility of another period and paradigm.

Among photographers shooting buildings, Turner’s style is unique. She had trained as a graphic artist, and was working at Doubleday, the New York publishing house, designing book jackets when she started photographing construction sites. The raw, unfinished structures, including the debris piled on the lots, caught her eye. She was introduced to Peter Eisenman, who saw her work and suggested that she photographs completed buildings. The suggestion led to

photographing the work of architects of his Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, and finally to her book on the Five. The core work of the architects at the time was Modernist, heavily influenced by Le Corbusier, and her graphic sensibility, also Modernist, was a natural fit with the architecture.

She saw their abstraction through the lens of graphics, however, and when she framed the view and clicked the shutter of her Nikon, she was not documenting the buildings but designing a page. Her take was original within the New York orbit, and within the field of architectural photography. She was not shooting documents for the record but was producing free-standing photographs suitable for galleries and art books rather than trade journals.

Her book *Judith Turner Photographs Five Architects* is a compendium of photographic excerpts taken from a handful of small buildings built by the architects in their fledgling practices. Her eye captured, confirmed and arguably even helped define the style of the Five: abstract, complex, intellectual, cool. She became a member of the avant-garde architectural community surrounding the architects and the Institute, and her work gave their work an additional artistic dimension. Their architecture in turn gave her camera a subject, and their growing reputations cachet. At the time, interdisciplinarity was not yet on the radar, but Turner was crossing disciplines in work that was unusual at a time when Greenbergian formalism was still an issue, and purity within a discipline, still the rule and practice. No one criticized Turner’s work as artistically improper and impure even though it represented a strong crossover between graphics, photography and architecture. She was one of the first to blur boundaries.

Turner remembers admiring the drawings of The Peak that she delivered to Hadid. She instinctively responded to the work, and naturally gravitated to the buildings, making a point of photographing them as they were built. Hadid in turn liked Turner’s photographic interpretations of architecture, and encouraged Turner.

But the attraction to each other’s work went beyond mutual admiration. Both shared a sensibility, and the sensibility was rooted in their respective formations. They had common roots. While she was still a student at the Architectural Association, Hadid was exposed to the work of the Russian avant-garde. Her tutor, Rem Koolhaas, took his students to the Soviet Union to see the work of the Constructivists and Supermatists, and otherwise they excavated material on the movement where and when they could: it had been repressed by the Soviet state, and generally marginalized and almost forgotten in the West. Hadid’s thesis project was based on a Malevich architekton, which she laid over a bridge crossing the Thames, and developed as a mixed-use project built on the bridge. Hadid resolved to continue and develop the Suprematism that history had aborted. As a teacher herself at the AA, she took her students into the Soviet Union three times to see the avant-garde buildings.

Through her interest in Suprematism, she imported into her work, and eventually into the architectural world that her work influenced so profoundly, the subjects the Russians had cultivated. Their intensity of feeling and covert mysticism distinguished them from the cooler, Germanic versions of industrial Modernism that would rule most of the century in the West.

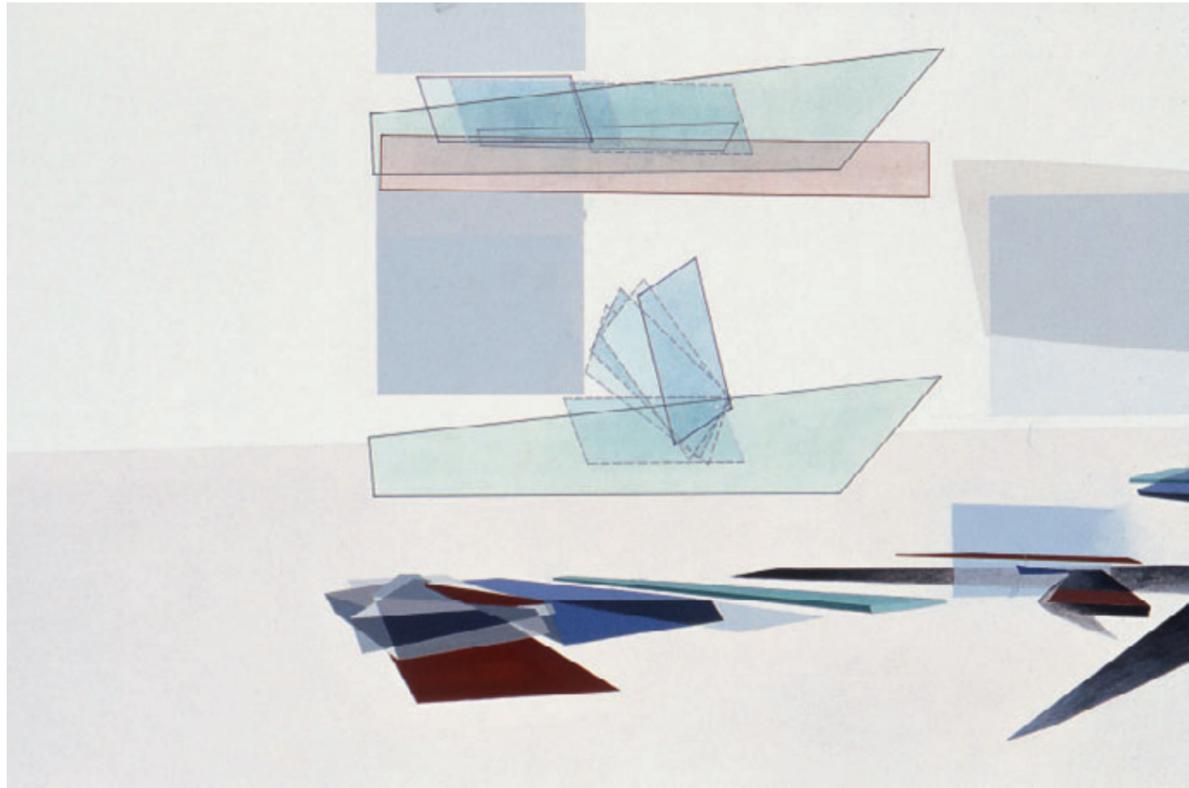
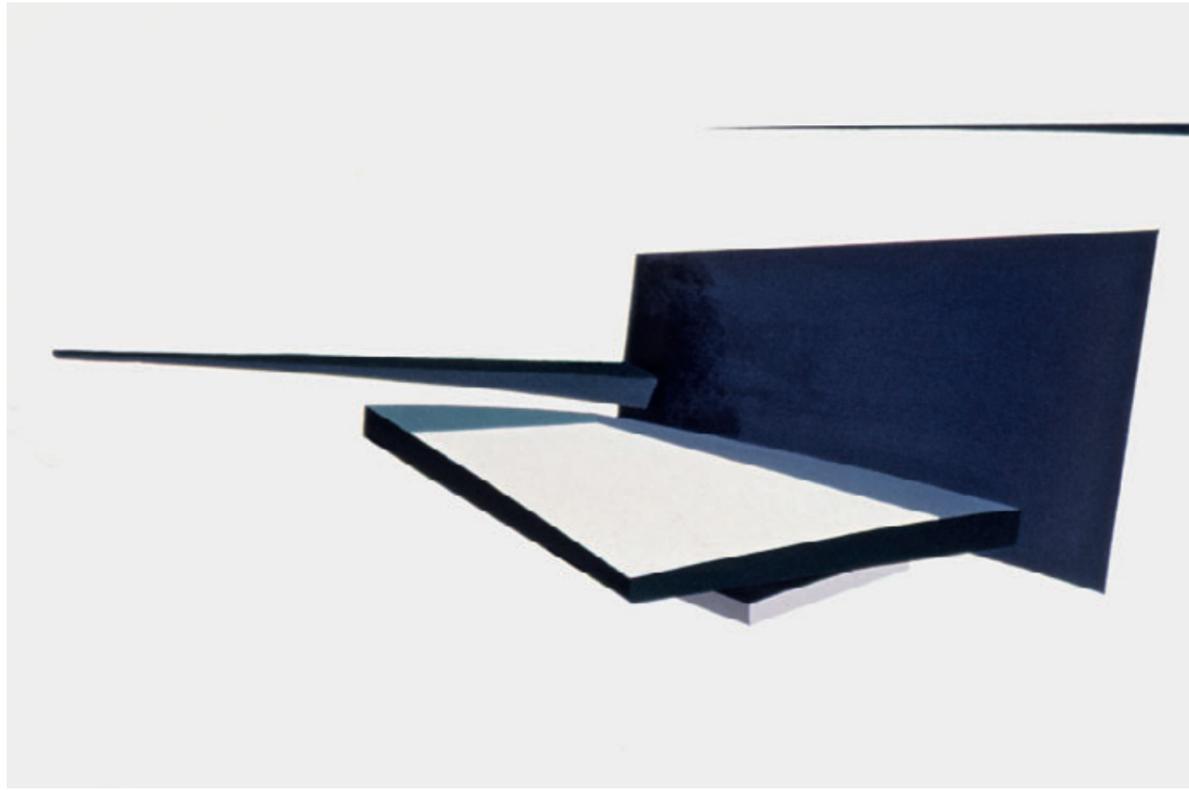
Turner came by the same Russian roots more indirectly, partly through her own discoveries. During her studies in art school, she was greatly influenced by the work of Josef Albers, and perhaps her indeterminate compositions come from the optical tricks and illusionistic ambiguities in his work. On her own she gravitated to Picasso and Matisse, the two major spirits who haunted New York’s Museum of Modern Art, to which Turner and many artists of her generation returned again and again, finding kindred spirits. Both artists had broken down space as traditionally understood and depicted, dismantling the apparatus of perspective that had come down from the Renaissance. They established alternatives to the perception of depth in a work of art. The frame was no longer a window into space. Instead, space was ambiguous. Turner internalized their visions.

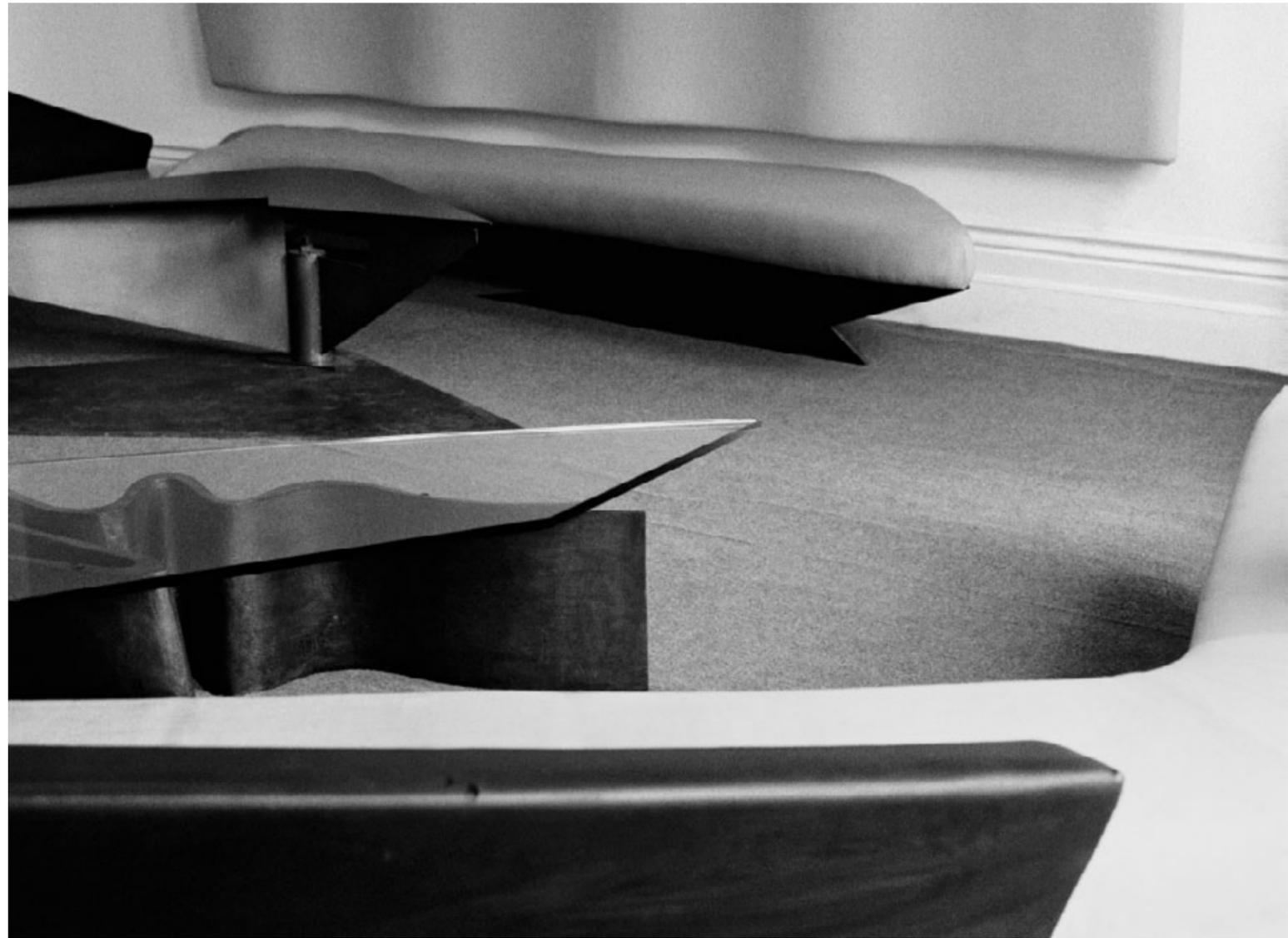
It is easy to forget that until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, when a torrent of revelatory avant-garde books and shows flooded the West, access to the Russians was limited. Though aware of the Russian avant-garde before, Turner had the occasion to immerse herself in the movement in 1981 through a major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, and she often attended lectures at the Institute, where the avant-garde was in the air. But she could never find a book on Alexander Rodchenko’s photographs, the artist and photographer whose closely cropped, diagonalized Agitprop angles radicalized views of people, factories, and cityscapes. His dynamized images recast photography, lifting it out of ordinary documentation onto an artistic, and revolutionary, plane: it was a different way of viewing the world, one that toppled traditional perspective and destabilized vision.

Turner came to the same diagonal mostly on her own, via her exposure to Albers and MoMA’s Modernism. But when she finally could lay her hands on a book on Rodchenko, it was like a homecoming. »I felt I had been his student. I pushed what he did, I pushed«, she says.

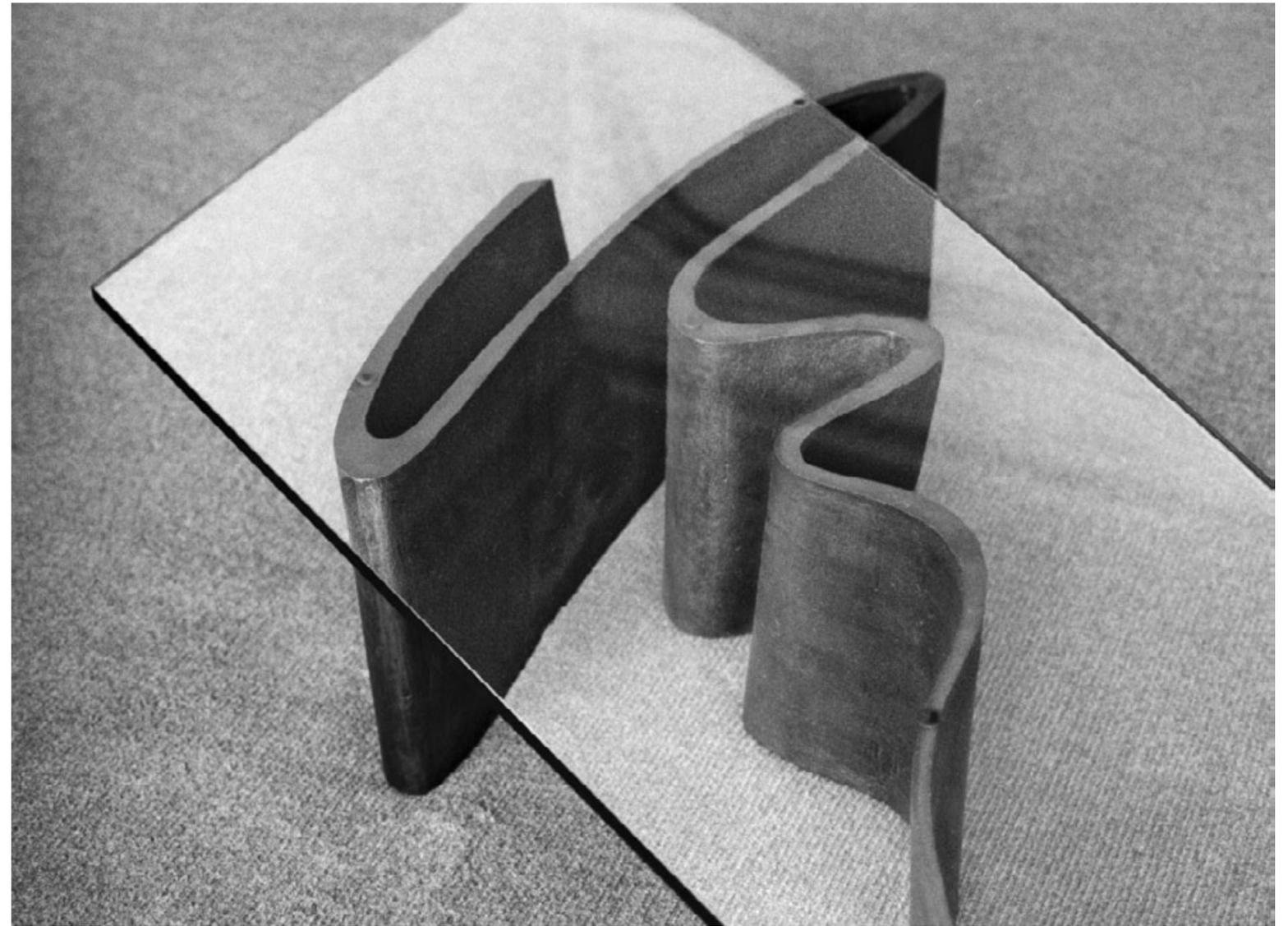
Her work, then, comes out of Modernism, but with an emphasis on the Russian branch of the movement, and it is in the Russian avant-garde that we find the root of the artistic complicity between Turner and Hadid. They drank from the same sources, and when they collaborate through Turner’s photography of Hadid’s architecture, it’s like a reunion of classmates who have been separated but who suddenly and fortuitously land again on the same intellectual campus. The work of each adds dimension to the other’s.

They are artists practicing different arts but from common ground. They agree.

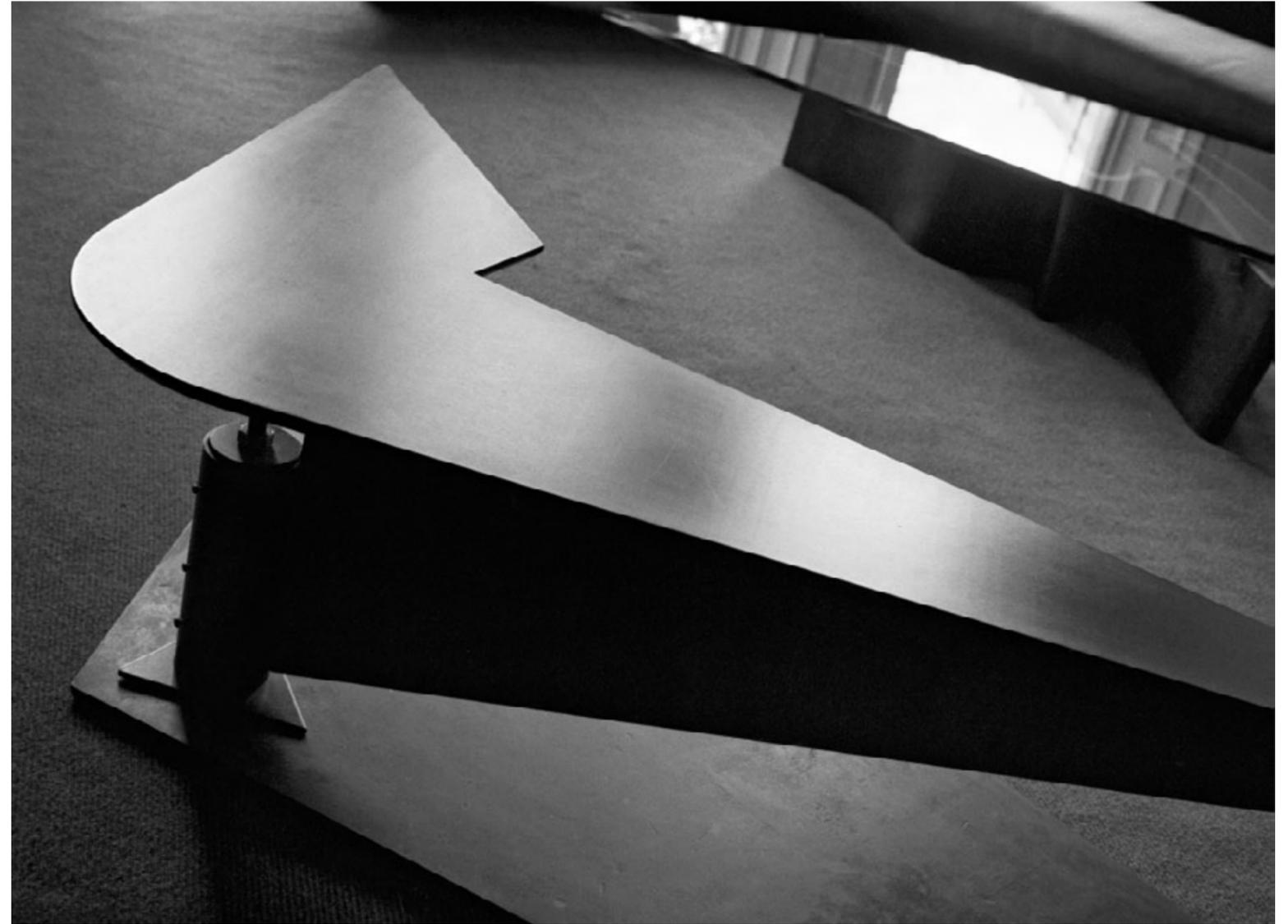
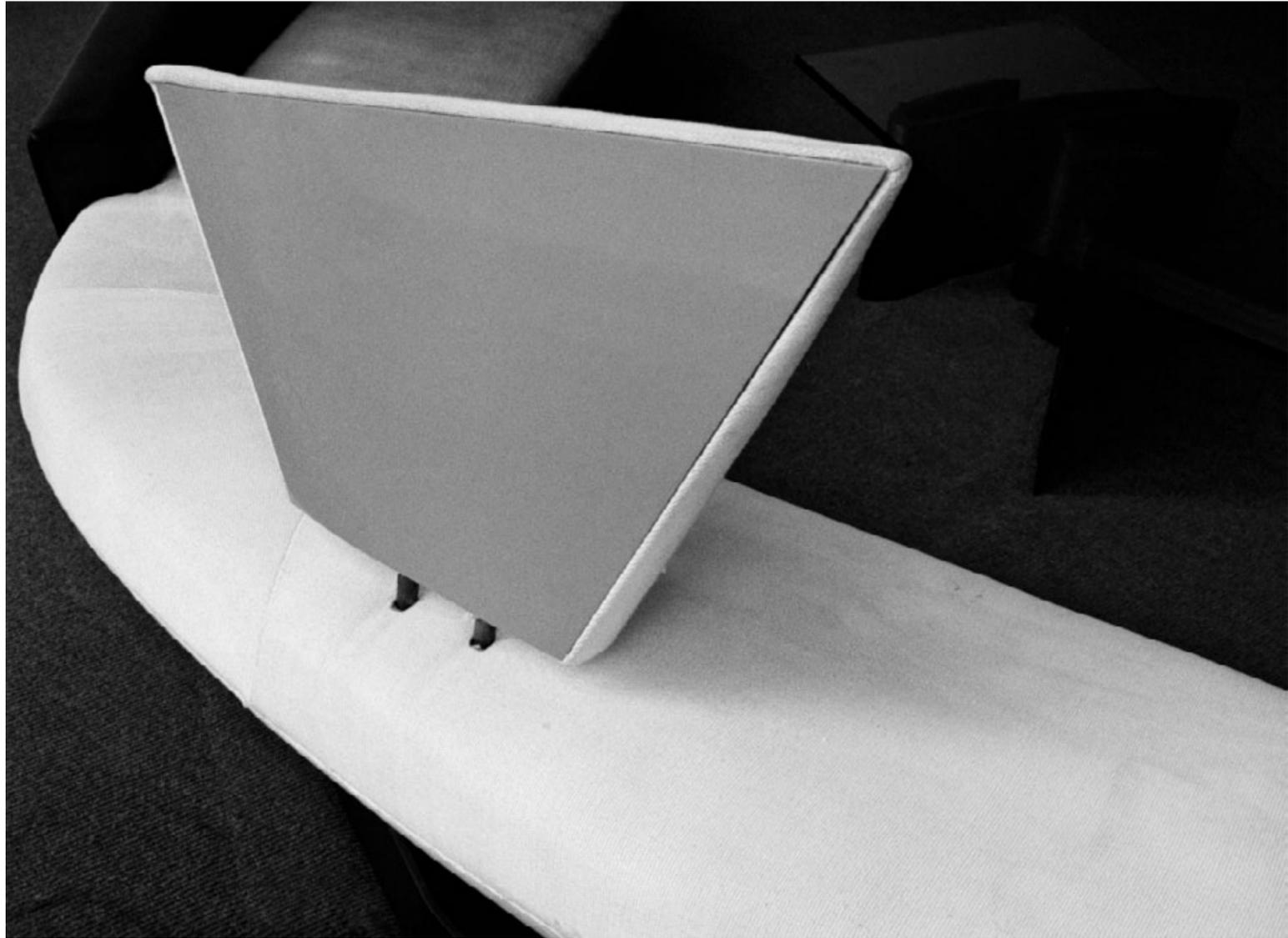


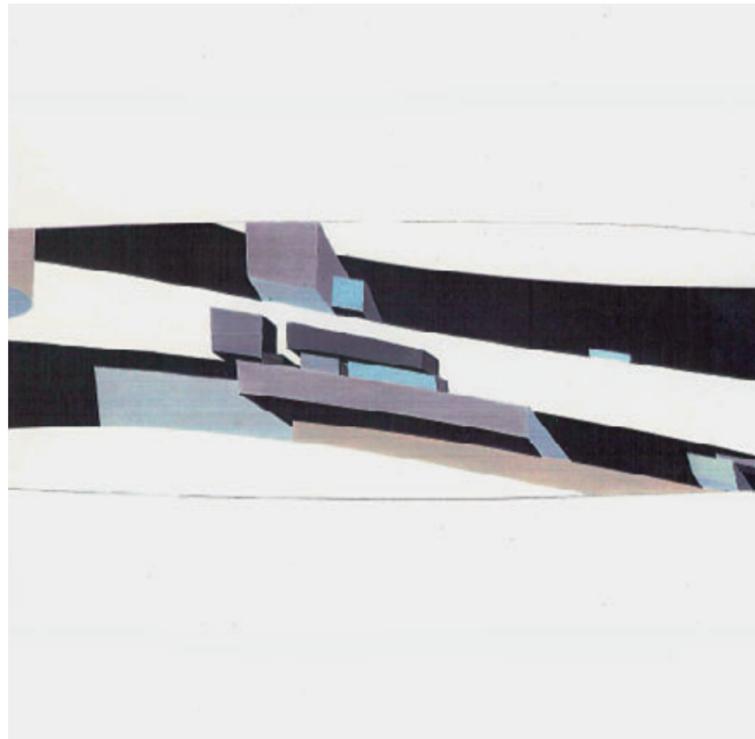
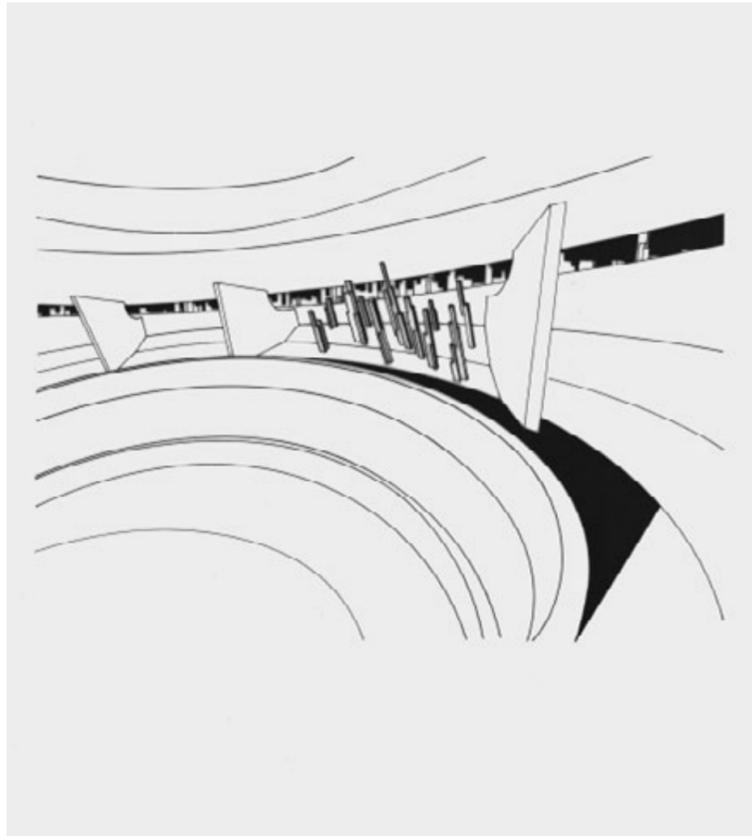


12 Bitar Furniture, 1985–86 (1990)



Bitar Furniture, 1985–86 13



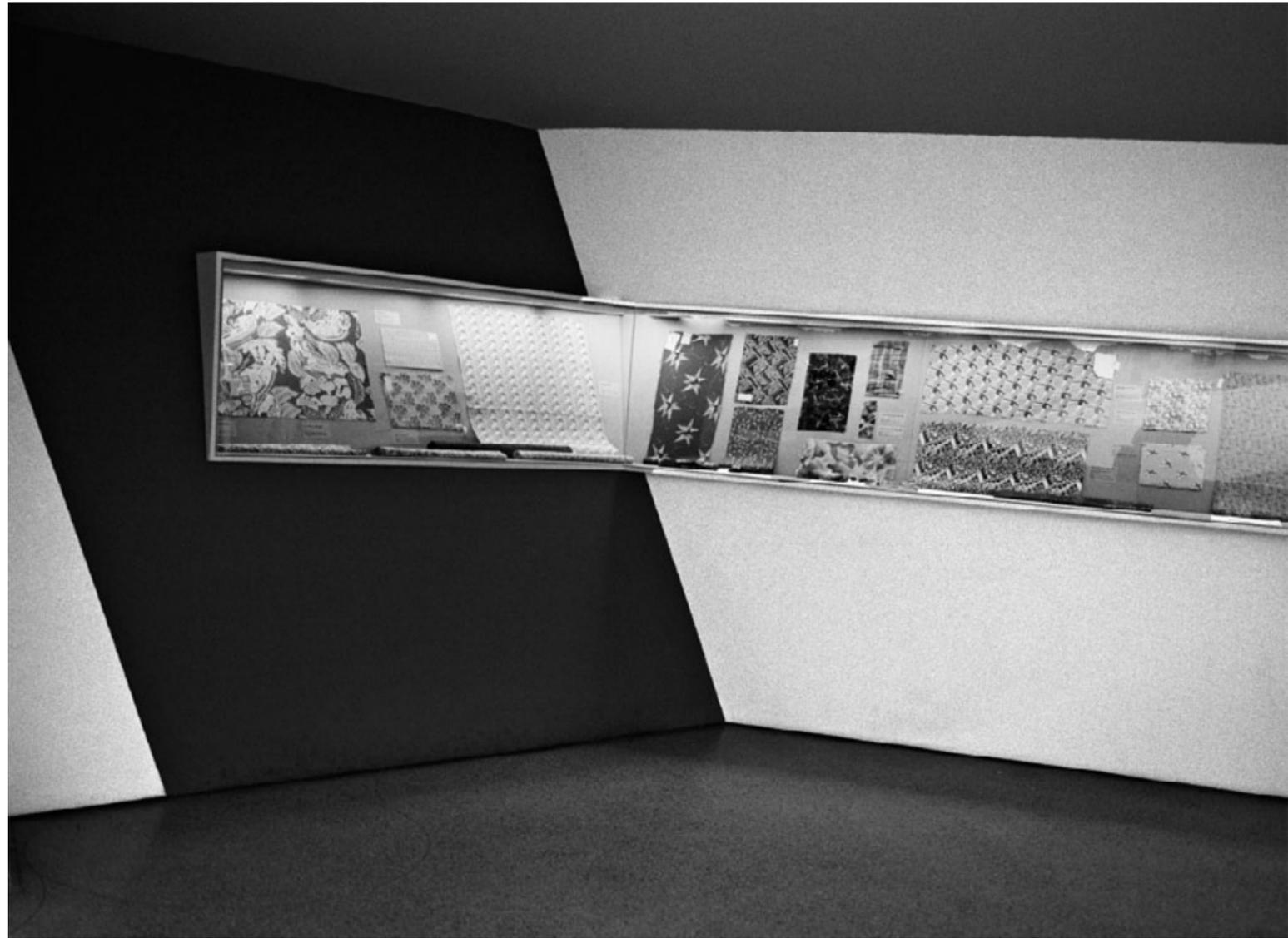




20 »The Great Utopia«, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1992



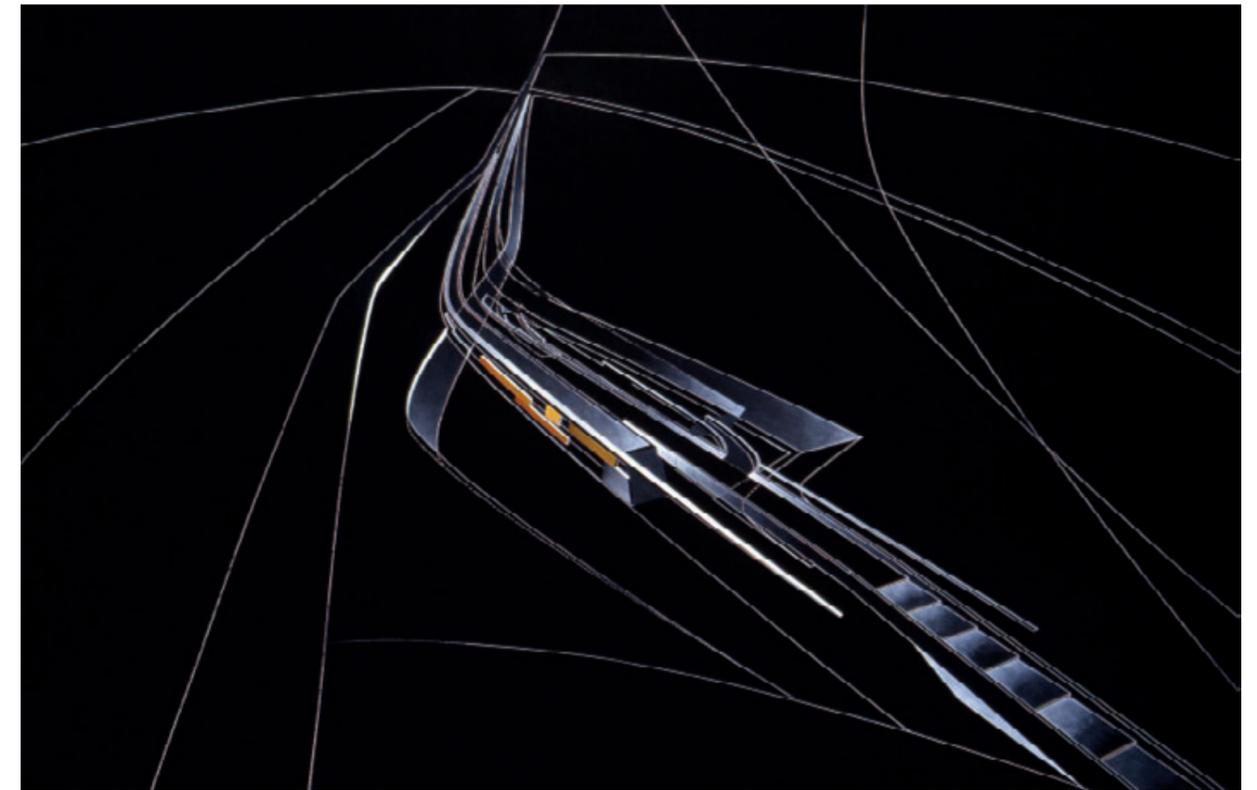
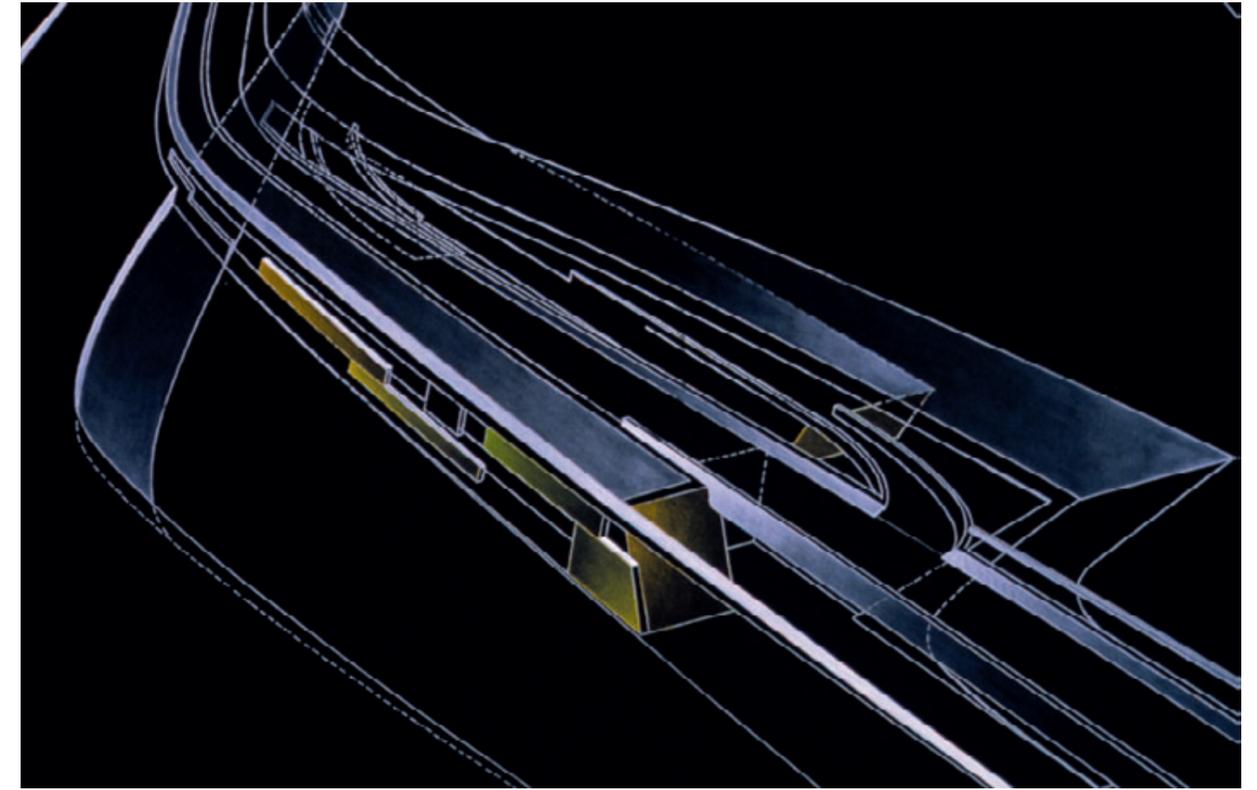
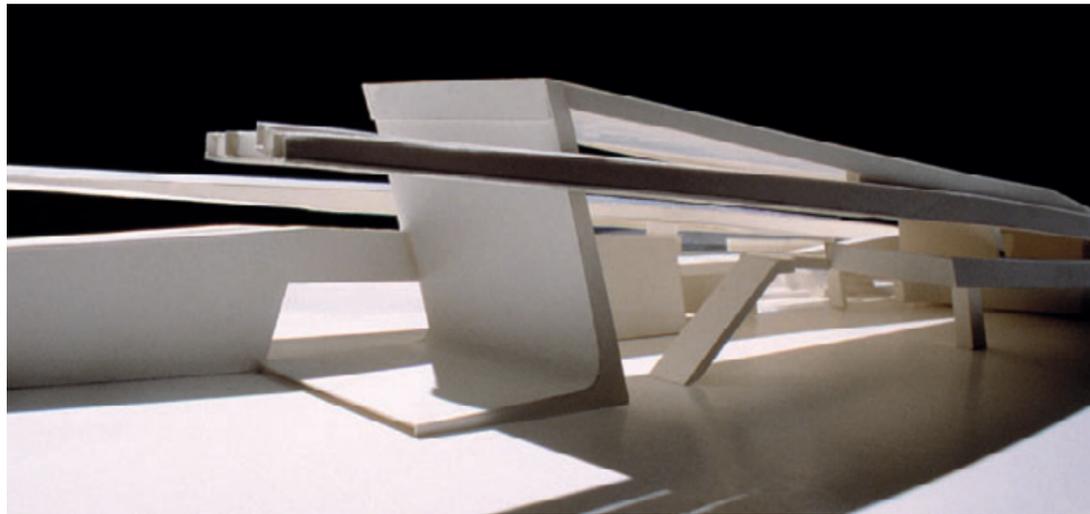
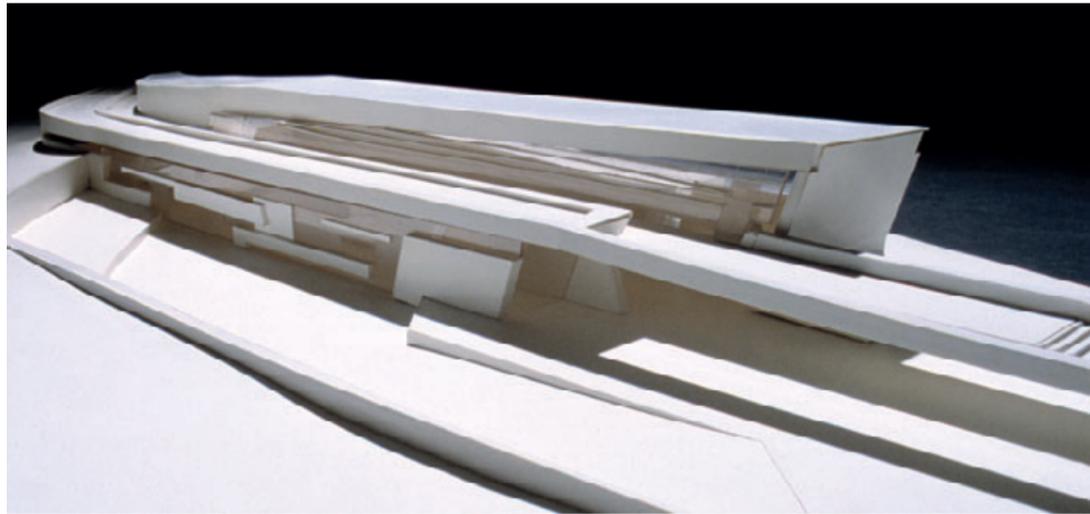
»The Great Utopia«, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1992 21



22 »The Great Utopia«, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1992



»The Great Utopia«, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1992 23





40 Landesgartenschau, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1996–99



Landesgartenschau, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1996–99 41



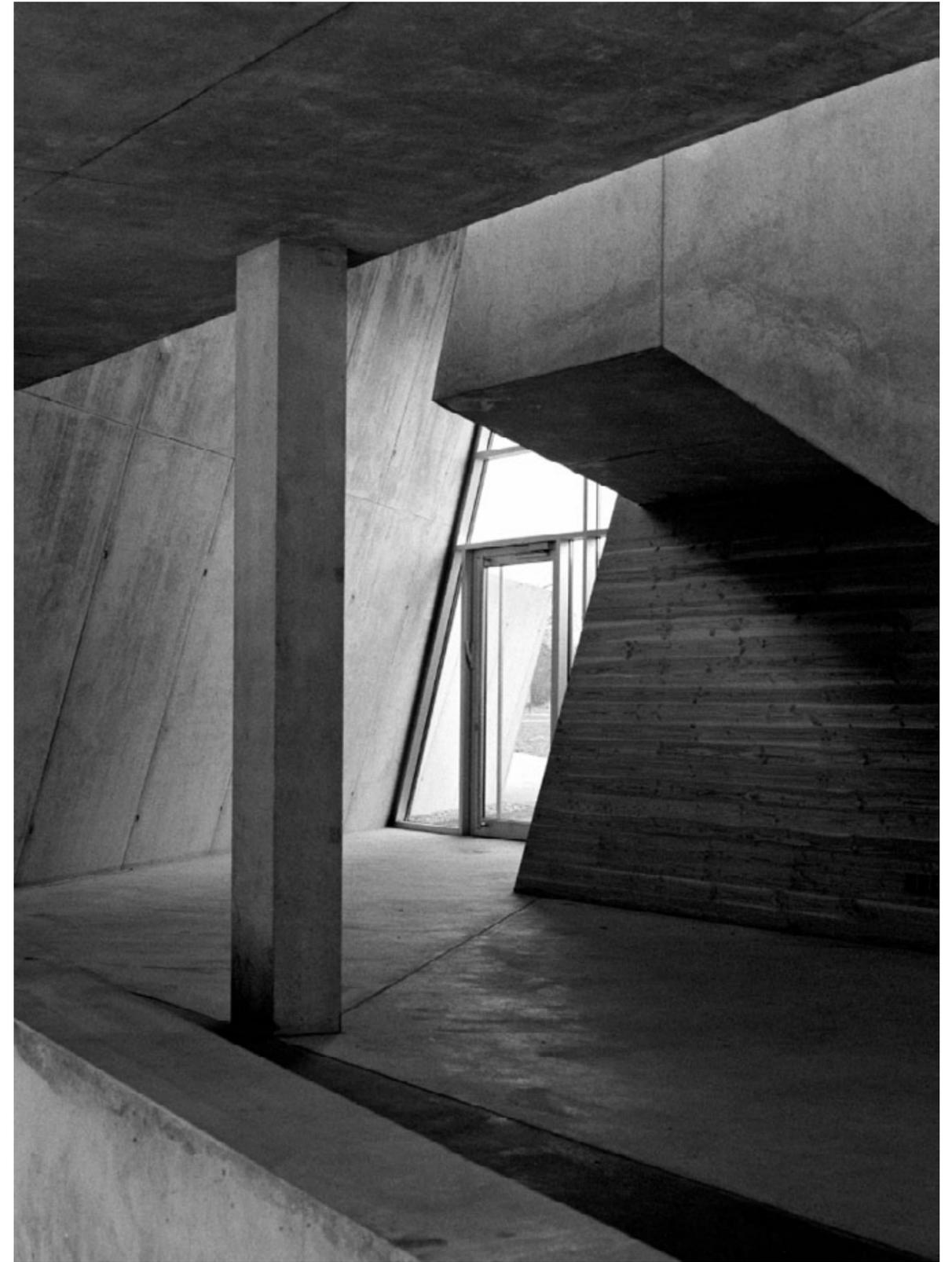
42 Landesgartenschau, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1996–99



Landesgartenschau, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1996–99 43



44 Landesgartenschau, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1996–99



Landesgartenschau, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1996–99 45