# The Eyes Bear the Load

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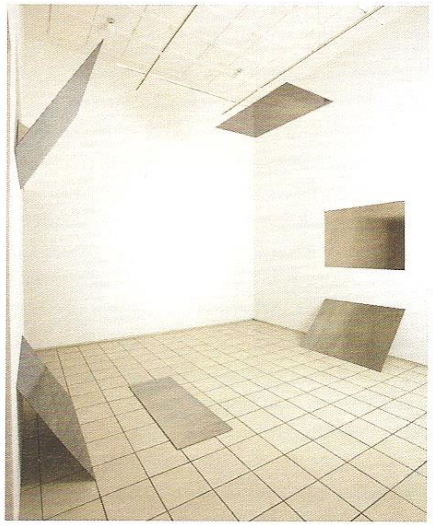
*"The architects are the form-givers and the photographers are the image-makers, and the relationship is more incestuous than one would think."*
–Ada Louise Huxtable, 1973[1]

There is a memorable photograph of the Whitney's Breuer building, from a coffee-table book put out in 1970, four years after the building's completion, that shows it rising awkwardly over 75th Street in an axonometric view.[2] Heavier at top than at bottom and barnacled with windows, the structure appears fetchingly odd, like the massive head on John Hurt in David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*. The three inverted setbacks on the main facade, seen foreshortened and in calming shadow, have a regularity and logic that contrasts strikingly with the side elevation, which is peppered by a seemingly random array of faceted windows caught here raked by morning sunlight to maximize the sense of their depth. The proportions and spacing of these windows make little sense from the exterior, where they seem like a glut of eyeballs looking out on the world below. Regular on one side, irregularly encrusted on the other, the structure thus rises from its pit and looms, gazing through its oblong protrusions onto further odd but endearing couplings at street level: the snub-nosed Fiat wedged between two very American sedans, or the prototypical 1960s Madison Avenue man in his skinny tie who appears to be helping his sensibly dressed grandmother hail a cab.

"That sheet of enclosure—that division between indoors and outdoors, the skin of a building—has again requested new answers to its problems," Breuer argued in April 1966, just as the Whitney building was nearing completion (it opened that September).[3] Breuer did not like his creations to appear transparently comprehensible from without, in the manner of Walter Gropius's glass architecture or the expressed I-beams of Mies van der Rohe; instead, he wanted internal functions such as air circulation, electrical or water conduits, and skeletal structure to be contained in precast concrete units that could either weight the cladding and make it load-bearing, like an exoskeleton, or, in the case of the Whitney building, rupture an otherwise smooth epidermal surface. Because the precast units for the Whitney exterior are essentially updated window moldings, the building appears to have a number of heavily lidded eyes punched through its outer skin. "A new *depth* of facade is emerging," Breuer concluded, "a three-dimensionality with a resulting greatly expanded vocabulary of architectural expression. Sun and shadow."[4]



*Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)*, 2009 (installation view, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2009). Six unique silver-toned black-and-white photograms, 136 x 192 x 58 in. (345 x 488 x 147 cm). Collection of the artist

Sun and shadow have a signal bearing on photography, which as Liz Deschenes knows, has a great tradition of bringing together the acts of writing and building. When Deschenes exposes sheets of photographic paper by moonlight, then processes them into lustrous, mirrored objects, she is consciously connecting with the development of "words of light" by the early photographer William Henry Fox Talbot, whose favorite subjects in the 1830s included written or printed surfaces and views of his manorial estate. Deschenes has used her heavily silvered "mirrors," which offer alluringly indistinct reflections of the surrounding space, to occupy that space as quasi-architectural elements in their own right. Her 2009 installation *Tilt/Swing*, for example, involved six of the mirrored photograms deployed in a full circle on the floor, two walls, and ceiling of a commercial gallery. Visitors stepping toward the ensemble saw their dim yet richly textured likenesses scattered and fragmented across multiple surfaces. The two-word title is common parlance among architectural photographers: *tilt* refers to the ability to swivel the lens plane relative to the image plane, so that elements not otherwise parallel to the camera will register as being in alignment and, thus, all in focus; *swing* (or *shift*) describes a movement of the lens directly up or down on an otherwise stationary camera.

typically to keep the image plane parallel to the plane of the subject, as when photographing multistory buildings. Deschenes's nocturnally prepared photograms involve no lens, so the words *tilt* and *swing* are liberated from a technical reference. They evoke instead abstract issues of viewpoint and manipulation, for example the ways in which the spectatorial subject is turned or focused in the controlled setting of a museum building.

For her participation in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, the artist is contemplating an arrangement of non-representational photographic elements that would suggest a relation between Breuer's sculptured architecture, with its stepped facade and many protruding eyes, and the lens and bellows of a view camera (a large-format device typically used to picture static subjects, such as buildings, in great clarity). It is another odd yet apposite pairing, tinged with melancholy: a high modernist monument, made in the very years in which architectural modernism was being condemned and relegated to the past, is coupled to a kind of camera rendered defunct now that film has ceded to digital photo sensors. We have no need of a bellows to create space between lens and film. For that matter, we no longer need an inside and outside to make a picture; dark and light need not be divided either in the moment of registration or during printing. Sun and shadow are what permit us to see an image, no longer to make one. In important respects as well, we concentrate today on the potential of skins, emphasizing surface over depth and thus refuting in every possible way the assertions made by Breuer in print and in his buildings.

The Breuer building, which will house the Metropolitan Museum of Art after 2015, will nevertheless live on, an archaic technology updated through new users. That moment of passage—like the far greater passage from analog to digital film—provokes nostalgia, but also the sort of critical reflection that Liz Deschenes regularly builds on in her work.

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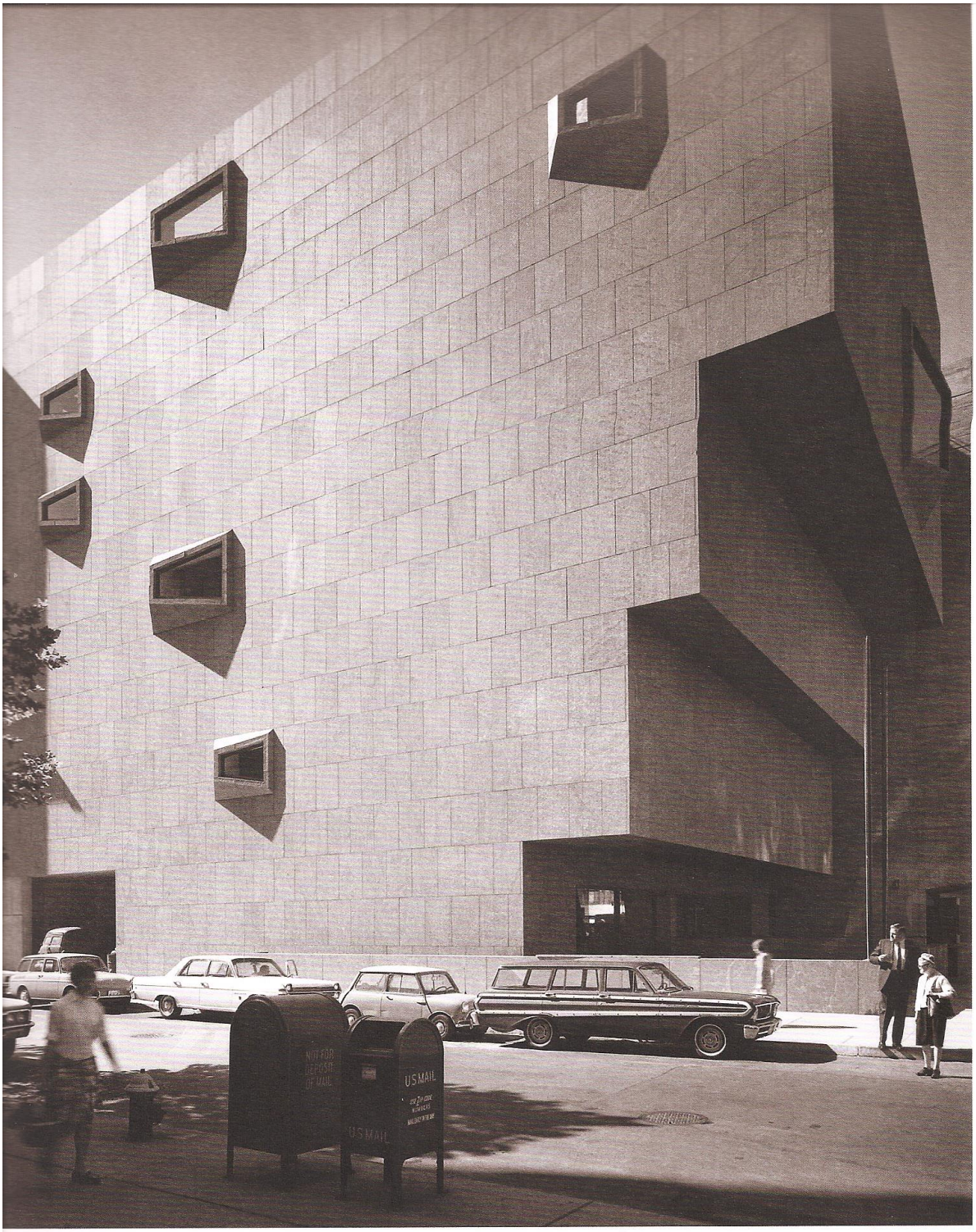
NOTES

1. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Perspective on the City: The Photographer's Eye," *New York Times*, November 25, 1973, reprinted in Huxtable, *Kicked a Building Lately?* (New York: The NY Times Company, 1976), 137. 2. The photograph appeared in Tician Papachristou, *Marcel Breuer: New Buildings and Projects* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Praeger, 1970), 123. 3. Marcel Breuer, "The Faceted, Molded Façade: Depth, Sun and Shadow," *Architectural Record*, April 1966, 171–72. 4. Ibid.




Museum of American Art, New York City, 1963–66, Marcel Breuer and Hamilton Smith, architects. Photograph by Ezra Stoller