

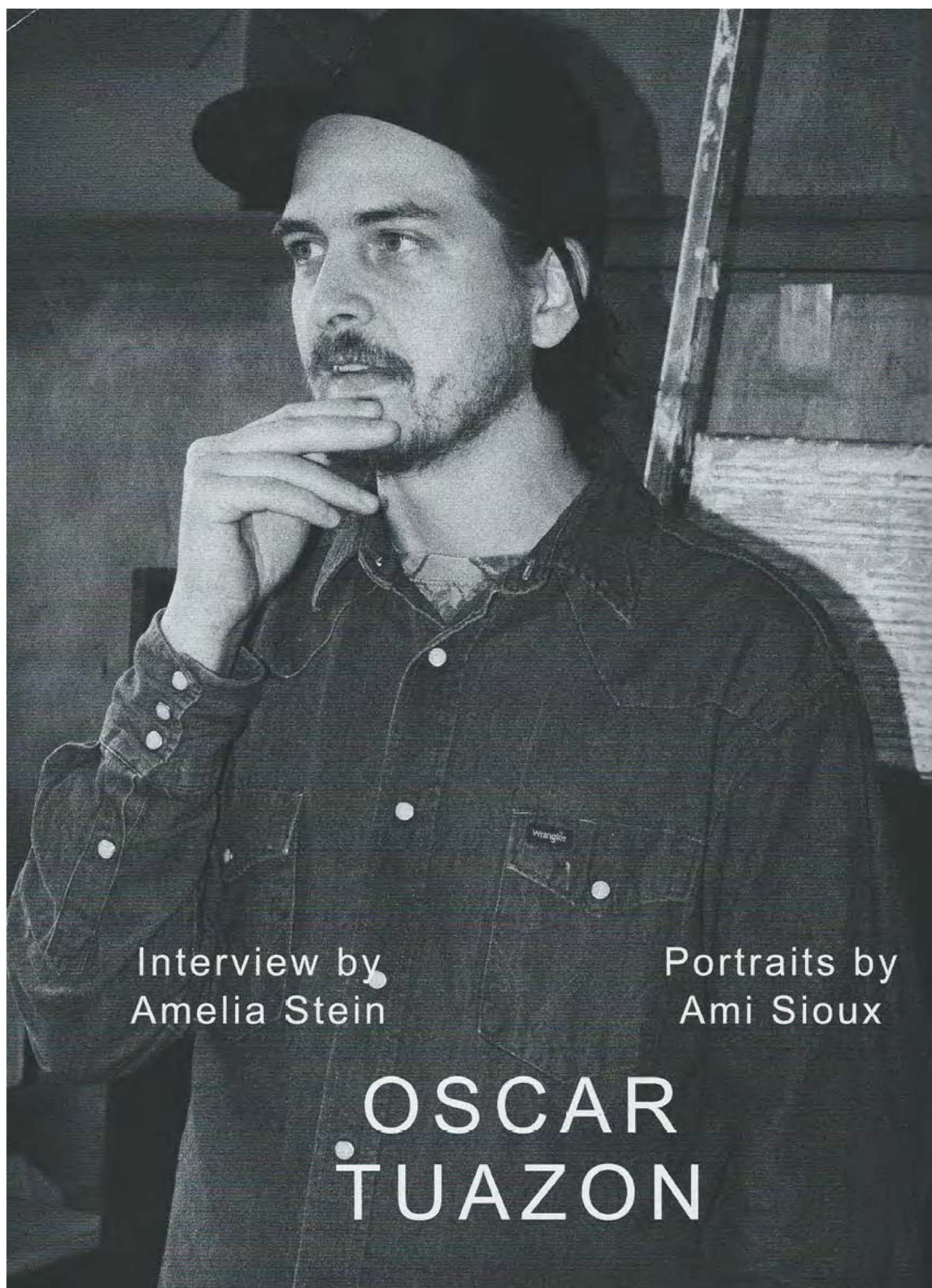
Stein, Amelia  
"Oscar Tuazon"

Pin-Up.

Issue 13, Fall/Winter 2012-2013.

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Interview by  
Amelia Stein

Portraits by  
Ami Sioux

OSCAR  
TUAZON

**O**scar Tuazon is an unlikely American in Paris. Born in a geodesic dome built by his parents in small-town Washington State, he didn't travel outside America until the age of 32 and only speaks rudimentary French. But in 2007 — after years of living between Los Angeles, New York, and Tacoma — he followed his wife Dorothée Perret, editor of culture journal *PARIS, LA*, to the French capital, where they have settled with their three children, Rain (one), Tacoma (five), and Nuage (eleven). The family's Montmartre apartment has become the latest example of a typically Tuazon kind of building/living experiment: large-scale sculptures absorb the living room, bathroom, and even the bedroom (the last iteration of which was sold in its entirety as a sculpture to the Saatchi Gallery in London), in continuous dialogue with the architecture. When I met him, Tuazon was in New York at the opening of "People," three new sculptures commissioned by the Public Art Fund for Brooklyn Bridge Park. Essentially made from cement and the trunks of local trees, the structures double up as basketball hoops, handball walls, and a water fountain. Moreover they are temporary, which is exactly how Tuazon likes it: his is a sort of inverse architecture in which the transience of a work and of the materials that comprise it are honored and even encouraged. Natural materials do not promise anything, they are made available to the artist or maker on the condition that they return to the earth with time — a temporary custodianship, which Tuazon takes very seriously.

Amelia Stein      You grew up outside Seattle, Washington. Can you tell me about your family home?

Oscar Tuazon      When I was ten the architect Ibsen Nelsen designed a house for us, and my parents built it. It was not a big house, but each of the elements were sort of separate and you would walk between them. My parents are bookbinders so there was also a bookbindery in there. They made blank books — sketch books, photo albums. They'd come to know Nelsen because he used to order these custom-made sketchbooks and I think they may have traded him some books for architectural work.

AS      They traded notebooks for the design of your house? That seems like an imbalanced trade!

OT      It does, doesn't it? There's probably more to the story, but that's how I remember it. But the house that I was actually born in is a geodesic dome that my parents built together.



Oscar Tuazon was born in 1975 in this geodesic dome located outside Seattle. It was hand-built by his parents and is now being used as a barn for horses. Photograph taken by Oscar Tuazon in 2004.

And I think, even though I didn't grow up there, that that house has been really important to me. It's in my DNA.

AS      Did the geodesic dome work as a home?

OT      No, not really. As soon as I was born they moved out. It was leaky, the windows were plastic sheeting... It was totally hand-built by two people who had never built anything in their lives, so it was bound to have a lot of problems.

AS      Geodesic domes were usually built in clusters, right? Someone would build one and then their friends would build one right next door.

OT      Yeah, a lot of it comes from a communal context. But in this case it was just in the middle of the forest. It's funny because now all of the forest around it has been cut down and so it's there in the middle of a barren hillside looking very strange. Somebody used to live there for a long time, but now it's being used as a horse barn, which is probably more appropriate.

## THE PARIS-BASED SCULPTOR BUILDS BIG BUT THINKS ANTI-MONUMENTAL

AS      There are obviously traces of the geodesic dome in your work — a structure that can be dismantled and that essentially failed, repeatedly, upon execution.

OT      Yes. Initially what attracted me about it was that these technical failures also had an interesting relationship to the ideological context that produced the geodesic dome in the first place, which, in my mind, is this sort of back-to-the-land movement and this moment of frustration with the urban situation. Although I'm not so much involved with the geodesic question any more, what remain interesting to me are the technical problems. I'm always interested in the way a structure can fail. In a lot of ways, in architecture particularly, when a building fails it can be more interesting than when it performs the way it's supposed to. That iconic image of a Buckminster Fuller dome on fire, with black smoke pouring out of it, nine years after the 1967 Montreal Expo — I think that's kind of fascinating.

AS      Do you think your relationship to natural materials, like wood, will change as they become more scarce?

OT      I actually feel more like that about stone. Certain kinds of stones are quite rare. But it's not something I really think about actually. For me what's more interesting about a material is its lifespan and how it ages. It's interesting in terms of an art object, which has traditionally been conceived of as a physical object. I like to think about it as decaying, falling apart, and ultimately being replaced. One of the things I'm trying to work on is the idea that a work will need to be repaired. Buildings are thought about that way; as a brick building ages it will need to be repointed, or bricks will need to be replaced. Somehow the form of the building and the essence of the building are able to stay the same while the materials can ultimately be completely renewed. In wood buildings that's even more typical, right? You'll have to replace the siding and eventually replace the roof, replace the foundations. What is the object? I now try to think about designing that into an artwork, so it becomes something that is in other people's hands.



**AS** You've said that before about a work, I think it was the piece of marble in the woods — how you liked the idea that it was going to exist on its own with no need for anyone or anything else.

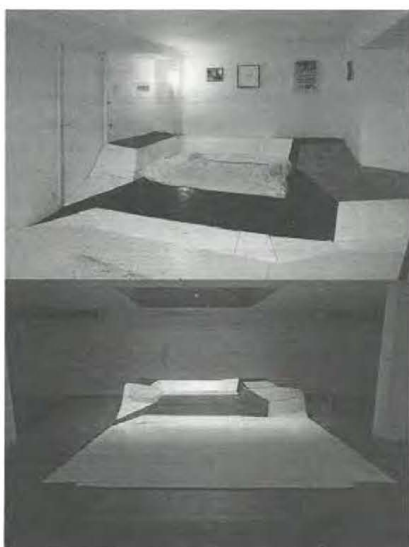
**OT** Yeah, *Niki Quester* (2009), a marble block in a tree — that's something which, rather than decaying, is growing. It's like I've set up a situation and now it's making its own decisions and creating its own form and, to me, it has autonomy that way. It's got its own life.

## "I THINK ABOUT MATERIAL AS DECAYING, FALLING APART, AND ULTIMATELY BEING REPLACED."

**AS** What do you find appealing about that?

**OT** Well, I think in one way it disintegrates the aura of an artwork. It returns it to being a thing. I've just done this project here in Brooklyn Bridge Park and to me what's exciting is that those sculptures exist and will be interacted with and perceived completely independently of me or of being artworks at all. They're just things that are going to function in the park and people are going to play basketball with them, or take a nap on them without having to perceive them as artworks.

**AS** In a way, what you're describing is the inverse of what a monument is supposed to be. A monument is supposed to be revered and not used in a utilitarian way and not touched or approached.



Oscar Tuazon's *Bed* (2007–10) as originally installed in the artist's Montmartre apartment in 2007 (above), and on display at the Saatchi Gallery, London in 2010 (below). OSB, tatami mat, steel, paint, mattress; 13 x 20 feet. All work images are courtesy of Oscar Tuazon; Balice Hettling, Paris; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Jonathan Viner, London; Macaroni, New York, and Standard, Oslo

**OT** Yeah, that's true. They should be anti-monumental.

**AS** You've said that with the "People" sculptures in Brooklyn Bridge Park you didn't want to compete with the New York City skyline. But do you ever feel as if you just want to make intrusive alterations on a huge scale?

**OT** No, I don't actually. It's weird because I like to work large. But it's not a question of scale, it's a question of size. Monumental gestures have less impact on me than something

I can interact with on a one-to-one basis. The fountain piece in Brooklyn Bridge Park, for example, is something you can perceive at a distance but its effect is very subtle. It asks you to come close to it. The effective moment in that work is to be able to touch it and feel the water. In terms of the Manhattan skyline, what I think is important is to somehow turn your back on it and to create an experience where you're more able to think about yourself and have the space for yourself. I've thought about parks a lot. A good park can give you the feeling of seeing things that nobody else has seen; it's discovery, basically. You find an area in a park that you've never been to or you feel like nobody has ever been to, which of course is absurd in a city of ten-million people, but there are seasonal things in a park that are completely new all the time.



*People* (far left) and *A Machine* (left), two of three sculptures Tuazon made as part of "People" (2012), a temporary installation at Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York. The sculptures double as a basketball hoop/handball wall and a water fountain. Photographs by Jason Wych.

**AS** Why did you move to Paris?

**OT** I met my wife — she's French. At the time I was living in Tacoma and for a year we were having this very long-distance relationship. Finally someone had to move and I tried to convince her to come to Tacoma, but ultimately I decided to move to Paris. It was nice because it gave me a lot of freedom — just the freedom of being disoriented and not knowing the language.

**AS** It must have been intense for your wife to always have to act as your translator.

**OT** [Laughs.] Yeah, it's true — but she's been very supportive and taken good care of me. I found it nice, it's like being a child where you can't understand what the grown-ups are saying.

## "PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO PLAY BASKETBALL WITH MY WORK, OR TAKE A NAP ON IT WITHOUT PERCEIVING IT AS ART."

**AS** Do you feel more American in Paris?

**OT** Definitely. I always thought it was funny that I was a sculptor in Paris, because, really, the urban situation — the housing, the spaces you can find — isn't conducive to sculpture. In a weird way, you could write the history of modern art and contemporary art just based on the architecture of the different cities in which that art developed. The scene in Paris has always had a very strong conceptual element to it, and an immaterial tendency. I think that has a lot to do with the fact that people have these small apartments and can't

afford studios. And then you think about, I don't know, the kind of work that developed in New York, postwar painting and sculpture — it had something to do with the particular kinds of spaces that were available. Anyways, I just thought it was quite ridiculous that I was living in Paris and doing large-scale sculpture.

AS What does your Parisian place look like?

OT It's an apartment, social housing, that my wife has had since before I moved there. For a long time I would build things into the apartment. I had this huge bed structure on the upper floor and I had my studio there for some time, which was insane. I was running power tools and mixing cement in the bathtub. I was really working in the living room, making these sculptures that would fit exactly the dimensions of the elevator. Now I have a studio in the outskirts of Paris — it's very rough and I can do whatever I want, so the apartment has kind of returned to normal.

AS Do you imagine the conversations you might have with your one-year-old daughter when she starts building things out of wooden blocks?

## "IF YOU CAN THINK OF A TABLE AS A SCULPTURE, THEN A SHOWER CAN ALSO BE A SCULPTURE."

OT Well, I've got two older daughters as well: I've got a five-year-old and Dorothee has an eleven-year-old. They've always been pretty active in what I do. Nuage, the older one, used to work in the studio with me when I had it at home and now she's at an age where I'll sometimes take her if I'm going to install a show or something. Sometimes she thinks it's stupid, which is kind of typical for her age. She's also like, "It's dirty in here, it's disgusting!" But there are certain things she really likes — we've made work together and it's actually pretty amazing. One time when we went to the studio together I had a work that I needed to make that I'd kind of been putting off, and I knew the materials I wanted to make it out of and I knew, somehow, the dimensions. But I was still in that beginning phase. And so we talked about it together, I tried to explain what I was thinking and — it was amazing! — she started doing some drawings. She knows my work very well, so the drawings she made were very perceptive about the volume and the structure that I was talking about, and we conceived the work together. It was really cool. It's rare, actually, because I work with a lot of people and it can be difficult to have that level of comfort.

AS Your career and work have obviously been directly influenced by the way your family lived and where you grew up. Do you think your career will influence your kids in an inverse way, making them want to get as far away as possible from art and spaces that transform constantly?

OT My parents were constantly building houses or remodeling houses and I think I absorbed the excitement of transforming a space just naturally from being around that. I have no conception of what it must be like to grow up for Tacoma, Rain, or Nuage. I didn't leave the country until I was probably 32. I didn't really leave Washington State until I was 18. I grew up in a very small town. Rain is turning one year old this week

and she's already been back and forth between France and the U.S. five times. She went on her first trip when she was only ten days old, so she draws upon a completely different environment. I try to incorporate the whole family in what I do, but what I do means travelling all the time and living this very strange lifestyle. In a way, I do try, I think, to replicate or explore some of the things that were interesting for me as a kid, but it's completely different. Maybe they're going to want to live in a small town in the middle of nowhere.



In his studio on the outskirts of Paris Tuazon occasionally finds abandoned furniture which he then "cannibalizes" and turns into sculptures. *Two Possible Chairs* (2007); steel, plastic, fiberglass, paint. 19.2 x 19.3 x 43 inches. Photographs by Daniele Balice.

AS Does moving around so much influence your relationship to accruing things?

OT I do try to shed stuff. But at the same time, being a sculptor, you're constantly producing things. The studio is always full of material, I'm always ordering material, I need it for projects. One of the things that drives my work is just this compulsion to empty the space out. I'd like to have the space empty of stuff, of materials, of half-finished works, even of furniture. Because the studio is a squat it came with some old furniture — chairs, and desks, and tables, and stuff — and those have all been cannibalized and turned into works. The flipside of that is, of course, I'm creating this ocean of stuff that goes out into the world. It's great to think about it from someone else's perspective, someone who might enjoy it, or lose it, or preserve it. I find that an awesome and humbling thing that anybody would find something I do valuable enough to live with. But from my own perspective, I really don't want to have anything to do with it! [Laughs.] I don't want it around anymore — I want to get it out of the way so I can move on to the next thing. And then I wonder: where the hell does it go?



*Bend It Till It Breaks*, a 2009 installation by Oscar Tuazon at the Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de l'Île de Vassivière, near Limoges, France. Douglas-fir, cement, steel, hoists; 20 x 40 x 16 feet.

AS Well the bedroom you built for your home eventually got bought by Saatchi Gallery.

OT Yeah, it's funny how these things happen. I'd never thought of it as an independent work, it was more a way that I could hide the bed underneath the floor so that I could move into the guest room and make my studio there. But then we had a fire and the bed was either going to get trashed or... [Laughs.] Oh, I really shouldn't say that it was either going to the dump or to some collector's house, but it's this thing about an artwork in the process of decay.



- AS** When you build a utilitarian object — a bed, a chair, a table — do you find yourself wanting to make it sculptural?
- OT** I think the line between a design object and sculpture is interesting. I would like to invent a new way of thinking about it. I'm fascinated with tables because you can't argue with the functionality of what a table is supposed to do. But I always feel like somehow there is a way of reinventing it — and not in an aesthetic way at all. Just that simple thing of making a horizontal plane at a certain height that people can eat at. In a way, that's a really open set of requirements. So, of course, you can find a million different ways to get there.

## "ARCHITECTURE SHOULD ASPIRE TO DEMAND NEW WAYS OF LIVING."

- AS** I suppose you're still dealing with parameters like the size of the room?
- OT** Sculpture needs to have those same criteria built into it to be successful. I don't think you can just go into the studio and be like, "I want to make something that looks nice." I try to think of making a sculpture like making a table; I may not be able to explain the criteria that it is trying to fulfill as clearly as in the case of a table, but it needs to have that kind of structure built into it.
- AS** Do parameters ever frustrate you?
- OT** No, no, for me that's the most exciting thing: to work against parameters and to work with parameters. I worked in architecture with Vito Acconci for a couple of years and that was a huge revelation for me. You could use the parameters to form the work in a way that I found more open, or more subtle, or more challenging than the idea of how site-specificity had been practiced in sculpture up to that point.



Tuazon's installation for the 2012 Whitney Biennial was reconfigured as part of the runway for a fashion show performance by the artist KB Hardy. *For Hire* (2012). Steel, plexiglass, Douglas-fir beams, lamps, carpet, water; Dimensions variable. Photograph by Ed Brachfeld.

- AS** Where parameters were limitations?
- OT** Yeah, and in very stark terms. I think the development of site-specificity in sculpture came out of an ideological struggle that presented things in an almost cartoonishly simple way. What you find in architecture is that the program is so complex and the process of having to plan a building is so multifaceted that you can't always sustain an ideological position in the overall construction. So, to me, it was exciting to find that mode of working.
- AS** How did you come to work with Vito Acconci?
- OT** I had always been an admirer of his work and he came to speak at the Whitney program while I was there, back in 2001. After he left he needed somebody to pack up his studio because he was moving to a new space, so I got hired just to

pack boxes and I kind of never left. I was never really offered an official position because I wasn't a trained architect, but I found things I could do to make myself useful there, and I just stuck around. I've always worked with architecture, though. I've actually just bought a cabin in the woods on the Olympic Peninsula where I've started to think about actually designing and building that structure. I'm not sure what I can say about it other than that it should be a house as a sculpture or something. I guess I'm interested in taking the various functions of a house and atomizing it, breaking it down into a number of smaller different events. I'm into building small, interconnected rooms, which is a funny idea for a place where it's raining 328 days a year, to try to explode the house out, it doesn't make sense yet. But if you can think of a table as a sculpture, you can think of a shower as a sculpture.



*Raped Land* were temporary concrete pavilion sculptures that Tuazon created for the 2011 Venice Art Biennale. They also provided the backdrop for a concert by the Norwegian pop singer Nils Bech. *Raped Land*, (2011); Concrete, metal armature; 13 x 20.5 x 17.5 feet.

- AS** And how does your wife feel when you start making alterations to the house?
- OT** She's always been very open about that. [Laughs.] It's kind of a crazy adventure. One of the things that I always admired — and this comes back to the dome thing and the kind of architecture that I like — is this impulse to build your own space and then have to adapt your way of living to that space. One of the things I've been interested in over the years is this nomadic or quasi-homeless or backwoods way of living. The idea is that the architecture is so demanding and so difficult that you have to adapt your whole lifestyle to it. I'm not that hardcore — in the end I just made a weird bed in my house — but I think that's the ideal that architecture should aspire to: not to accommodate existing functions or existing uses, but to demand new ways of living.

PLATES — pages 118–119, 122–123

- 1 *Niki Quester* (2009); Carrara marble, live oak tree; Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de l'Île de Vassivière, France.
- 2 *The Rain*, one of three temporary sculptures from "People" (2012); Black oak tree, concrete, basketball backboard and hoop, lamps; 30 x 6.5 x 16 feet; Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York. Photograph by Jason Wyche.
- 3 *My Mistake* (2010); Douglas-fir and pine beams, steel bolts and screws; Dimensions variable; ICA, London.
- 4 *Raped Land* (2011); Concrete, metal armature; 13 x 20.5 x 17.5 feet; 54th Venice Biennale.
- 5 *For Hire* (2012); Steel, plexiglass, Douglas-fir beams, lamps, carpet, water; Dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



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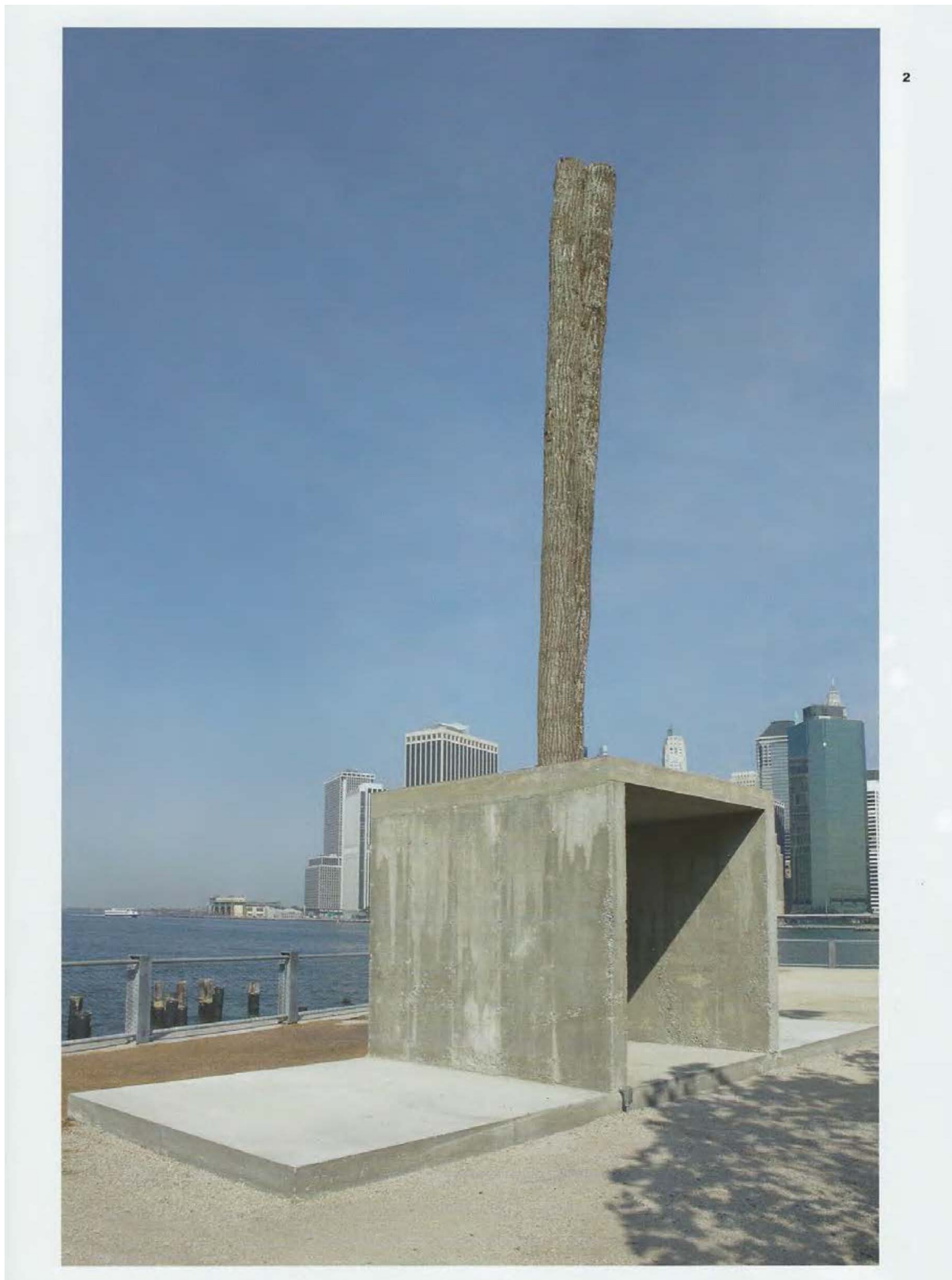
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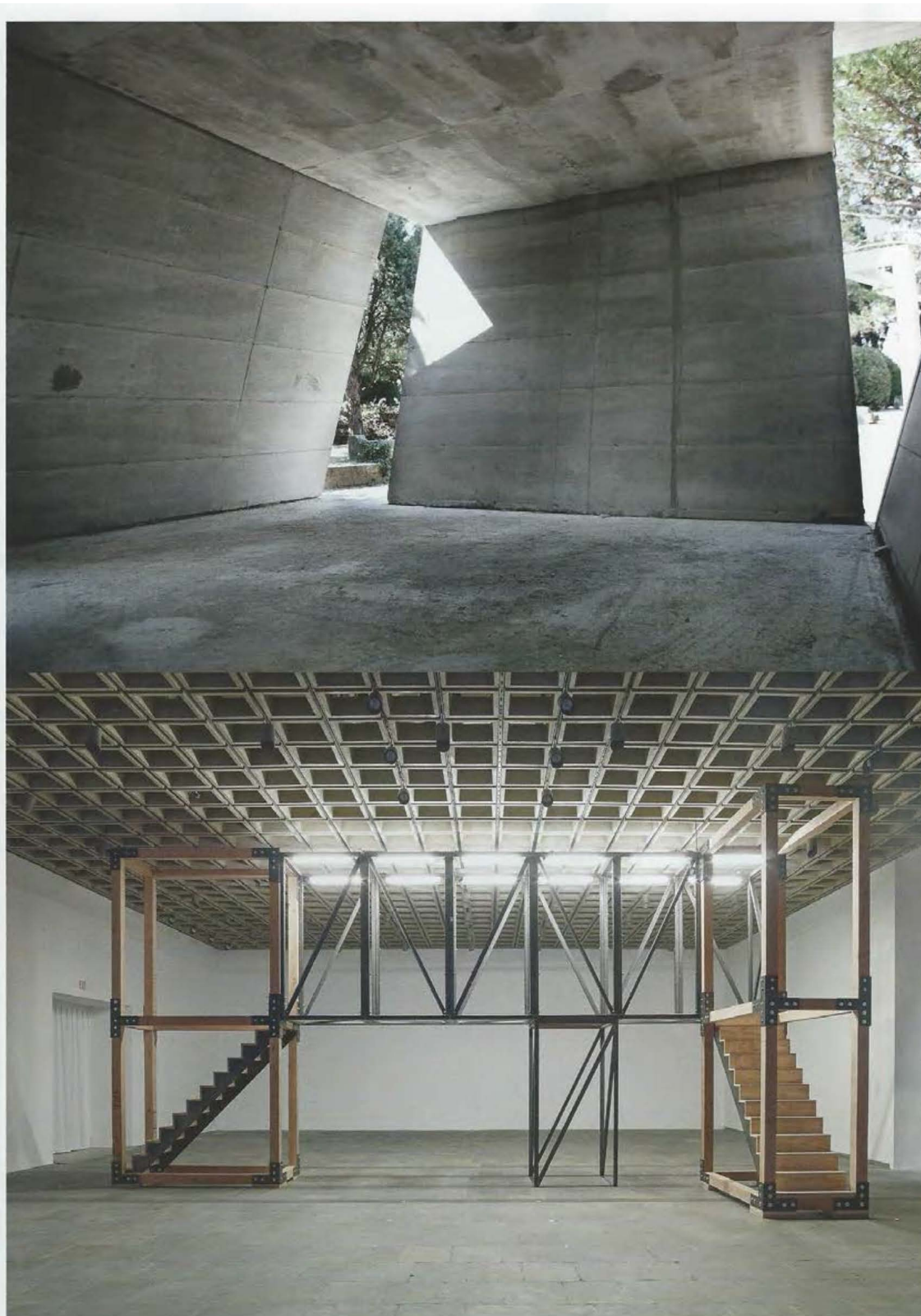




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