Museum of Contemporary Photography
Columbia College Chicago
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Michael Wolf: The Transparent City
Work / Place featuring work by Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom, Thomas Demand, Lars Tunbjörk, and Karen Yama

Michael Wolf
From the series *The Transparent City*, 2008

Additional Information for Viewers

This resource packet, which contains additional information on the artists on view and questions for looking and discussion, was produced as a viewer supplement to the exhibitions *Michael Wolf: The Transparent City* and *Work/Place* featuring work by Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom, Thomas Demand, Lars Tunbjörk, and Karen Yama by Corinne Rose, Manager of Education. This packet is also available on the museum's website (www.mocp.org/education/). To schedule a free docent led exhibition tour, contact Corinne Rose at crose@colum.edu.

Michael Wolf: The Transparent City
In 2005 Michael Wolf (German, b. 1956) visited Chicago for the first time to participate in a group exhibition for the Museum of Contemporary Photography. As he rode an elevated train from the airport into the city, he began to envision photographing Chicago. For the previous decade, Wolf had been living and working in Hong Kong, attempting to capture the sheer density of people living on the two small islands that make up that city. Wolf examined the endless ranks of residential housing complexes in Hong Kong by removing the horizon line and flattening the space to a relentless abstraction of urban expansion. He noticed, however, that Chicago had an entirely different feel. While Hong Kong is built of endless rows of structures designed and built in a nearly identical style, Chicago has more experimental, unique buildings of many different styles.

In 2007, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, in collaboration with the U.S. Equities Reality artist-in-residence program, invited Wolf to create his first body of work to address an American city. Chicago is known for work by innovative architects such as David Adler, Daniel Burnham, Louis H. Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright, and after World War II, it established itself as a world capital of modern architecture influenced by the international style of Mies van der Rohe and home to notable projects by Helmut Jahn, Philip Johnson, and more recently Frank Gehry. While it has been common for photographers to glorify Chicago's distinctive architecture and environmental context, Wolf depicts the city more abstractly, focusing less on individual well-known structures and more on the contradictions and conflicts between architectural styles when visually flattened together in a photograph. His pictures look through the multiple layers of glass to reveal the social constructs of living and working in an urban environment, focusing specifically on voyeurism and the contemporary urban landscape in flux. Wolf explores the complex, sometimes blurred distinctions between private and public life in a city made transparent by his intense observation.

Natasha Egan
Associate Director and Curator

THE EXPERIENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHING in America was not much different from photographing in Asia, really. The challenge was more conceptual: After working so long in Hong Kong and China, I wasn't sure I was capable of working somewhere else. I feel in tune with what is happening in the East, and am so inspired by the architecture, food, people, and flux of life there, that I was afraid I'd feel disconnected from an urban landscape in another part of the world. Luckily, when I came to Chicago in 2006 to install some photographs, I rode an elevated train into downtown from the airport. It was a wonderful visual experience, looking out and seeing everyone through the office windows. I remember arriving at the museum and meeting the curator, and by my third or fourth sentence they asked whether they could arrange an artist residency for me. A year later, the deal was done.

I had thought about working in New York, in part because I've worked so long with what I call "architecture of density" in Hong Kong. But there are logistic problems in New York that don't arise in Chicago. In Chicago, the buildings are spread out, they're more loosely structured, and ten- or twelve-story parking garages are interspersed between them. From the garages, you can look into buildings. I would go up onto the twelfth floor of a parking structure and get a nice view into the neighboring building. To prepare, I went onto Flickr and printed out every photo of the city's downtown Loop, then drew red arrows pointing to all of the roofs to which I wanted

access. In Hong Kong, every building has guards and you must apply for permission to get onto the roof, but researchers at US Equities, who supported my residency, were able to get me access to 99 percent of the rooftops from which I wanted to photograph.

I began my series "Architecture of Density" by photographing close-ups of vernacular subjects in the back alleys of Hong Kong's downtown high-rises. I enjoyed the photographs but thought the series of seventy or so images was conceptually one-dimensional. I felt the series would be enriched if I could bring in another layer of meaning, so I began to take photographs of the buildings from a distance. In Chicago, I worked in the opposite direction, beginning with the architecture. I felt, however, that I was bumping up against the same problem. Then one evening I was looking at a photograph I had shot and I saw in it a man giving me the middle finger. In the *exact* moment he made that gesture I pressed the shutter, even though I had probably been standing there for twenty minutes.

It set off a chain reaction in me, and I began to look through every file at 200 percent magnification to see what else was going on in those windows. I saw hands on computer mice and family photographs on the desks of CEOs; I saw people watching flat-screen TVs in the evening. It was a bit lonely, particularly when I was photographing corporate office towers during the first banking crisis in November–December 2007—I could see through my telephoto lens the tension and stress those bankers were feeling. By zooming in on details, I manage to introduce a certain vernacular visual language as well as balance the faraway with the up close.

I don't consider these works portraits; I'm not doing a portrait of Chicago. In fact, the city's characteristics don't really figure into my discussions of the series. It could be any large urban city. I simply proceeded by answering the question, Which vantage point gives me the ability to look into a building? One building that fascinated me was the very big courthouse downtown. The judge's rooms are in the corners of the building, and I wanted to catch a moment when lawyers were standing in the hallways of seven or eight consecutive floors so that the image would depict them locked into little cells, like a Robert Wilson stage design. Despite the unpredictability of my process, I have very specific images in mind as I work. Edward Hopper was a particular inspiration for this series, and I was looking for the types of images he specialized in. I was trying to translate an idea—or, rather, to find it in reality.

-Michael Wolf

Technical Notes
Michael Wolf made the images for this series at dusk, when the light inside and outside the buildings was fairly balanced, which allows us to see inside the buildings' windows. He also photographed in December, when the sun sets in Chicago before 5pm so that he could show office spaces inhabited by workers. The images on view were made with a 2 ¼ camera with a digital back. He uses digital imaging software to correct or modify color or perspective in the images. In some cases he removed objects such as trees or water towers in the foreground of the image to reinforce the presentation of the architecture. In one image depicting people watching television in a condominium, Wolf filled the tv screen with a still from the movie *Rear Window* as an homage to Alfred Hitchcock. Wolf says that in the creation of this series he, to a certain extent, emulated the main character in the film by peeking into people's windows.

Work / Place

Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom
Thomas Demand
Lars Tunbjörk
Karen Yama

Many people spend countless hours in an office amid the buzz of fluorescent lights, the din of a constantly rustling ventilation system, the glow of a computer screen, and that silent impatience of stacked files and loose papers. Mundane as it seems, the workplace is fertile territory for artists to explore. In conjunction with the exhibition *Michael Wolf: The Transparent City*, which offers a furtive depiction of contemporary urban life from the outside, *Work / Place* looks at the idiosyncratic personal routines that individuals perform inside their offices. The photographs and video in this exhibition use as their raw material the highly ordered but often banal and absurd activities of office life. Each artist strikes a balance between the personal attributes brought into an office and the homogeneity of office etiquette and behavior. As the popular television show *The Office* so cleverly depicts, the great challenge of the workplace is the implausibility of drastically distinctive personalities having to function toward the same goals—under the same roof.

Natasha Egan
Associate Director and Curator

Thomas Demand
Thomas Demand (German, b. 1964) re-creates media-based photographs by painstakingly making and photographing full-scale, three-dimensional models of their subjects. (The models are constructed entirely from colored paper and this picture is a detail of an entire office copy center he constructed.) Although Demand's subject may seem boring and commonplace, his work often carries cultural or political relevance and offers a smart critique of mass media. In much of his work the relevance of the paper itself is the subject of the picture. For example, his picture titled *Office (Büro), 1995* depicts a ransacked office made of paper. The picture refers to an image of the Stasi Central office in Berlin after it was pillaged by East Berliners seeking their personal records. Although the scattered papers in Demand's version are blank, the reference to a paper-choked, Kafkaesque society is clear. The office copy machine is also laden with cultural myths concerning fraud and breaks in confidentiality. Close inspection of Demand's pictures reveals their artifice and encourages us to question the photograph as a faithful reproduction of reality, especially in a world that is saturated with manipulated imagery.

Lars Tunbjörk
Using wit to emphasize the banal, Lars Tunbjörk (Swedish, b. 1956) observes the vernacular interiors of anonymous businesses in Europe, Japan, and the United States. He portrays what he sees as the melancholy and absurdity of modern-day office life and the struggle of the individual against corporate homogeneity. Like the artificiality of Thomas Demand's re-created offices, Tunbjörk's series underscores the often sterile and artificial nature of work environments. He observes individuals tailoring their environments to their needs—a shoeless man stretching his legs, another man talking on the telephone tucked under his desk. Tunbjörk also uses body language and formal constructs to capture the hierarchal levels of office politics—a woman crouches under a conference table organizing papers while her assumed boss stands above by the window, for example. In many of his pictures there is a sense that something is festering under the surface or behind closed doors.

Karen Yama
Karen Yama's photographs of arrangements of photographs and personal items in the work place are odd still lifes that expose our desire to modify our work spaces to feel more like home. In these photographic constructions, Yama flattens elements of the pictorial space with uniform color palettes drawn from contemporary and past interior designers who fashioned office environments. Yama manipulates all of the surfaces within the constructed environments she depicts except for the photographs within the personal displays, retaining the detail and grain of each family snapshot. This peculiar juxtaposition illustrates the tension between revealing personal information and maintaining a professional etiquette in the office.

While in the offices, Yama noticed that workers seem to create these personal displays for different reasons: they make public our achievements and accomplishments and help us bond or define ourselves with our coworkers, by making visual statements such as "I am a family man." They can also be a form of revenge against these impersonal places and companies that attempt to stifle personal expression in the office and quietly state "I am more than my job." It took Yama several months to gain access to these environments and she was often allowed only a few minutes to photograph within the spaces.

Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom
In *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg & Moore* (2007), a video mixing elaborate formality with humor, the artist team of Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom (American, b. 1954, 1957) collaborated with four practicing New York City attorneys. They observed the attorneys at work over a period of three years, noticing the phrases and body language they each use during litigation. With this source material, Carlson and Strom created a whimsical vocal score and choreography that, prior to filming, they rehearsed with the attorneys every Sunday morning for three months. Filmed in the attorneys' elegant office building, the performance provides metaphors for the theatrical aspects of litigation and the high-pressure demands of working within the juridical system. Seeing the lawyers chant and contort their bodies in exaggerated ways ultimately exposes their humanity. Strom and Carlson say they are interested in creating work that explores how art is inscribed on the body—how we all *perform* different roles in life--and in making art with different communities of people.

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Questions for Looking and Discussion

1. Look carefully at each photograph, video or series of work on view:
   - Describe what you see and hear.
   - What do we learn about the people or place depicted in the photograph or video?
   - What details reveal this information?
   - What can you tell about how the work was made and presented?

2. The artists in the exhibition *Work/Place* examine similar subject matter for different purposes using a variety of media and techniques.
   - Describe the similarities and differences between these bodies of work.
   - What does each series seem to say about office life?
   - How does each artist seem to feel about these places and the people who spend time there?

3. What connections do you see between the work in the exhibitions *Work/Place* and *Michael Wolf: the Transparent City*?