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Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Chicago

Skyscraper  
Art and  
Architecture  
Against  
Gravity

# Contents

**Skyscraper:  
Art and Architecture  
Against Gravity**

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Ai Weiwei. *Study of Perspective—Hong Kong, 1995–*.

<sup>1</sup> See Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles; and London: University of California Press, 1999).

### A war of symbols

The skyline of Hong Kong—that famously vertical, modern city—is partially obstructed by a hand. In *Study of Perspective—Hong Kong* (1995–), by Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei, the artist's arm is blurred by its proximity to the camera, the lens of which is focused on the faraway city. Nevertheless the gesture is unmistakable: Ai is giving the finger to everyone and no one in particular. This image is part of an ongoing performative-photographic series in which Ai executes this defiant gesture toward a broad range of architectural spaces that hold political and cultural power throughout the world—from the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the White House in Washington, DC, to St. Mark's Square in Venice and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Even Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (circa 1503–06), surrounded by adoring crowds at the Louvre, is not spared his disdain. Ai's repeated gesture and the resultant compilation of photographs—although they capture a variety of spaces, each meaningful for its own reasons—in their standardization and amassing speak to the broad human impulse to make snapshots. But what do these places really stand for? How have they been flattened as tourist destinations into mere signs, what relationship do they have to priorities of various populations, and why must they be constantly photographed?<sup>1</sup>

Here, Ai's gesture is directed toward that semi-autonomous, hyper-capitalist Chinese city-state Hong Kong and specifically to the architecture that has come to stand, metonymically, for its leadership among worldwide financial centers. Even in its impotence the gesture succinctly insults the cityscape. Of course, to suggest that Ai's

gesticulation is solely aggressive is to miss its tragic humor. In the play with scale reinforced by the title, his singular, protruding phallic finger mimics the tall buildings beyond, claiming a place among them.

Via Ai's rude gesture, the tall buildings of Hong Kong are seen from afar as closed monuments—all surface and form. Meanwhile, pedestrians on the ground negotiate the mass of a skyscraper in phenomenological relation to the human body. A skyscraper's steps can be climbed, its reflective surfaces negotiated and doors opened. Furthermore, the building type cannot be divorced from the variegated city in which it is found. In *Study of Perspective—Hong Kong*, it is not a singular building that is depicted but a crowded metropolis symbolic of an entire (capitalist) system. Likewise, the exhibition *Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity* includes works that address wide-ranging phenomena associated with the skyscraper, including formal aspects such as verticality and transparency as well as abstract concepts including signs, administration, and democratization. So while this building form serves as a useful model for considering a more pervasive set of conditions, let us allow ourselves the leniency to discuss cases that may not literally involve the skyscraper but that are nevertheless inextricably related.

For many, the skyscraper has become a symbol of masculinity and power. Ai's photograph playfully engages such a metaphor. A critique of the tall building's phallic crassness is also clearly articulated in the exhibition by works such as Vito Acconci's interactive sculpture *High Rise* (1980) (see pages 22–23), in which the viewer participates through physical effort in the erection of a model more than twenty feet tall, revealed to be both tower and

Erica Bohm. *Houston Tower II* from the series *Cityscapes*, 2009.



penis, and by Madelon Vriesendorp's illustrations of anthropomorphized New York skyscrapers caught in bed (see page 25). Argentinean artist Erica Bohm's photographs of North American skyscrapers similarly emphasize the form's singularity. Digitally removed from their surroundings, Bohm's skyscrapers take on an eerily alien pitch. In *Houston Tower* (2009), shot at a steep angle that conjures an uncomfortable tilting back of one's head, the sixty-four-story Williams Tower—whose name is derived from its major tenant<sup>2</sup>—appears as an impenetrable monolith, the ultimate abstract sign of capital. Jeff Wall writes compellingly that whereas the glass tower once symbolized “the new American ‘neo-capitalist’ city,” by the 1960s it had begun to

**exude a sense of historical disillusionment . . . symbolic of the inversion of values suffered by the “modern movement.” The notion of openness and transfiguration has been changed (through the implosion of revolutionary ideals) into an architectural emblem of lost or falsified openness, one containing the specifically modern form of oppression which appears to have no secret or hidden core forbidden to sight.<sup>3</sup>**

It is this failed liberal ideal of transparency, both physical and metaphorical, and the

**2**

Originally named for the Transco Energy Corporation upon its completion in 1983, the Transco Tower was renamed in 1999 by the Williams Energy Corporation.

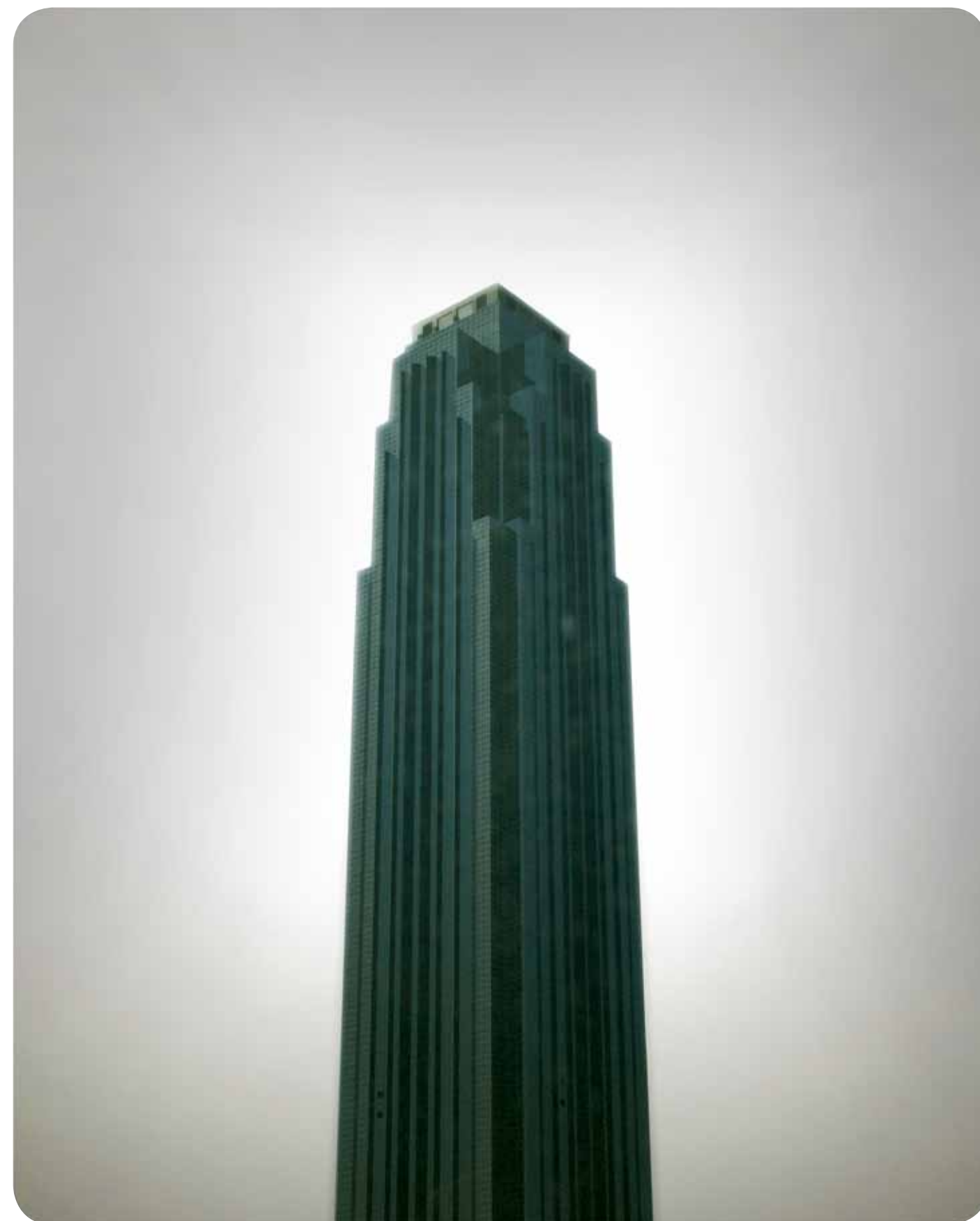
**3**

Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), 42.

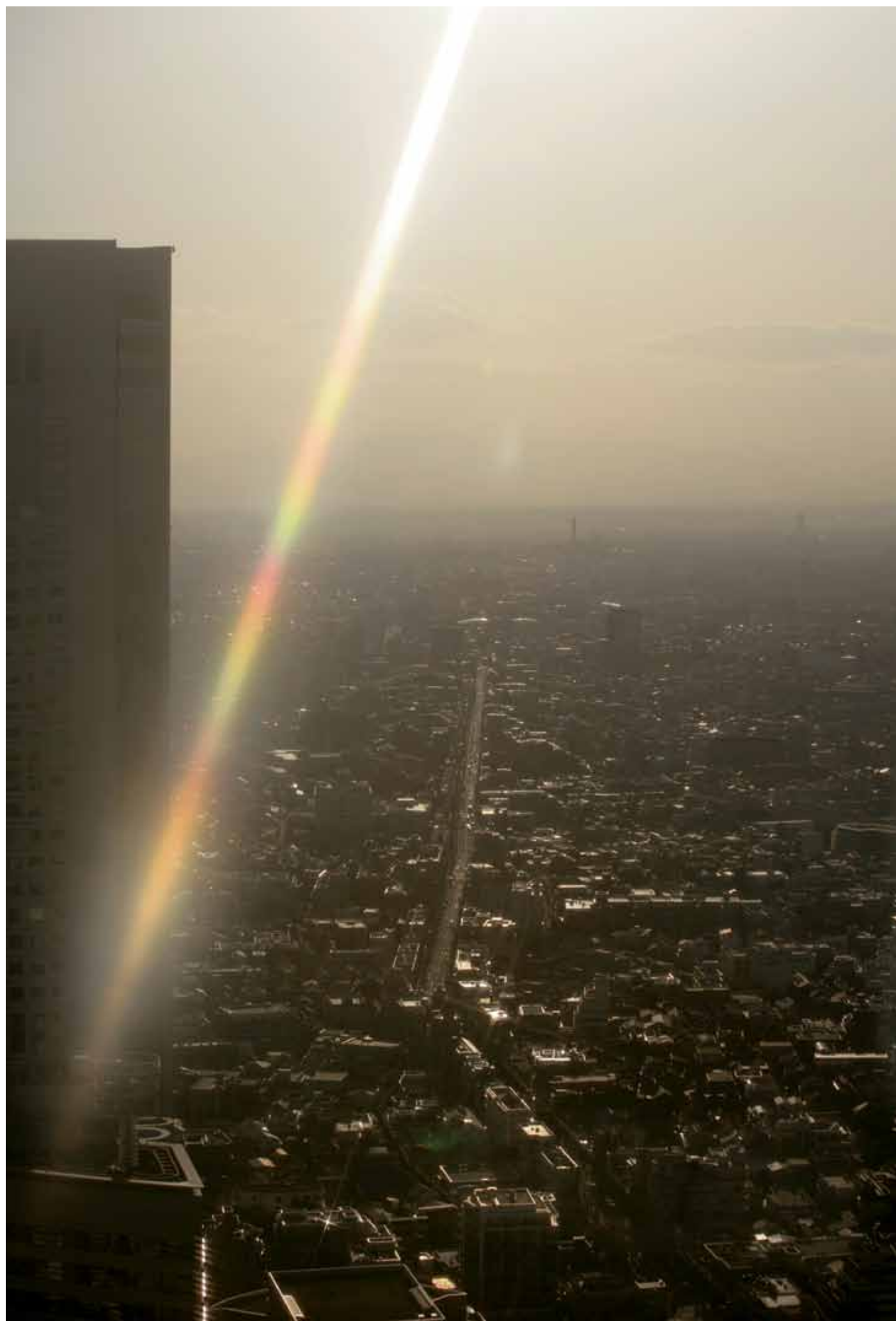
inverted symbolism that the modern city has come to hold to which Bohm's pictures speak.

At the time of organizing this exhibition and catalogue, the Occupy Wall Street movement is spreading throughout the United States—a resistance that started in solidarity with uprisings in Spain, Greece, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere. As these movements gain hold, a global public is turning its attention to the space of the city and even to the meanings that skyscrapers hold. Demonstrators against economic inequality are taking over urban parks and plazas as law enforcement officials continue to devise increasingly hostile tactics to disband the camps. The choice to *occupy*, rather than to march (and subsequently disperse), has led to debates about the use of public space and the right to non-violent demonstration. One might argue that in addition to occupying physical space the movement also acts on the level of the symbolic: the movement is not unified by tangible demands because, as the system currently functions, no real concessions are foreseeable or even possible. Instead, many participants simply voice their anger. They are disillusioned by the US government's tax policies, which have caused the gap between the wealthiest one percent and the rest of the population to grow exponentially over the last decades. While many wish for concrete reform—functional legislation that would more justly tax corporations and regulate campaign finance—just as many among the movement call out: “Occupy everything, demand nothing!” In such a necessarily symbolic approach, so too the enemy becomes symbolic. In the wake of the occupation of Frank Ogawa Plaza and the November 2, 2011, General Strike in Oakland, California, blogger Prima Porta conceded that

Erica Bohm. *Houston Tower* from the series *Cityscapes*, 2009.



Roe Ethridge.  
*Tokyo 2*, 2009.



Gustave Caillebotte.  
*Jeune homme  
à la fenêtre*, 1875.

4

Prima Porta, "Beyond the General Strike—One of Many Postscripts," *Prima Porta* (blog), November 2011, <http://primaporta.tumblr.com/post/12325173640>.

5

See Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

6

Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 6.

**the architecture of the 20th-century city begs to be defaced—indeed, it can only be defaced. Like all parts of the urban façade, bank windows are simply the surface-plane of an encompassing infrastructure of discipline and dispersion (what was once called “the spectacle”).<sup>4</sup>**

From the street, the modern city and its surfaces are flattened; the (transparent) building facade and the “falsified openness” of which Wall writes is synecdoche for the oppressive financial infrastructure it contains. The best way to cope with the intangible system, it follows, is to defiantly attack or deface its surface, just as Ai in China flips the bird to Hong Kong. It is the facade, the surface of the system that one can actually touch—and potentially destroy.

As compelling as they may be, Ai’s action and the Occupy campaign’s metaphorical strain toward the modern city are limited by their own symbolic language. To posit a purely negative reading of skyscrapers as icons of power, to renounce them as signs of an oppressive system, and to forget everything that is human about architecture is to obviate any possible complexity—even pleasure—they might afford. Furthermore, despite the complicated promise of modern housing, when inhabited, such buildings can give way to new feelings of alienation and melancholia, and a loss of the distinction between public life and privacy. Modern housing projects, skyscrapers, and the newly coined “super-tall” buildings are not after all closed monoliths but permeable structures that engender real, daily lives and experiences.



#### Crossing the threshold

Inspired by the politics and zoning of space in Chicago, the skyscraper was born as a commercial building type in the 1880s; its history is bound up completely with certain forms of modernism. As the story goes, rapidly advancing plumbing, air circulation, and electrical systems, as well as the development of the elevator, gave architects the ability to design ever taller buildings. Meanwhile the glass-clad high-rise was made possible with the development of steel technology, whereby load-bearing walls could be replaced with ones that hung from the building frame.<sup>5</sup> As we learn from Owen Hatherley in his essay elsewhere in this book, that building style was soon translated to apartment high-rises throughout the world, affording spectacular views to their many inhabitants. Reflecting on the transparency of Le Corbusier’s designs, architecture historian Beatriz Colomina writes:

**[T]he walls that define the space are no longer solid walls punctuated by small windows but have been dematerialized, thinned down with new building technologies and replaced by extended windows, lines of glass whose views now define the space.<sup>6</sup>**

A photograph by Roe Ethridge capitalizes on this new transparency. In *Tokyo 2* (2009)

Michael Wolf. *Transparent City #32*, 2007.

8

Nineteenth-century interiors, Susan Buck-Morss writes, “made a distinct separation between public space and living space. Interiors were closed off, draped and dark, musty, and, above all, private,” whereas the new architecture “broke definitively out into the open air, and ‘privacy’ became old-fashioned.” Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 303.

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Special thanks go to Julian Myers for planting this hilarious image in my head. Moreover, my sincerest gratitude goes to him for his insightful conversation, helpful readings, and bottomless patience.

(see page 54), the city streets stretch out before us in an exhilarating (if common) view of a landscape encompassing city buildings, the roofs of which produce hot white reflections that glimmer through a hazy atmosphere miles into the distance, even as the bodies of those structures are equally obscured in shadow. A wide street crowded with traffic—a major artery of the city, it can be deduced—leads our eye into the distance. From the upper edge of the image, a sunbeam refracts in the lens of the photographer’s camera, creating an artificial rainbow, while another glass surface—that of the skyscraper window at which we stand—becomes legible in the small light reflections that are imposed, hovering, on the sky. Immediately we are situated in an apartment or hotel room on a high floor of a tall building. The hum of air conditioning is nearly audible.

There is an uncanny familiarity to this picture; standing at such a window is a common modern experience, or one that many of us can imagine. In this way, *Tokyo 2* depicts a somewhat democratized view; many other inhabitants have access to almost exactly the same scope of those city blocks. But this fact makes the view no less enjoyable. We make out the contours of the edge of another tall building, possibly several city blocks away, although distance is difficult to discern at such extreme heights. It echoes the viewer’s own apparent location: a modern, glass-sheathed high-rise, a simple grid system of hundreds of apartments inhabited by even more hundreds of people. Adopting Colomina’s idea that “views . . . define the space,” the photograph locates the viewer in an easily conjured architectural space; despite its absence from the field of the photograph, the room is implied by

its view. Printed at five by three and a half feet and framed, the photograph physically reinforces its analogousness to a window. Indeed, it is likely that the viewer of the work is experiencing the Tokyo scene at a near one-to-one ratio.

Whereas the spectacle of the city and the aesthetic wonder of the view are offered up by the architecture of the high-rise, the structure’s overall effect, as conveyed by this photograph, is one of loneliness. Looking out from within the city as opposed to at it from afar, one might imagine Ai far off in the distance, brandishing his middle finger at the high-rise in which we find ourselves.<sup>7</sup> The democratic promise of which Wall speaks is betrayed for this passive subject, suspended here at great heights in a sense of vertigo. Of course, the figure alienated by architecture is not a new character in art. Although situated in a very different modernity, the loneliness of Ethridge’s Tokyo image is reminiscent of Gustave Caillebotte’s *Jeune homme à la fenêtre* (1875) (see page 55), which depicts a young man looking out from his balcony at the streets of Paris. Although Caillebotte’s subject is pictured, whereas in Ethridge’s photograph she or he is implied, it is only the young man’s silent back that is visible. The painting also locates this silent observer, his feet firmly planted in the apartment. Like the photographer in *Tokyo 2*, he is not hidden from the street, and yet in all likelihood he is not observed either, as he watches the action below and beyond. Identical buildings stretch out before him in this early reckoning with modern urban life. These pictures of Paris and Tokyo, made more than a century apart, share both a lonely solitude and a joy of looking—like the



flaneur of the streets, but here, from private quarters, observation is even more luxuriously passive. The modern skyscraper makes this (dandyish) pastime of looking out from one’s window a joy available to a great many.

The separation between public and private spheres that dominated nineteenth-century living was effectively erased with the arrival of large windows and whole walls made entirely of glass.<sup>8</sup> As privacy has become passé with the advent of transparent architecture, perhaps we have become accustomed to exposure, feeling ever more anonymous. Like hundreds of others in identical units, we live our lives with the blinds up. In Michael Wolf’s photographic series *The Transparent City* (2007), the artist captured the unhidden lives of Chicagoans in high-rise office and apartment buildings. Like Caillebotte’s young man, Wolf sees only what is plainly uncovered, but his natural vision is aided by the camera, and his looking feels somehow surreptitious. While the images depict unknowing subjects, the action seems at once invasive and forgivable. In their openness, the subjects must be aware of the semi-public—or, potentially public—lives they lead. Here, the modern dream of democratizing architecture has curdled. Following Wall’s logic, the glass walls that were meant to promote transparency of

operations in actuality produce only a deceiving openness, here giving way to perversity. We have witnessed elsewhere the observer’s solitude, but in Wolf’s photographs the loneliness is inhabited predominantly by his subjects. In *Transparent City #32* (2007), a white-shirted man stands alone eating supper at his kitchen counter. The scene is observed through the characteristic curtain wall of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Lake Shore Drive apartments. The subject pictured is but one among many others in this massive, ant farm-like city. Wolf’s photographs give a sense of the excitement of a densely organized, humming city even while conveying the urban loneliness such cities engender.

The transparency of modern dwellings can also produce alienating new social relations. Playing with this blurred line of privacy instead of secretly capturing the images of subjects in their homes (as does Wolf), the artist Shizuka Yokomizo engages the participation of her models in the creation of her photographs. The series *Dear Stranger* (1998–2000) is a set of portraits of people in their ground-level apartments. As the title asserts, the artist has never met any of her subjects. Instead, over the course of her project, she sent letters to strangers, asking them to pose in their windows at a particular time. “Dear



Shizuka Yokomizo.  
*Stranger (9), 1999.*

Shizuka Yokomizo.  
*Stranger (5), 1998.*

9

Shizuka Yokomizo, quoted in Barry Schwabsky, review of Shizuka Yokomizo's *Dear Stranger* at Cohan Leslie and Browne, New York, *Artforum* 39, no. 8 (April 2001): 139.

Stranger," she writes, "I would like to take a photograph of you standing in your front room from the street in the evening."<sup>9</sup> If they agreed, they would illuminate the scene with all available light; if they did not want to participate, they should signal their unwillingness by drawing the blinds. The artist then arrived at the specified time and, if the viewer had signaled agreement, created a portrait of the stranger in his or her home from her position in the shadows of the evening. Standing, facing out toward the street, the subjects appear variously defiant, surrendering, apprehensive, or compliant. As they had all expressed desire to be photographed, their postures take on additional complexity. In *Stranger (9)* (1999), a woman stands with crossed arms, leaning her weight on one leg in a challenging stance exaggerated by her unwelcoming expression. That she agreed to have her photograph taken is significant: she chose to exhibit a defensive attitude. Meanwhile, *Stranger (5)* (1998) depicts a young man in his sparsely decorated room, staring out at the invisible photographer, lips slightly parted and arms hanging down loosely around his firmly planted legs. This stance, combined with his form-fitting T-shirt and loose jeans, is somehow sexual—welcoming if frightening, like a dare. Knowing that they are being photographed, Yokomizo's subjects offer up charged counter-gazes toward her hidden figure. Empowering her subjects by inviting their participation, Yokomizo takes up the presumed privacy of the home and raises an awareness of exposure, certainly for those inhabitants who received her anonymous letter, as well as for the viewer. Out there, from the dark of the street, *they can see us*—whoever they are. "The ideal of the visible society," Wall writes, "one without cabals and

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Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 3–23.

10

Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerenspiel*, 39.

conspiracies characteristic of aristocratic and religious obscurantism, is open to the witness of the rational and alert citizen."<sup>10</sup> If only it were always the benevolent, responsible citizen. The modern skyscraper, then, is not an impenetrable sign by any stretch. It has enabled a new kind of publicness—or, rather, a new understanding of privacy. Granted, the supposedly democratizing mass architecture may invite perverse voyeurism. Nevertheless, to deny the modernist project entirely is to deny the potential pleasures of a connected, fluid life with the public of the city.

#### The view from above

As historian Martin Jay has convincingly argued, to survey or picture the landscape from above is to claim it.<sup>11</sup> In Fikret Atay's video *Tinica* (2004) (see page 61), the camera is trained on the city of Batman from above as a teenage boy starts to arrange a makeshift drum set on a dirt landing. Batman, located in southeastern Turkey, was developed in the 1950s, when extraction of the region's plentiful oil reserves began and a refinery was built. The city grew immediately and dramatically in population. Today, it remains an icon of the vertiginous modernization propelled by wealth gained from the extraction of fossil fuels in that region of our globe, while the people of Batman suffer high unemployment and illiteracy and live in an environment of ongoing conflict between the Turkish and large ethnic Kurdish populations. The boy in *Tinica* is dressed modestly in jeans and T-shirt. He props a plastic bucket—his bass drum—on a sneaker and brings out two PVC pipes—his drumsticks. Tin container lids serve as cymbals. Dawn creeps over the housing development that stretches endlessly into the



Protest at UC Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, November 2011.

12

Reflecting on the view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, Michel de Certeau writes that the "elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a

text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god." Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 92

horizon. After taking a swig of cola, the boy plays on the plastic and metal containers, rattling off his amateur composition while looking out over the modern blocs on this banal morning. In the face of his own disenfranchisement, he claims the city for himself. Finally, in a gesture of defiance and triumph modeled on the pure joy and adrenaline of rock-and-roll superstars, he noisily chucks his instruments over the hill. They roll and clang until they come to rest in the dirt with other detritus. He *owns* this city.

No longer only castles or prison towers, tall buildings are now inhabited by common citizens; the view from above can afford observation, even valuable countersurveillance. Is it possible that the buildings producing such views could be utilized—their initial democratic ideal redeemed—rather than defaced? In early November 2011, students at University of California, Berkeley, set up camp on Sproul Plaza in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street and to protest the increasing privatization of public higher education in California. Housing the university's registrarial, administrative, and police offices, Sproul Hall is the control hub for campus operations. The protestors pitched their tents on the plaza sited in front of this building—a public space supported by their own tuition, taxes, and debt. On November 9, as UC Berkeley police arrived to dismantle the camp, the demonstrating students, faculty, and staff locked arms to prevent their advance. A clash ensued. What was utter confusion on the ground was completely legible from above in Sproul Hall where a witness recorded video, capturing the scene. From this vantage point, we see that campus police began beating the crowd with their batons, jabbing

protestors in their stomachs, hitting their arms and legs, and dragging them violently from the front line by their hair. Separated from the chaotic "dark space" of the crowds, a divine ability of observation and comprehension is afforded to the elevated viewer.<sup>12</sup> Granted, while Sproul Hall looks out across to high-rise student dormitories, the administration building is neither modern nor a skyscraper. The claiming of this space, of the knowledge afforded by *the view*, nevertheless speaks to a relationship with the built environment that is different from Ai's rejection of the city, Ethridge's alienation from within it, or even the radical call from some among the Occupy protestors to deface its surface.

Fikret Atay. Still from *Tinica*, 2004.

