Michael Wolf
BRUCE SILVERSTEIN

Looking at Michael Wolf's photographic series, one is flung between two poles: Is the photographer trying to demonstrate how dehumanized the world has become, or is he insisting on the opposite?

One series, "Architecture of Density," 2003–2009, shows images of Hong Kong high-rise buildings, with rows and columns of windows that seem to extend ad infinitum and, in fact, look quite like pixels. The images don't have the all-encompassing feel of those by Andreas Gursky, such as the artist's *Hongkong and Shanghai Bank*, 1994; the motion Wolf's works inspire is less one of stepping back to be enveloped by a pattern than one of coming in close to look for interruptions in it. Human presence, however, is scant: A group sitting amicably on a windowsill turns out to be shirts on hangers, and in night shots, figures are so blitzed by the light blazing out of windows that they are unidentifiable. In "Transparent City," 2007–2008—the series' name referring most obviously to the kind of glass curtain ushered in by the International Style, but with overtones of containing nothing and having nothing to hide—images of Chicago office buildings are taken from closer up, so that people are visible, although largely obscured by the grid, going about the familiar business of office life. Seeing examples from these series together, one gets the impression that the photographer is slowly approaching from a distance, and in "Tokyo Compression," 2010, he comes in for a close-up. Here, riders pushed up against the doors of Tokyo's crowded subway are more or less ambushed by Wolf, so that their defenselessness—compared with that of his unaware subjects in "Transparent City"—is quite apparent. Do they close their eyes to keep him away, to create one last barrier of privacy? Or are they simply exhausted? One woman, framed in condensation on the window, opens a single wary eye.

This sense of photographer conflated with camera, along with the slick surfaces of the first two series, gives the work a chilly feel, suggesting that Wolf takes the side of the machines. But "Street Views," 2009–10, another series, complicates matters. Combing Google's feature of the same name—an enormous database of images—Wolf finds people who happen to have been captured by the search engine's roving automated camera. (The prints on display are made from Wolf's photographs of his computer screen, thus adding another degree of remove to a process that already puts the subject at a distance.)

In discussions of street photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson is impossible to avoid, although it feels cynical indeed to associate the "decisive moment" with a machine that doesn't look, but merely eats up and spits back that which passes in front of its many lenses. These images are accidental, contextless, impartial, belonging to a global corporation but available in the public sphere—and in fact, another artist, Jon Rafman, has evidently made use of the very same images in a similar project. But, surprisingly, an odd assertion of something human arises, perhaps because the results are so hard to interpret: A girl appearing to run and jump in play could just as well be trying to escape, or even be getting shot, and a naked woman at the edge of a body of water could be a contemplative nudist or a hesitant suicide. A couple kisses somewhat frantically; a seagull is caught midflap. Here, even with no human agency behind the photographic apparatus, and despite both viewers and subjects being dogged by the doomy feeling of relentless digital surveillance (and the accompanying suspicion that anything we do can be dissolved into bits), the subjects are revealed to be irreducible. They are still permitted—and here maybe it is apt to invoke Cartier-Bresson—some mystery. With a simple enough gesture, Wolf has located our humanity in the cloud.

—Emily Hall

Michael Wolf, *A Series of Unfortunate Events #57*, 2010, color photograph, 60 × 48". From the series "Street Views," 2009–10.