

# foam

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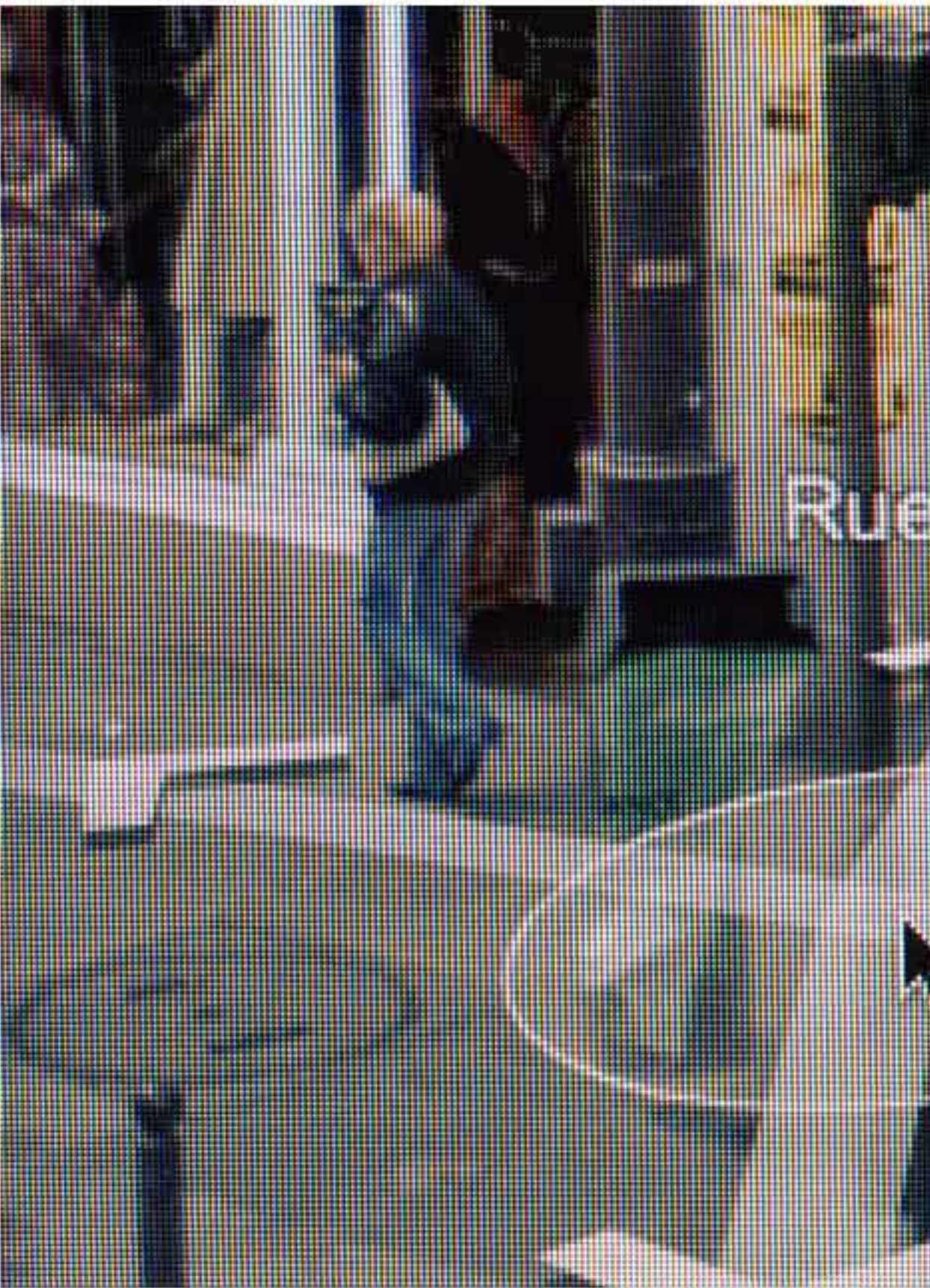
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€17,<sup>50</sup>





Ruete Paradis











# Michael Wolf

All images © Michael Wolf, courtesy Wouter van Leeuwen Gallery, Amsterdam; Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York; Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco; Gallery 51 Fine Art, Antwerp; Gallery La Particulair, Paris; M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

**Michael Wolf** was born in Munich in 1954. He grew up in the United States, Europe and Canada, and studied at UC Berkeley and at the Folkwang School in Essen, Germany. He moved to Hong Kong in 1995 for a period of intensive study of Chinese cultural identity and the complexities of Chinese urban architecture. He has published five photobooks on China: *China im Wandel* (Frederking und Thaler, 2001), *Sitting in China* (Steidl, 2002), *Chinese Propaganda Posters* (Taschen, 2003), *Hong Kong Front Door Back Door* (2005), and *Hong Kong Inside Outside* (Peperoni Press/Asia One Publishing, 2009). Wolf's work has been exhibited extensively in galleries and at art fairs throughout the world since 2005, including shows at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago in 2006, at the Museum Centre Vapriikki in Tampere, Finland, in 2007 and most recently at the Aperture Gallery in New York in January 2010.

Michael Wolf won a first prize in the World Press Photo Award Competition in 2005 (Contemporary Issues Series) and in 2010 (Daily Life Single), on both occasions with topics photographed in Asia.

Michael Wolf has long been interested in the city and its architectural structures. He photographed Hong Kong's strikingly formalistic and severe buildings and the result, as seen in *Hong Kong Inside Outside* verged on the abstract. His professional interest in people and human interaction began when he accidentally blew up a detail from glazed buildings he had been photographing in Chicago. *Transparent City* (Aperture 2008) juxtaposes images from the buildings and pixellated details with blown-up details of the life within. Wolf's curiosity about accidentally captured human situations led to work with the immense

image archive of Google Street Views. With great precision he isolates scenes from the streets of Paris. By framing and directing our gaze, Michael Wolf helps us discover small details. The images capture both the humour, beauty and absurdity of daily life and raise questions about the constant surveillance of public spaces.

*Paris Street View* will be exhibited at the Goethe Institute in Hong Kong between 3 March and 23 March 2010 and in an outdoor exhibition on the Zuidas, the Amsterdam business district, from 12 March till 11 April.

Michael Wolf is represented by Wouter van Leeuwen Gallery, Amsterdam; Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York; Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco; Gallery 51 Fine Art, Antwerp; Gallery La Particulair, Paris and M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

For more information, see [www.photomichaelwolf.com](http://www.photomichaelwolf.com).

## Marc Feustel

Marc Feustel is an independent curator, writer and blogger based in Paris. A specialist in Japanese photography, he is the author of *Japan: a self-portrait, photographs 1945-1964* (Flammarion, 2004) and has curated several exhibitions as creative director of Studio Equis ([www.studioequis.net](http://www.studioequis.net)) including *Tokyo Stories* (6 March – 2 May 2010, Kulturhuset, Stockholm) and *Eikoh Hosoe: Theatre of Memory* (19 March – 22 May 2010, Japanisches Kulturinstitut, Cologne). He blogs at [www.eyecurious.com](http://www.eyecurious.com)



# Towards a New Street Photography

Marc Feustel

In his collection of prose poems on the city, Italo Calvino writes the following about the imaginary city of Tamara: *'You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard, the tavern. (...) If a building has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city's order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel. Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe that you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.'*

Paris has become a photographic Tamara, a city where every street seems to evoke an old photograph. Its architecture has remained largely unchanged since Haussmann's nineteenth-century restructuring of the

city. Over the decades this architecture has become the subject or the backdrop of a quasi-universal photographic iconography which developed as the medium of photography flourished in the French capital. This rich heritage has become an obstacle for contemporary photographers shooting in Paris. How can you photograph the now of a city where every street corner, every café terrace, every doorway has been immortalized by the likes of Eugène Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau and Willy Ronis? Their photographs are the elephant in the room, so universally recognizable that they have become visual clichés, best avoided, and yet they are also part of the very essence of the city and therefore cannot be ignored.

This is the conundrum that faced Michael Wolf when he partially relocated to Paris in 2008. Wolf is known for his large-format photographs of the density and monumentality of Hong Kong's architecture. In the series *Architecture of Density*, Wolf used Hong Kong's tower blocks to great effect, turning their facades into abstractions, never-ending repetitions of architectural patterns, with only the odd piece of dangling laundry to remind us of the thousands of people within. Hong Kong and China, where Wolf has shot several series, are places of flux: the architecture and structure of their cities is constantly being reinvented and there is little sentimentality about the preservation of traditional architecture. The buildings in these cities are replete with fascinating details as they wear the signs of their inner life on their surfaces: pipes emerge from walls at random, telephone wires are tied in inextricable knots and balconies are transformed into overflowing outdoor storage units. Arriving in Paris after 15 years spent living and working in Hong Kong, Wolf was



*The Transparent City, 2008 © Michael Wolf*



faced with a restrained city that shows few signs of contemporary life on its surface. The city's static form and the weight of its photographic past convinced him of the need to find a new approach. The result is his latest series, *Paris Street View*.

*Paris Street View* is made up entirely of images taken using Google's Street View technology, which allows users to navigate a photographic map of any given city. Street View's images are taken at regular intervals by automated scanners placed on top of vehicles which drive through the locations to be mapped. In some ways it seems that the scale and significance of this endeavour has been overlooked by the photographic community. The idea of creating a photographic map of the world is ground-breaking: in scale it dwarfs even the most expansive previous efforts, such as Eugène Atget's rigorous documentation of Paris. In creating Street View, Google is doing more than assembling a series of photographs. Each of its images contains a discrete slice of space and time. In order to assemble its photographic maps, Google is stitching together slices of space and time to form a seamless photographic tapestry of our world.

Interestingly, Google Street View explodes one of Cartier-Bresson's fundamental concepts: the decisive moment. The French master coined this famous term in reference to the ability of a photographer to see, and capture on film, a moment where the significance of an event combines

with the organization of forms. By removing the photographer from the equation, Street View is creating a different kind of decisive moment, one that does not depend on the photographer, but that is instead governed purely by chance.

Since its launch a number of people have combed through this tool to uncover some of the more extraordinary moments that Google's cameras have captured. Wolf's approach is different. Rather than simply trying to find an interesting scene, he uses Street View as the raw material from which to shoot his own photographs.

By embracing this alternative photographic world Wolf is challenging another Cartier-Bresson maxim. Whereas Cartier-Bresson famously (almost) never cropped his photographs, for Wolf's Street View work the crop is everything. This approach is an extension of street photography, but one in which the crop and the choice of angle have replaced the camera. Wolf refers to the process of making these images as shooting and his online journeys through the streets of Paris, searching for moments to be photographed, are analogous with those of a street photographer pacing the streets of a city. The world of Street View may be more limited than our reality, but it still offers an infinite set of visual possibilities for a photographer to explore. With *Paris Street View*, Wolf may have become the first street photographer of the online world.

These images recognize and even intentionally quote the classics of street photography from Robert Doisneau to Robert Frank, by making use of its tropes. A couple's embrace on a busy Paris street is a playful reference to Doisneau's ubiquitous *Kiss by the Hotel de Ville*. These are photographs of photographs that recognize and engage with the weight of their photographic heritage.



*The Transparent City*, 2008 © Michael Wolf



For a photographer best known for the work that he shot on a large format camera with extraordinarily detailed results, these super-pixelated street shots may come as a bit of a surprise. But Wolf is not so much a photographer of architecture as of the city in all its forms and his *Paris Street View* series represents a logical progression from his previous work.

With his series *Transparent City*, the dense, claustrophobic concrete of Hong Kong's high-rises gave way to a sleeker, more statuesque Chicago. These later photographs extend Wolf's study of the skin of the city, but Chicago's glass skyscrapers reveal far more of the life within them. During the editing process for the series, Wolf became fascinated by the little glimpses into people's lives that were visible through the windows of the buildings he had photographed. He painstakingly scoured every inch of the images to find human details to pair with his architectural images. He then blew up these details into highly pixelated large-scale tableaux. In the process, his work acquired a certain voyeuristic edge, which he acknowledged with a dramatic image containing a *clin d'oeil* to Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

*Paris Street View* extends this use of pixelation and digital noise even further. As Wolf blows up details from Street View, his images begin to echo the textures of Roy Lichtenstein's newsprint or of Warhol's silkscreen prints, influences which he acknowledges and actively cultivates. In addition to embracing this aesthetic of digital noise, Wolf also uses Google's language of symbols to anchor the images in the digital age. By making use of Google's pixels, superimposed lines, arrows and geometric shapes, he forces the city's Haussmannian architecture into the present day, if not into the future. Just like Italo Calvino's imaginary Tamara, Paris is a city where everything is invested with some symbolic reference to the past, and by adding a layer of contemporary symbols to the city's old ones, Wolf is suggesting a new way of reading the city.

A circle hovers over the blurred face of a young girl, three directional arrows seeming to taunt her with infinite possibility. An image of an ordinary intersection takes on an entirely different meaning when layered with its street names, rue de Paradis and rue de la Fidélité. The language of symbols of the Street View interface is designed to be universal. By making use of these symbols, Wolf's images become imbued with a sense of the increasing globalization and homogenization of our world. He has already begun shooting Street View images in other cities and it will be interesting to see how these images from different locations combine and resonate with each other.

There is a great irony at play with Street View. As anti-terror and privacy laws proliferate it has become increasingly difficult to photograph major cities like Paris. In January 2010 over 2,000 photographers assembled in London's Trafalgar Square to demonstrate against police use of terrorism laws to prevent photography in public places. And yet Google has been photographing cities more extensively than any photographer ever could. This is made possible in part by the algorithm that Google Street View uses, which automatically blurs human faces, thereby protecting the privacy of the people in the images. This technology is far from foolproof however, and Wolf has exploited its failures in several recent images which reveal the faces that fell through the gaps in Google's algorithm. Is this voyeurism that infringes on the privacy of innocent passers-by caught in the photographic crossfire? If so, who is the voyeur: Google for making these images so easily accessible to anyone with an internet connection, or Wolf who has used Google's Street View imagery to draw attention to its loopholes and the double standards associated with them?

*Paris Street View* highlights the absurdity of current attempts to control photographic practice just as digital photography has made photography more accessible than ever before. By cropping, manipulating and even making high quality prints of images derived from Street View, Wolf is reasserting the role of the photographer and opening up new avenues for photography to explore. I wonder what Google will think. +