

# Humanising A Modernist Icon

## Skyscraper: Art & Architecture Against Gravity

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BRINGING THIS ICONIC BUILDING TO LIFE, *SKYSCRAPER* IS A RE-APPRAISAL OF THE MODERNIST STRUCTURE AND FEATURES OVER 50 ARTISTS WHOSE WORK RESPONDS TO ITS VARIETY AND COMPLEXITY.

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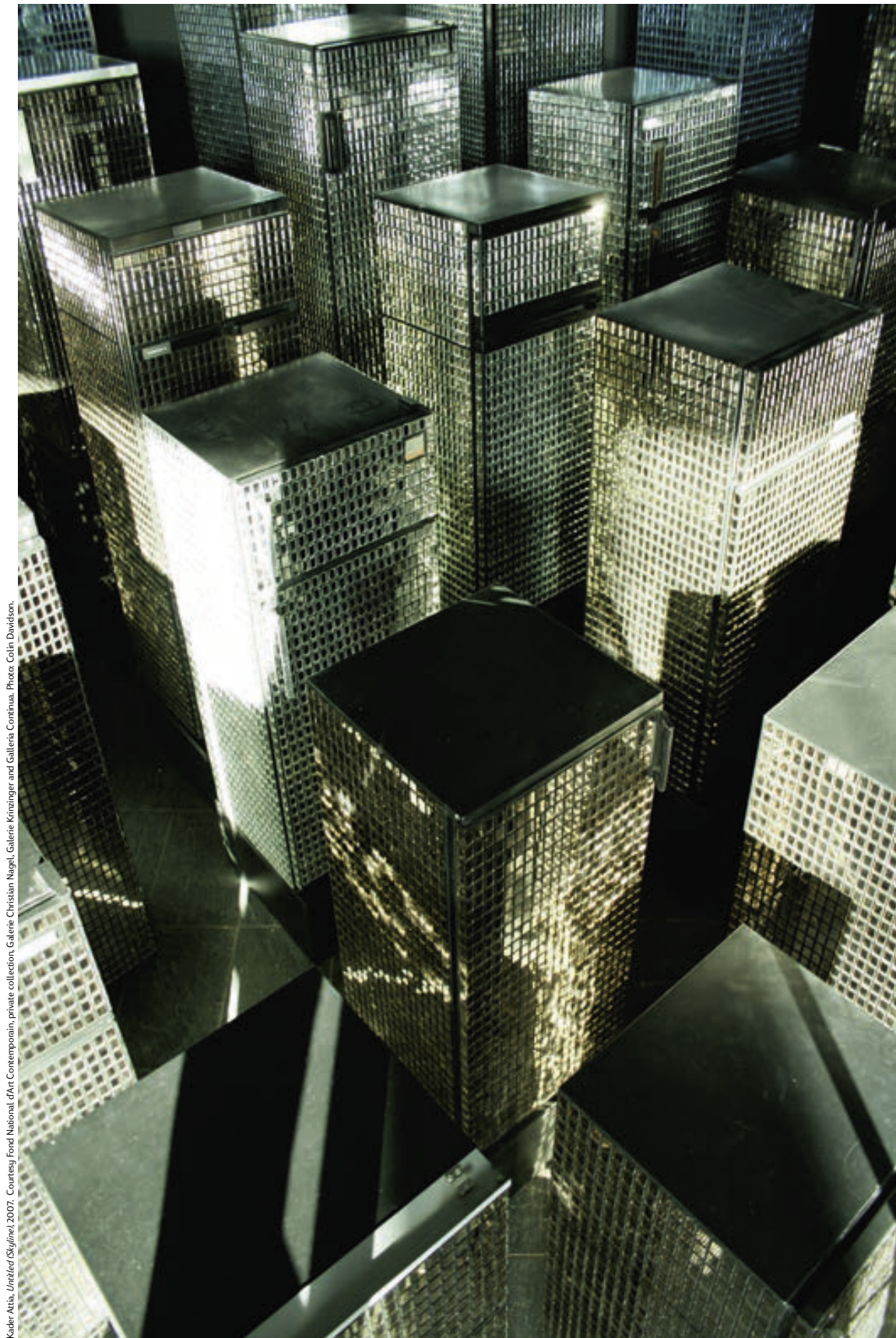
In a passage in *The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered* (1896) the pioneering, influential architect Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924) stated: "This loftiness is to the artist-nature its thrilling aspect ... It must be in turn the dominant chord in his expression of it, the true excitant of his imagination ... It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line." A skyscraper can be sculpted and formed into an incredible towering edifice of steel and mirrored walls of glass; a colossus inherently capable of inspiring admiration and at the same time provoking a sense of insignificance.

Chicago has been acknowledged as one of the first cities to embrace the high rise building and it seems appropriate that the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago should play host to the exhibition *Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity*. This thematic exhibition has been curated by Michael Darling, James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator, Joanna Szupinska, and Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow. It features works by over 50 artists such as Andy Warhol, Chris Burden, Catherine Yass, Erica Bohm, Vito Acconci, Fikret Atay, Claes Oldenburg, Ziad Antar and Enoc Perez. The exhibition also includes a specially commissioned sculpture by Polish artist Monika Sosnowska, installed in the vertical space of the museum's atrium, and the minimal paintings of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers by Robert Moskowitz are on display in the gallery for the first time since 9/11. Each work has been selected because of its response to this iconic structure; Darling considers that "artists have always looked at skyscrapers with a wary eye as well as with fascination." While the exhibition is dominated by a central cohesive theme, it is divided into five distinct sections: Verticality, Personification of Architecture, Urban Critique, Improvisation and The Vulnerability of Iconic Buildings.

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ing the eye from street to summit and, in doing so, instilling both awe and aspiration. The Verticality section of the exhibition explores both the formal configuration of these buildings and the psychological correlates of optimism and progress. Darling suggests: "It is an inescapable fact about how skyscrapers work; grouping these (pieces) together to establish rules regarding the theme – those pieces on their own will take you in all different directions." In the work *Chrysler Building* (2011) by Chris Burden, we experience a customary landmark one might expect in an exhibition of this nature. Burden's rendering has reduced the monumental Chrysler Building to a miniature construct assembled from a simple metal building kit, and this scale presents the viewer with an opportunity to relate to the building on a tangible level. In a similar response to Burden's appropriation, the artists Jeff Carter and Jennifer Bolande also intricately reconstruct models of iconic high rise buildings. With its curtain wall façade, New York's Lever House (1952) was one of the first glass-box skyscrapers, and exemplifies the design principle according to the Bauhaus master Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In *Appliance House* (1998-9) Bolande's "curtain wall façade" consists of stainless steel light boxes with duratrans photos of washing machines displayed in shop windows at night. We become aware of the strong association that skyscrapers have with commerce and its capitalist ethos. This pristine, shiny edifice has been constructed from the financial success of selling cleaning appliances to the masses. The impressive panoramic vista captured from a Tokyo highrise by Roe Ethridge and the expressionistic utopian edifices of the *Cityscapes* series (2009) by Erica Bohm perfectly capture the metropolitan dream of an aspiring urban planner. Enoc Perez's oil on canvas painting of the *Marina Towers, Chicago* (2011) serves as a poignant reference to the exhibition's host city.

The destruction of The Tower of Babel reminded mortals that they were



Kader Attia, *United Skyline*, 2007. Courtesy: Ford National, d'Art Contemporain, private collection, Galerie Christian Nagel, Galerie Krinzinger and Galleria Continua. Photo: Colin Davidson.



Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura Image of the Empire State Building in Bedroom*, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist and Bonni Berrabi Gallery, New York.

lesser than their God. It took some time before secular constructions far exceeded religious structures in height. Less spiritual needs such as status can play a major part in the construction of a tall building and Personification of Architecture makes us aware of the relationship between the physical and the ego. Vito Acconci's kinetic sculpture *High Rise* (1980), Roger Brown's *Ablaze and Ajar* (1972) and H.C. Westermann's *Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea* (1958) exemplify this dual implication. Darling testifies that "the anthropomorphising instincts of these artists is thinking of (the) buildings in a very phallic way, which of course, lends itself to the hubris of the skyscraper and the macho 'race to the sky' – there is something deeply human about that." Abelardo Morell's emotive and monochromatic *Camera Obscura Image of the Empire State Building in Bedroom* (1994) has captured a public icon and metaphorically invited it into a private, intimate space. A sense of the corporal

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is present in the packaged confectionary sculptures by Eliza Myrie entitled *Project Candy*. Through this concept the artist offers viewers the opportunity to purchase and then consume a memento from the show. Myrie says: "The work considers the food supply of the inner city and how we physically ingest and manifest the circumstances of the locations we dwell within."

Improvisation offers a look at the ways that people who inhabit it humanise modernist architecture. Wilfrid Almendra's sculptures stress the clash between individualism and standardisation. Yin Xiuzhen takes old clothing and transforms the fabric into soft sculpture cityscapes that dramatically unfold from suitcases. The act of travelling and the places visited become one complete whole. Marie Bovo's photographs of the sky centrally shot within courtyards gives viewers a sense of vertigo. Congo based artist Bodys Isek Kingelez began

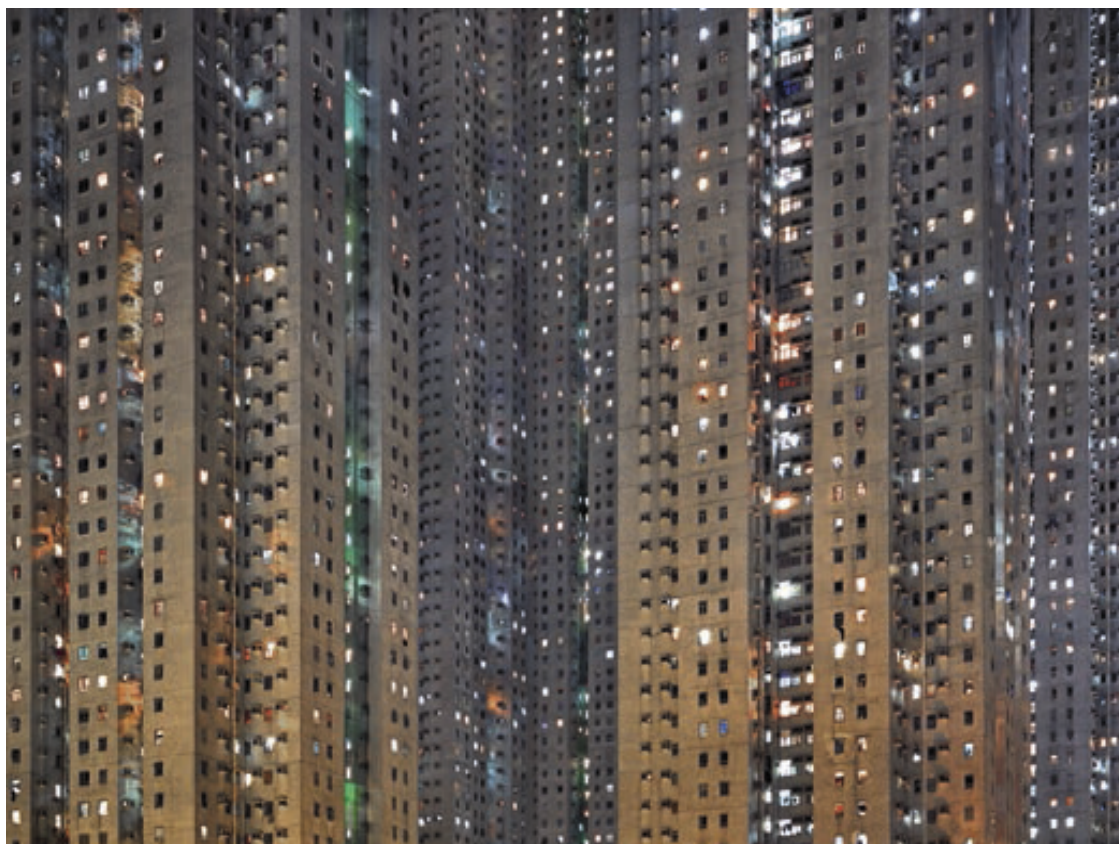
building his brightly coloured maquettes of imagined buildings when he was made redundant. Although he has no formal training in architecture or art, his idiosyncratic structures such as *Palais d'Ihunga* (1992) articulate a joy in conceiving and constructing. A similar pleasure in mark-making can be seen in the felt-pen drawings of Wesley Willis. Diagnosed with schizophrenia at 26, Willis used both music and drawing as means of expression. His depictions of the Dan Ryan Expressway and other Chicago street scenes reveal an effervescent personality in their repetitive marks. Kori Newkirk's *Glint* (2002) creates an equally colourful celebration of the city by rendering the silhouetted outline of skyscrapers using bright red plastic pony beads threaded unto artificial hair. Gabriel Orozco's photograph *Isla en la Isla (Island within an Island)* (1993) presents two cityscapes within one image. A bleak view of the Manhattan skyline seen from New Jersey is echoed by the placing of broken, discarded planks and detritus against a grey concrete wall in the foreground. The artist's makeshift reproduction of the cityscape seems like a scathing critique of the dominant role that New York plays within the art world.

Darling asserts that in the interest of balance it was important to recognise that "a large number of artists are critiquing the modernist idea of grouping hundreds of people together in a single tower." The Urban Critique section presents works that explore the more dystopian nature of urban development. The criticisms levelled by Jane Jacobs in her influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) are still relevant in most industrialised countries. In the drive for market-led efficiency human needs are subordinate to the machine of commerce, diversity is sacrificed for the specialisation of financial quarters, and shopping centres, link roads and bypasses rip through city neighbourhoods. This dehumanising tendency inevitably leads to alienation and this theme is picked up by artists such as Ziad Antar, Jeff Carter, gelatin, Jakob Kolding, Michael Wolf and Shizuka Yokomizo. Kolding engages directly with how town planning interferes with





Pierre Huyghe, *Les Grands Ensembles*, 2001. © Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris.



Michael Wolf, *Night* #7/2005. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Koo Gallery, San Francisco.

human activity in his striking collages whilst Carter's questioning of Modernist theories by recreating famous structures through a process known as IKEA-hacking can be seen in his sculpture *Untitled #3 (Chicago Tribune Tower)* (2010).

Wolf's *The Transparent City* voyeuristically captures fragments of life within Chicago's high-rise towers. Office spaces and private accommodation are scrutinised through a telephoto lens or, as in *Transparent City #6* presented here, building facades are transformed into abstract compositions inhabited by city dwellers oblivious to Wolf's gaze. In contrast, Yokomizo's photographic project *Dear Stranger* 1998-2000 presents complicit night-shots of individuals framed within the brightly lit interiors of their homes. The artist wrote an anonymous letter to her subjects asking if they would stand at a particular window at a specific time of night so that she could photograph them from the street. The record of these encounters perfectly captures the uneasy relationship between self and other inherent in city living.

Ziad Antar's decision to take a photograph of the world's tallest free standing structure, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, with out-of-date film using an obsolete camera immediately places this modern building into the prism of the historical archive. In this simple gesture he profoundly presents current grandstanding within a historical framework of fallen empires, inevitable decline and the transient nature of power. The future can also reframe historical actions. Austrian collective gelitin's "prankster" performance in which they installed a window balcony on the 96<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center to watch the sunrise is revealed in *The B-Thing, New York City* (2000-01). The archive relating to their intervention presented here is inevitably overshadowed by later events.

These later events, the 9/11 attacks and the resulting changing relationships to iconic structures of power, inform the works presented in *Vulnerability of Icons*. Included are Vera Lutter's spectral *Studies for Ground Zero* (2001-02) – gelatin silver prints captured by turning a room overlooking the site into a camera obscura. The means of recording and its impact on our understanding is also explored in Thomas Ruff's *jpeg ny05* (2004) in which the broken remnants of one tower are further fractured through the degraded quality of a digitally

captured image. The conclusion may be that binary approaches cannot meet the complexities of our times. Robert Moskowitz's minimal paintings of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers will be shown for the first time since 9/11. Moskowitz has drawn and painted the towers since 1974, engaging with them through his monochromatic, formal approach. It's impossible now to see these works as purely surface relationships between structure and rendition; a new narrative dominates. Aspects of this narrative are poignantly told in Hans-Peter Feldmann's installation *9/12 Frontpage* (2001). The artist displays the front page of 151 newspapers on 12 September 2001. Darling believes this piece "reminds us just how global the impact of those attacks was and how much of a shift it created in culture at large."

It could be argued that terrorists are using the efficiency-model philosophy behind such high-density buildings to create as much death and destruction as possible with the fewest resources. The Twin Towers were not the only high-rise buildings to be targeted by those wishing to pursue their cause violently. Ahmet Ögüt's *Exploded City* (2009) presents an imaginary metropolis of 22 scale-model buildings and architectural features that have suffered bomb attacks such as the Madimak Hotel, Sivas (attacked 2 July 1993), Europa Hotel, Belfast, (continually bombed between 1972-1994), HSBC Bank, Istanbul, (attacked 20 November 2003), Ferhadija Mosque, Banja Luka (attacked 7 May 1993) and Mostar Bridge, Mostar (destroyed 9 November 1993). By not including the Twin Towers in the cityscape Ögüt reminds viewers that the toll of victims from extreme acts of violence is vast.

In addition to the themed sections there will be presentations of work by Cyprien Gaillard, Pierre Huyghe and Jan Tichy. Darling and his fellow curators have brought together a dynamic collection of works that enable a multi-layered reappraisal of that most iconic modernist structure, the skyscraper. *Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity* opens 30 June and continues until 23 September. [www.mcachicago.org](http://www.mcachicago.org).

Angela Darby





gellin, *Big Thing, (detail I)*, 2001. Courtesy the Artists and Greene Nafali, New York.



Gabriel Orozco, *Isla en la Isla (Island within an Island)*, 1993. © Gabriel Orozco, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.