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In each of the subjects that Wolke has taken on photographically, there are moments of psychological resonance and meaning that transcend ordinary experience. In what is often an ironic and harsh world, he preserves and shows us both transcendent moments and those of resignation and defeat. Wolke’s language is the image, and his images urge us to consider the complex consequences of our actions.

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Notes
2. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

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Saint Louis, Missouri 63108
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Wednesdays, Fridays: Noon to 5:00 p.m.
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and one hour before Sheldon concerts and during intermissions.

The exhibition is made possible by Joan and Mitchell Markow

Biography
Jay Wolke was born in 1954 and raised in Chicago, Illinois. He received his B.F.A. in Printmaking, Illustration and Design at Washington University, St. Louis, and an M.S. in Photography at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. Since 1981 he has taught photography and art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Institute of Design, IIT; Studio Art Centers International, Florence, Italy; and Columbia College Chicago. He is an Associate Professor at Columbia College, Chicago and served as Chair of the Art and Design Department from 2000 to 2005, and again resumed his duties as Chair in 2008. Wolke has had solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago; the St. Louis Art Museum; Harvard University; the California Museum of Photography; and Foundation Studio Marangoni, Florence, Italy. His photographs are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others. Two monographs of his work have been published: All Around the House: Photographs of American-Jewish Communal Life (Art Institute of Chicago, 1998) and Along the Divide: Photographs of the Dan Ryan Expressway (Center for American Places, 2004). Wolke has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, Focus Infinity Fund and the Ruttenberg Arts Foundation. His photographs have appeared in numerous publications including the New York Times Magazine, Doubleday, Architectural Record, Newsweek, Fortune, and the Village Voice. The book, Architecture of Resignation will be published in late 2010.
Collisions and their Consequences

Jay Wolke's photographs concern, on a broad level, the theatre of human experience as it unfolds in the landscape. Since taking up the camera as his primary means of expression in 1977, Wolke has sought places and social situations that illuminate human dynamics as they intersect or collide with human will, human construction, and political machinations. Wolke has chosen his subjects carefully, approaching each project like an anthropologist, or an archaeologist—carefully finding and cataloguing varying pieces of “evidence” that collectively yield a broad social and psychological picture of our society in the 20th— and now—21st centuries. His projects have often overlapped, sharing similar concerns.

What sets Wolke’s photographs apart from the work of others is his exceptional ability to organize elements within the picture plane. This maneuver helps to subdue the chaos that is often inherent in the subject. Each image is carefully choreographed; every aspect is considered and elements are carefully organized so as to yield a picture that feels at the same time solid—even architectural—but also surprisingly fluid. The fluidity is in the image’s ability to invite immersion and inspire speculation about the outcome of the pictured moment. Inherent in each is a multilayered narrative that involves the facts as the photographer has offered them; the many histories that make up the image's subtext; and the additional stories, perceptions and interpretations that are brought to the image by the viewer. For Wolke, the construction of the photograph is central to his art making. In each work, he looks for “particular dynamics” within the picture plane, finding ways to create complex, “problematic, challenging, provocative” images with elements that address “hierarchical space, scale issues, lots of tensions and contrasts of symbols.” The result is that the photographs are like prosceniums in which individual dramas unfold. The highly cultivated spaces that Wolke constructs within the picture plane are a reminder of Old Master paintings in their articulation of the unfolding drama.

In addition to their acting as vehicles for picture-making, Wolke’s subjects offer him the opportunity to create images laden with metaphoric meaning. “I was always interested in delving and diving into complex systems that are human, social, political, architectural, things that have lots of consequence, lots of weight, layers—from the smallest to the largest,” states Wolke. “When I go out to look for projects, I look for these very resonant systems that allow me to make good pictures.” His photographs provide a glimpse into the ironies and idiosyncrasies of human nature. In them, we find the dance of humanity as it played out on the stage that Wolke choreographed within the picture frame. He is equally comfortable and adept at capturing the psychological nuances of human gesture and interaction as he is in recording and commenting on the unique dynamics of place and space. Each project that he has undertaken is as much about the people as it is about the places that they inhabit, or the lines and forms that make up the structure of the photograph.

Wolke’s investigations have moved organically from one body of work to the next, often overlapping branching, or intersecting from a concurrent thread. From 1981 to 1985, Wolke traversed what he calls the “arterial organism” that is one of the nation’s busiest and most dangerous highways—Chicago’s Dan Ryan expressway. Coming naturally to this project because he lived near the notorious artery, Wolke photographed every aspect of its influence on the landscape and its inhabitants, exposing thousands of negatives. Though documentary in nature, each image also contains layers of meaning that escape the didacticism of a simple project to catalogue various aspects of the entity that is the Dan Ryan. These images show in the wider spectrum how we adapt to our surroundings, inhabit spaces and interact psychologically with such a powerful presence. Highways are about ideological optimism, movement, and commerce, but in the urban environment often become barriers, segregators and certainly indicators of political power structures.

An abiding interest in the use of public spaces and how people interact within them would also be a part of Wolke’s next project, which he titled Social Buffers and the Temporary Use of Public Space. Photographing block parties, beach gatherings, competitions, religious pageants, civic events and even the after effects of disaster, between 1985 and 2000 Wolke sought out and recorded transitory human psychological states that resulted from the temporary moments created by heightened human dynamics. Within roughly the same time period, Wolke also worked on a project he titled Dream Cities, an investigation of centers for gambling. Between 1987 and 1992, Wolke traveled several times to Las Vegas, Nevada and Atlantic City, New Jersey photographing the spectacle of simulacra that is at the heart of the success of these places. These cities are about transience, the temporary and the virtual. The dream cities were the waifs and odysseys of Old Masters in their classical worlds that Wolke was to photograph. In these photos, Wolke sought to find “situations in which people try to rise above the vulnerability of their positions in life,” and looked to capture moments “charged with expectation” and transcendence.

In these photographs, Wolke reveals the dance of humanity as it is played out on a constructed stage. The dance of humanity also played a significant role in the project, All Around the House: Photographs of American-Jewish Communal Life, a six-year project begun in 1992 and published in 1998, which investigated the many complex aspects of Jewish life, both sacred and secular. In this body of work, Wolke focused on the psychological resonance of gesture as well as moments peculiar to Jewish life as they relate to American culture at large. “From its inception,” wrote Wolke in his artist statement, “the photographic project was a generalist proposition, deliberately portraying the complex demonstrations of traditional, Jewish values as they filtered through the screen of American culture. My critique involves the construction of images that utilize a color-narrative interpretation of personal, idiosyncratic responses within communal events and rituals.” He cites All Around the House as “a profoundly personal critique,” which is illuminated by his own personal experience as the son of a man active as a national leader in Conservative Judaism. “In many ways my own life has been indicative of many second-generation American Jews. I have had to negotiate dilemmas that underscore the discrepancies between Jewish and non-Jewish life. There have always been at least two worlds to consider and at least two viewpoints by which to consider them. Growing up in this way has given me an intrinsically humanist perspective from which to evaluate my surroundings and has most certainly helped to inform this current body of work.” Humanism is at the core of all of Wolke’s projects. In each of his investigations, he uncovers the way in which we navigate and stumble over social and political roadblocks while trying to preserve our own humanity in the process.
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The work on view at the Sheldon Art Galleries, Architecture of Resignation, is a project that Wolke produced from 1999 to 2009 in southern Italy, during summers teaching there for Columbia College in Chicago. It continues his investigation of the way in which landscape is used and altered by a complex layering of forces, individual, institutional and political, and the consequences of these changes. “With great promises of progress, the land has been exploited and parcelled out for the convenience of a few and accepted with
resignation and submission by the many,” writes Wolke in his artist statement for the project. Naturally following the Dan Ryan, Dream Cities and Social Buffers projects, Architecture of Resignation, though this time focusing on unpopulated places, nevertheless uncovers the effects that the cacophony of constituents have on the landscape. In these photographs, Wolke has focused his attention on the absurdity that is created as a result of poor (or no) planning and greed, like a hill reduced to a teetering monolith, smaller at its base than at its top, abandoned resorts, or the variety of structures built speculatively that now stand as abandoned skeletons, incongruous in the now mythical landscape of the bel-pose (beautiful country).

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