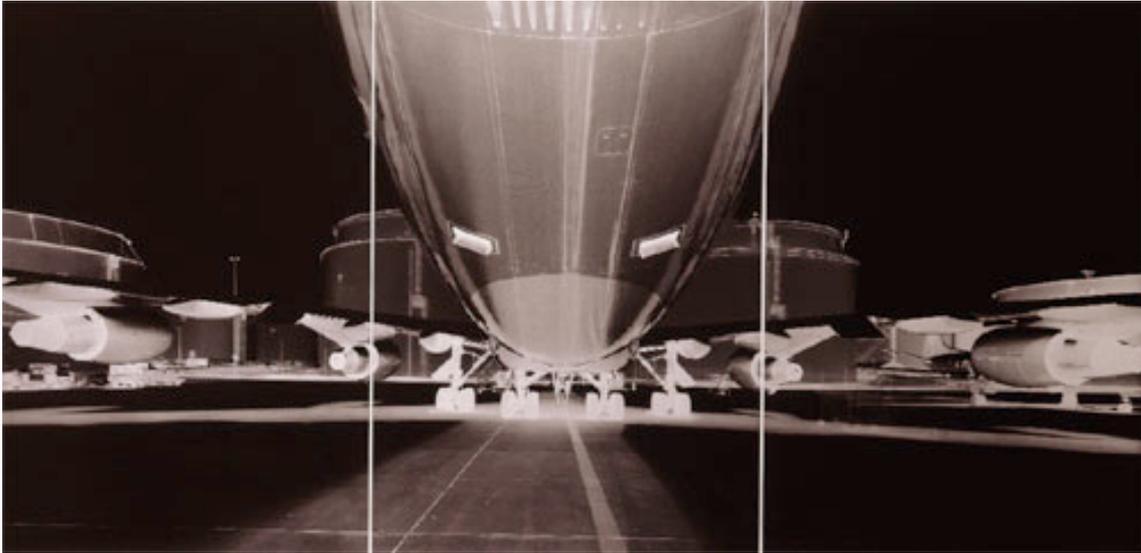


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Vera Lutter by Peter Wollen



Vera Lutter, Cargo Field, Frankfurt Airport, XIII: May 2, 2001, unique silver gelatin print, three panels, 86 x 168". Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

According to most accounts, the camera obscura was developed in Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although versions of the device may have been used even earlier in China and the Arab world. It consisted of a large boxlike space within which an image of the world outside was projected onto a wall by means of a carefully placed aperture that admitted light. The image's scale depended on its distance from the aperture. It was not until the sixteenth century that the camera obscura was perfected as an instrument of vision. The first known illustration was published in 1544 to demonstrate its use in the observation of a solar eclipse. In 1558 Giovanni Batista Della Porta explained how the camera obscura could be used to show battle scenes on the wall inside the device. It is possible that Vermeer too used a camera obscura to paint his View of Delft, and Canaletto may well have used one for his views of Venice.

Vera Lutter has revived and modified the camera obscura in unusual and intriguing ways. At the time of the Renaissance a typical camera obscura was room size. In the eighteenth century it was the size of a sedan chair, while in the nineteenth century it shrank to the size of a packing box. In sharp contrast, Lutter's camera obscura of choice is the size of a shipping container. (In fact, it often is a shipping container.) Her work is also differentiated from her predecessors' in that she prints extremely large, sometimes wall-size images as the end product. The photographic images are exposed over several hours or even months, capturing traces of movement and creating a ghostly sense of temporality. Vera Lutter's work has not only revived the camera obscura but also reinvented photography itself, creating a new sensitivity to both time and space.



Vera Lutter, 545 8th Avenue, looking North: February 10, 1994, unique silver gelatin print, 66 x 42".
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

peter wollen How did you become interested in camera obscura?

vera lutter I was trained in Munich as a sculptor, but I had come to a point where I didn't really quite know how to continue or what direction to take. It was actually a rather serious crisis. When I started to resurface from it, as it turned out, I received a DAAD grant for New York and moved into an old high-rise in the Garment District. Living in a wonderful loft on the 27th floor, an illegal sublet in a commercial building, I had a great start. I was overwhelmed and incredibly impressed by the city, the light, the sound, the busyness of the streets. It was fantastic. Through the windows, the outside world flooded the space inside and penetrated my body. It was really an impressive

experience on all levels, and I decided to turn it into an art piece: the space, the room inside which I had this experience, would become the container to transform that very experience. The room would become a transfer station from outside to inside, the window itself the eye that sees from inside out. I placed a pinhole on the window surface and replaced my body with a sensitive material, and that was the photographic paper. This setup was meant to record my experience, in place of myself. My intention was not to make a photograph as such but to make a conceptual piece that in its own way repeated and transformed what I had observed. Conceptual art was the spirit in which I was trained in art school. At the same time, I wanted to keep the process as immediate and direct as possible. That's why I decided to work with the pinhole and not a lens, and to project immediately onto photographic paper and not use the intermediary of the negative, which conventionally is printed and editioned in photography. The scale was a given, as the space I was working with was architectural, and the wall onto which I projected was the wall of the room.

Anyway, I darkened the loft, placed the pinhole on the window's surface and installed photographic paper on the wall opposite. It took me forever to get the traces of light onto the paper.

pw I've been in a lot of camera obscuras, and I was astonished by your idea that the camera obscura could really become a camera. Usually there's just a round table and the image is projected down onto it —

vl And it's already altered, and removed from the most immediate experience. They often have a sort of telescopic lens above, and I have seen one that rotates so you get various views, but you don't have a firm eye, so to speak, or a pinhole. There was a great sense of innocence in those first pieces of mine. I didn't know a lot about the technique. The exposure time was roughly five hours, whereas I had expected it to be minutes. And when I finally made the first print, I was quite excited about the specific quality, and I have worked with this method ever since.



Vera Lutter, *Zeppelin Friedrichshafen, I*: August 10–13, 1999, unique silver gelatin print, 55 x 81". Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

pw How big was it?

vl The first piece was 80 by 80 inches.

pw That's quite big.

vl Because of the DAAD grant, I was involved in art school, so I used the School of Visual Arts' photo lab to process it. I didn't even know how to mix chemicals. People said, "Well, maybe you should learn how to print an 8 x 10 first." But I didn't.

pw (laughter) No. It wouldn't be the same.

vl They looked wild, the first ones. I'm a little sad that I've become so tame.

pw How do you mean, "wild"?

vl Oh, bold. Usually one uses a heavyweight paper because it resists the treatment in chemistry better, but I first used single-weight paper, which has a very thin paper body. When you process it in the chemicals, it tears and wrinkles easily. The paper was too big for the tray, so I just folded it up and stuffed it into the chemicals. The development was incredibly uneven, and of course photo dealers were horrified. (laughter) But over the years I've learned to appreciate the double-weight paper, and I've become good at rolling the paper through the chemicals. Now they're archival and flat, not torn, not wrinkled.

pw How big does the tray have to be?

vl Well, I use a trough about 60 inches long, and approximately 10 by 10 inches deep and wide. You fill that up with five gallons of chemicals. Putting the paper in rolled up, you learn very quickly how to roll it from one end to the other. Then you pull it out and turn it around so the beginning is facing you and you roll again. It is anxiety driven: if you are too slow, you get developer marks. Knowing how long one turn takes helps you stop the process at the right moment. It's choreography.

pw How did you go on to make your decisions about what to photograph? There are skyscrapers, harbors and docks and bridges and everything that goes with them, and there are factories. Those categories seem to dominate.

vl Industrial sites interest me tremendously, both the ones that are fully functional — they are the most monumental, impressive manifestations of mankind pushing for industrial fabrication — and the ones that are already over the edge, rotting, decaying and taking on a life of their own. Decay becomes a process. A big theme that I'm still working on centers on travel and transportation, transfer and exchange. Despite much talk about globalization, I am interested in the massive, physical, awkward act of people and merchandise being moved from one place to the other. I've been exploring the medium of transportation — ships, trains, zeppelins, oil rigs, planes — in the industrial environment they were built in, relating the transfer of merchandise to the transfer of light within the camera. You have a void and that very void allows for the change/exchange or the transfer. The empty body takes in people and brings them somewhere; it's the transfer of place and the exchange of goods. The void interior camera space allows the light to come in and transfers it into an image. So I got very interested in discussing these things with the medium of camera obscura. Coincidentally, I often use shipping containers now, which I rent —

pw As cameras?

vl Yes. Just like in the beginning when I appropriated a room to photograph architecture.

pw As the subject matter becomes bigger, does the camera have to become bigger? Or is it not as simple as that?

vl It's not quite so simple: by changing the focal length, which in my case is the distance between the pinhole and the photographic paper, I can affect the image size. The photo industry delivers a certain width of paper on a roll, and I piece sheets together to make my images match my ideas.



Vera Lutter, Frankfurt Airport, VII: April 24, 2001, unique silver gelatin print, 3 panels, 86 x 168". Courtesy of the artist and Max Hetzler Gallery, Berlin.

pw How big are the sheets?

vl They are 56 inches wide, and they vary between 90 and 110 inches in length. 56 times three makes almost 15 feet. It's become a standard size of mine. The shipping container just barely accommodates such an image size.

pw I met a man at a friend's house quite a few years ago, and I asked him what he did professionally, and he said, "I don't have to do anything." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "I've got so much money I don't have to work." So I said, "How did that happen?" And he said, "I invented the container."

vl Oh, really! I should meet this man.

pw It was maybe 20 years ago.

vl So he worked with railroads and ships and airports and made the container match everywhere. . . . But I wonder if we should feel sorry for him that he doesn't have to work.

pw He seemed quite happy.

vl (laughter)

pw Now, how about movement? Looking at the images, I'm not always sure whether everything looks still because everything you were photographing was still, or if things were actually moving and were captured as still.

vl The speed of movement has to relate to the amount of light in the environment that I am photographing. The movement either registers as a blur or inscribes itself as a ghostlike figure. For instance, I photographed zeppelins inside a hangar where they

had recently started to build them again. That was also my first use of a shipping container. I placed the container inside the hangar, ran tests inside it and understood that my exposure time for the image would be four days. The zeppelin was still being tested and corrected, and one day, during my exposure, the company decided to pull it out for a test flight. During the four days of exposure, the zeppelin was flying for two days and for two days it was parked in front of my camera. When the zeppelin was gone, whatever was behind and around it inscribed itself onto the photograph, but when it was placed inside the hangar, the outline of the zeppelin imprinted itself. It was rather dark inside the hangar, so things inscribed themselves very slowly. The result was this incredible image of a translucent zeppelin, which was half hangar and half zeppelin.

pw When you're setting up an image, do you seek out subjects that will move, so that you can capture those traces in your photograph?

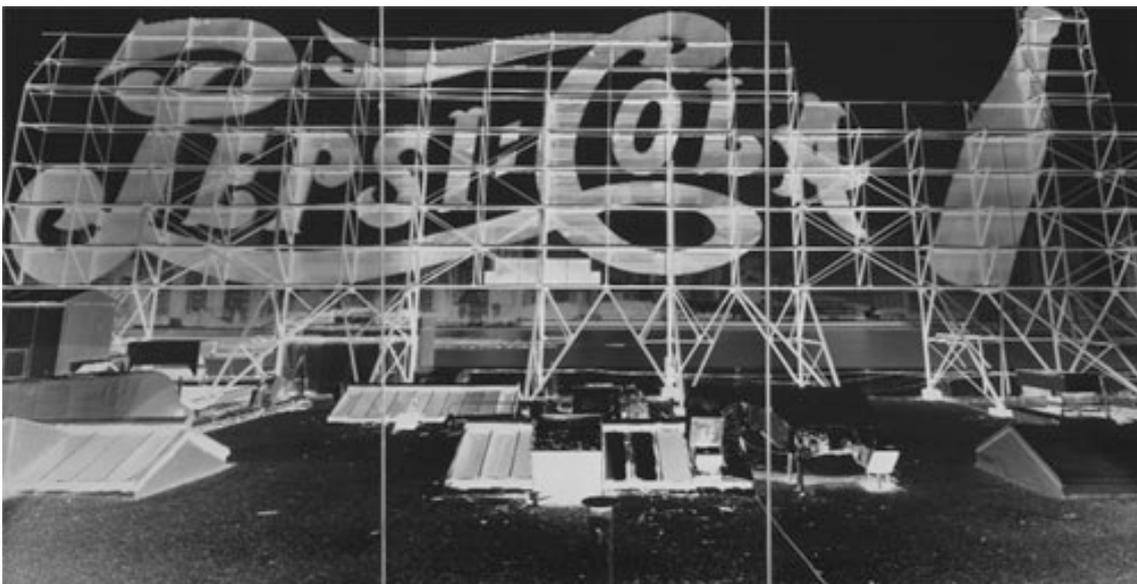
vl I never know what is going to happen. My way of working is very hands-off. I install the apparatus of observation, the camera, and then endure the process of observation and record whatever happens. The work is essentially about the passage of time, not about ideas of representation.

pw A lot of your spaces seem depopulated — either there was nobody in these spaces or you can't see anybody in them. Is that deliberate? Of course, you are there, but we can't see you, either. People don't seem to be in your airplane pictures, for instance, even though people move in and out of airplanes all the time.

vl People move too fast. I'm not sure to what degree the fact that people are missing is coincidence and to what degree it is intention. It almost concerns me to what degree I don't intend to photograph people. I'm the polar opposite from a portrait photographer. If the interaction between human beings were my main interest, I would find a different form.

pw I hadn't really expected interaction between human beings, but somehow I expected the phantom of human beings, or phantom baggage handlers, (laughter) or whatever, but they weren't there.

vl Well, what's there in reality after you move the luggage is one little person somewhere, at most. The open areas of airports are purposely depopulated.



Vera Lutter, Pepsi Cola, Long Island City, X: July 10, 1998, unique silver gelatin print, 87 ½ x 168".
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

pw When you first started interacting with planes, what was the attitude of the people who work in the airport: the baggage handlers, the electrical people, the engineers —

vl In Frankfurt I worked in three different locations. I had rented a shipping container and installed it on the very tip of what they call a fingerhead, which is a gate formation that looks like a hand; the planes go up into the fingers. Being outside on the roof of this building, my camera and I were on the level of the windows where the pilots sit. A 747 is about four stories high. Labor underneath the plane is mechanically structured. It all happens with the help of machines. The president of the board of the Frankfurt airport had invited me to work there, and the rest of the operation cooperated. They were very friendly and helpful, for the most part. I had to make them understand what I was doing there to get some electricity for the container and to have a minimum of respect. It's very hard for people to understand that somebody spends her time with something that doesn't reveal any meaning to them.

pw It is outside their world. Geographically, it is their world, but psychologically, it's another world completely. And it must be difficult, perhaps, for them to imagine what the purpose is.

vl It's not something that's immediately clear and explicable, like some other more functional things in life. People struggle with it, especially people who come into the industrial sites where something is being manufactured or into an airport that has to be operated efficiently and every activity has an immediate and clear purpose. Also, security has been much tighter. I always wanted to gain access to a site where spaceships are launched into the universe, like Cape Canaveral, but September 11 and the Afghanistan war and then the Iraq war have discouraged me and the people who help me do these things. I couldn't do this alone. Of course, there are even more security measures at a space center than at an airport. With the help of many other people, I was hoping to get access to Baikonur, the former Soviet space station.

pw In Kazakhstan?

vl Correct. At Baikonur, things should be more open-minded and less security anxious. But it's emotionally so destabilizing that I haven't felt like taking the voyage to this distant part of the world. Not so much that it's dangerous, but it's a place that comes with more problems of understanding than others, in terms of language and beyond.

pw Do the workers at the sites where you photograph ever say anything to you?

vl No.

pw They just do their jobs?

vl Yes. Sometimes I bring my hosts or the workers inside the camera and have them see the projected image on the opposite wall. And so often they just don't blink an eye — it doesn't mean anything to them. And that's another fascinating experience for me: one of the most impressive things I've ever seen in my life isn't amazing to somebody else. The first time I created a camera obscura, after I had realized how long I had to sit in there to adjust my eyes to the darkness, to see the projection, which is about 20 or 30 minutes — I thought I'd seen God. When I saw the first projection, it was an epiphany. It was probably one of the most overwhelming moments of my life.

pw That was in your loft in New York, right? Do you get the same feeling when you're in the container?

vl Yes, over and over, I'm totally fascinated. The fast movements don't stay in the photograph, but I see the cars driving through the image, I see trains, boats going by, birds and airplanes flying through. It's like watching a film, but the image is reversed, upside down, and very crisp. The larger the pinhole is, the more you see color; the

smaller you go the more black-and-white the projection becomes. There's an incredible variety of sensations; it does and it does not look like the outside world that you see every day.

pw How do you decide how far to be from what you're photographing? How do you make the choice between things that should be close up and things that should be long shots, things that should be at eye level and things that shouldn't?

vl There's always a very clear physical relationship to the scene that I'm photographing. For instance, I photographed a Pepsi-Cola sign on the roof of the Pepsi factory in Long Island City. This factory is right on the waterfront of the East River, facing Manhattan from the opposite shore. On the roof of this factory, maybe three or four stories up, is this huge logo reaching into the sky. Except for where the letters are fixed to the scaffold, it's translucent. I built a camera on the roof and photographed through the logo onto the island. My intention was to blend this pop-culture icon that is so descriptive of American life with a view of the metropolitan area, which describes a different aspect of American life. Since I was behind it, the sign was reversed, but then I reverse it again in my negative image. However, that was not my reason for doing it. I wanted all of this at once — the logo, the translucency and the city — but it had the side effect of correcting the Pepsi logo so that it reads from left to right in my image. I wanted to show the letters of the logo in such magnification that it would almost seem threatening, as if it were tumbling down on you. These ideas dictated distance and closeness and representation of the object in the image.



Vera Lutter, Nabisco Factory, Beacon VI: Oct 21–Dec 22, 1999, unique silver gelatin print, 96 ½ x 166 ½".
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

pw Some of your skyscraper photographs have the opposite perspective: you're looking down from above onto urban roofs.

vl Yes. Being high above the world and seeing it that way is another idea that I worked with, as in the first photographs from my loft. I am stationary in one location, yet at the same time I can observe an enormous part of the world surrounding me, and this is true in two ways: I see the world through the window and I see it projected onto the surface of the walls of the room. As the exterior world by way of light blends with the interior of the room that I inhabit at that moment, it appears as if I were appropriating

the world through sight. Looking up from below is much more oppressive; the hierarchy is, in a way, reversed.

pw You photograph a lot of glass; do you worry about reflections? Do you try to avoid them or do you welcome them?

vl I welcome them. There's one project that I specifically did because of the reflections, and that happened to be at my second home in New York. Living across the street from a huge high-rise, I could only inform myself about the world outside by looking at the reflections in the windows opposite my building. I could see the sky, the clouds, the traffic, people walking on street level. The windows weren't just reflecting but also allowed for some translucency. I had the view into the building, the view of the building and the reflected view of myself, or better, of the building I was in, all at once. Multilayered information in one image is what I'm really interested in. I have to capture the reflections at a moment where each of the different elements has enough of a presence to not overpower the others, which is difficult, because you have to photograph reflections when the light is opposite yourself. The light shines onto the object that reflects it, and you are opposite that object. And, as everybody knows, you can't photograph into the light.

pw With your exterior shots of buildings, you're often at quite a long distance from the building, but it's still a central point.

vl Being far away and having a central viewpoint takes me back to that idea of appropriating the world through sight.

pw Master of all you survey.

vl Exactly. A medieval concept, or maybe even older, right? I think that's where the wide views come from — I like to relate these things with one another, the manifestation of the great, grandiose outside world and the rather great dimension of my camera. The interior images are a newer subject matter, and I wouldn't have dared approach them were it not for Dia's inviting me to work with the museum. I was asked to drive to Beacon to see if there were something that I could work with. It was the first time that I had support in making an image. The Dia's museum in Beacon is the largest enclosed space I've ever seen, so even though it's an interior it's still a very grand view. The first image that I did there, Nabisco Factory, Beacon I, has a central perspective point of view of the ground floor; the building has a choreography of columns and sequential spaces; a very classical perspective suggested itself. The basement, on the other hand, is huge and dark and the light is very dim. One of my exposures there lasted for three and a half months.

pw Three and a half months?

vl Yes. It is interesting for me to get traces of this time that passed; it becomes such an essential factor. I think of Andy Warhol's films, like *Sleeping* or *24-hour Empire State Building*, where he points the camera in one direction and the camera records. What goes into many frames in his film would go into one frame of my image.

pw It's strange, that aspect of time. There are three variables, time, movement and light, that have very complex and very different kinds of relationships with each other. You must know this better than I do.

vl You explained it very well. It's a triangle, a dynamic relationship, it's never the same. In the basement of Dia Beacon, very few things happened. A musician came every once in a while — he liked the acoustics of that place — and installed an entire band in front of my camera and played. In a way all of that is in the image, because it was there while my camera recorded, but none of it remains visible because in that case the dynamic relationship is very little light, very long exposure time and movement

that needs to be incredibly slow. If a chair stood there for two or three weeks and then was moved, it would probably leave some interesting traces.

pw Which of your works has the most movement?

vl The Frankfurt airport series. I observed different planes coming into a gate over time, and I tried to achieve an overlapping of airplanes in one place. There was no way of knowing what the schedule on that particular gate would be for a certain day. With the last print that I did there, Airport VII, I was able to record five or six different airplanes coming into the gate and overlapping just long enough to leave an imprint, and just short enough so that no one plane would overpower all the others. So you see a little plane inside a big one in the outline of an even bigger one, and the wing of another one slightly out of focus. That is one image where I think the idea of movement and the characteristics of the object that I photographed are successfully shown in the work.

pw Again, there are no people, right?

vl Yes, it's a depopulated world. I do have a ghost in one image, I remember now, a picture I did in Cleveland on July fourth, a hot and sunny day. In the foreground are a waterfront lawn and somebody sunbathing. A funny imprint of that person remained. The camera is looking down from high up onto his body lying on the ground. He had his legs pulled up and bent knees, so it's a very recreational, relaxed and comfortable position. It contributes further to the abstraction of that figure.

pw How high above him was the camera?

vl Maybe six or eight stories. The image wasn't recorded straight down, but still with a relatively steep angle. So when people really decide not to move for a long time in bright sunlight they have a chance to be in the picture. (laughter)

pw So they could be asleep, or they could be very disciplined, or they could be dead.

vl Yes, I've thought about that, too, a scary idea.

pw Do you ever shoot your subjects at eye level?

vl Not really. One of the interesting aspects in my work is that the image tends to take on a perspective that the human being seldom has. Rarely do you lie on your back looking up.