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ON THE ROOF

PEPSI DEGENERATION

by Blake Eskin

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When Pepsi-Cola erected its big red neon sign in Long Island City, along the Queens side of the East River, in 1936, ships would steam up to the plant below it and unload sacks of sugar from Havana. Soda hasn't been bottled there for five years now, and the plant is being torn down this month to make way for a high-rise apartment complex, so the sign—unofficial landmark and longtime beacon to local residents, film location scouts, and drunken taxicab passengers on the F.D.R. Drive—has to move. Over the past few weeks, it has migrated, letter by letter, from the plant's roof to a site on the ground, three hundred feet to the south.

Each morning, as a group of riggers dismantled the logo, Vera Lutter was watching. Lutter is a forty-four-year-old artist who moved to the city from Munich eleven years ago. "They work very, very fast, much faster than I thought," she said the other day. "Since Monday, they took the bottle, the P, E, P, S, the I—and the hyphen. And today they set their hands on the C in 'cola.' "

Lutter was observing the proceedings from inside a twenty-foot-long wood-frame shack that she built on the factory's roof. She calls it a camera obscura, and it's modelled on the optical devices used by Renaissance artists as a drawing tool; it's basically a giant pinhole camera. Sunlight streams through a two-millimetre opening on one side and projects an upside-down, reversed image of the Pepsi sign onto the opposite wall, where each morning Lutter drapes three big sheets of photosensitive paper. The light burns the image into the paper, which Lutter then takes down and develops and assembles into a single fifteen-by-eight-foot photographic print at her studio, in Manhattan. The prints make up a series that she calls "The Deconstruction of Pepsi-Cola."

She takes only one picture a day, because each print needs up to three hours' exposure. The workmen don't stand still long enough to register as fixed images, but the camera captures ghostly traces of their labors. "With the Pepsi bottle, I was able to get four different shades of gray as they moved it away," she said over the low-frequency hum of a portable generator, which powers a space heater and a red safelight.

Lutter had already rolled up her daily exposure, but when she switched off the safelight what was left of the sign appeared as a projection on the back wall. As the eyes adjusted, other details emerged: the river; the United Nations; the Chrysler Building, its needle pointing at the 'O' in "cola." "Isn't it exciting?" she said. "When I first

saw an image projected like this, I just thought I was seeing God."

That occurred in 1993, in a twenty-seventh-floor loft in the garment district, when she turned the place into a camera obscura to record the odd, pleasing shapes on the neighboring rooftops. "I had no intention of doing this more than once," she said. "But I've done very few other things since."

The Pepsi sign wasn't visible from Lutter's loft, and a couple of years passed before she noticed it, riding home one night from a party in Williamsburg in the back of a pickup truck. After lobbying Pepsi for two years to gain access to the roof, Lutter built her camera obscura there in July, 1998. During that summer, she produced her first prints of the sign.

When the new apartment complex is finished, the sign will move again, to a permanent, elevated spot along the waterfront. Though the sign has been good for Lutter's career—the Whitney Museum and the Dia Center for the Arts have exhibited her Pepsi-Cola prints—she has no plans to photograph it again. Reflecting on the more than five years that she has spent on the site, she noted that the Queensboro Bridge is just a few blocks away, and recalled a passage from "The Great Gatsby": "The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world."

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