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GAGOSIAN



Vera Lutter with Jean Dykstra

“Once I decide to do something, I have to find a match in the real world to my mental image. Sometimes I look for it actively, and sometimes I wait until I encounter it.”

Jean Dykstra



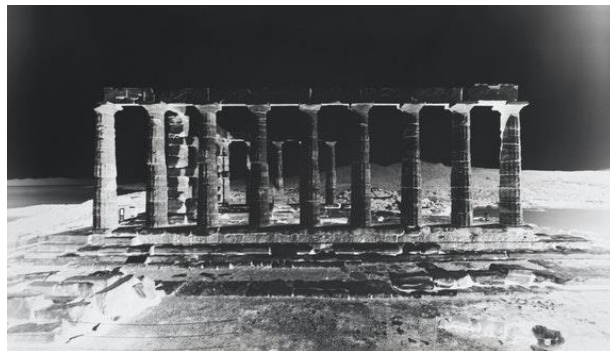
One of four covers of The Brooklyn Rail March issue.



Portrait of Vera Lutter, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

The German-born artist Vera Lutter is known for her ghostly, immersive camera-obscura photographs made in pinhole cameras that are sometimes the size of small rooms. Rather than printing positive images from a negative, she keeps the tonal values reversed, so that a bright daytime sky is impenetrably black, and solid structures appear to glow. Late last summer, the New York Times asked Lutter to go to Athens to make photographs of the Acropolis and other monuments to accompany [an article by Thomas Chatterton Williams](#). A selection of the majestic images she made there—of the Parthenon, the Acropolis, the Temple of Poseidon, and Plato’s Academy—will be on view at Gagosian Gallery Athens in the exhibition *Fragments of Time Past*.

Working on a deadline, Lutter completed the shoot for that project in a couple of weeks. In contrast, her previous project, *Museum in the Camera*, took four years. For that series, she photographed in and around the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) before a major redesign of the museum campus that involved razing several buildings. A room-sized camera obscura was constructed for that project, which was moved around the museum on a trolley or hoisted into position by a crane. In Athens, on the other hand, she made images using old travel suitcases she bought at Woolworth some 20 years ago. Such is the ingenuity that informs her photographic practice, which began when she moved to New York from Germany in the early 1990s and turned her apartment into a camera obscura as a way of understanding the city and making it her own. Lutter spoke to the Brooklyn Rail from her studio in midtown Manhattan.



Vera Lutter, Temple of Poseidon, Cape Sounio: August 30, 2021, 2021. Unique gelatin silver print, 14 1/2 x 26 inches. © Vera Lutter. Courtesy Gagosian.

Jean Dykstra (Rail): Tell me about the photographs at Gagosian Gallery in Athens. I read the New York Times piece about the photographs they commissioned from you for the article, and it sounded like an incredibly challenging shoot, for a variety of reasons. But maybe they all are.

Vera Lutter: They all are, they really all are. In a way, this one was much less so, because usually my work happens on a completely different scale, where I work with cameras that are 20 to 30 feet wide and 10 or 15 feet tall, and the whole project has a three- or six- or twelve-month timeline, or, in the case of my collaboration with LACMA, four years. The Times had approached me with various ideas over the years, but this time, the subject matter went right to the core of my heart. I love the Mediterranean and its ancient structures. The request also lifted me out of a very sad environment. My dad had just passed, and I was in Germany, taking care of my father's affairs. Germany had an incredibly rainy summer—it rained every day for months and eventually there were fierce floods. It felt like a lost and sad summer, and then I got this offer. In Athens it was 45 degrees Celsius at the time, which is something like 110 degrees Fahrenheit, and there were terrible wildfires burning.

Rail: I read that.

Lutter: Long story short, I called Lukas Vogt, my German assistant, and I said: Lukas, can you build a camera for me? We had talked about that since he helped me the year before in Rome. And I asked him if he wanted to come to Greece with me. He was excited, and I decided to accept, praying that in those two weeks that I had to prepare the whole thing, the weather would give a little and the fires would stop. Lukas built an additional smaller-scale camera for me so that we had three cameras on site. It was challenging: it's hard for people to understand, if they haven't been part of one of my projects, how I work, and how incredibly labor intensive it is. But it was also great fun, because Greek people are lovely, generous, and helpful. Lukas is a very hard worker. And when the first good images started coming out, it was very fulfilling.

Rail: Do you build a new camera for each project you do?

Lutter: When I work with the large scale, yes. For the smaller scale, I use these old overseas travel trunks that I bought back in the day at Woolworth.

Rail: I wanted to ask about the photograph Steps at the Site of Plato's Academy in Athens. What made you decide to photograph that relatively humble-looking staircase? It's such a departure from the other pictures.

Lutter: That is very true. The Times had hired me to make images accompanying a text by Thomas Chatterton Williams. He wrote not only about the temples but also about his memory of spending time in the ruins of Plato's Academy in Athens. I was asked to photograph these three sites—the Acropolis, Plato's Academy, which is now a park in the heart of Athens, and the Temple of Poseidon on the cape of Suonio. In Plato's Academy, only foundations are left in the ground, there's nothing above ground. I found this to be the most interesting and revealing image. It's of a staircase that goes down into a deeper level of the park, where more excavation had been done. Quite honestly, I think that staircase is probably from the 1800s. But the age of the stones doesn't really matter. The image of the stairs invites us to enter into Plato's world.



Vera Lutter, Temple of Poseidon, Cape Sounio: August 31, 2021, 2021. Unique gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches. © Vera Lutter. Courtesy Gagolian.

Rail: One of the things that resonates for me in your work, in particular in these photographs, is that your images capture light, but also the passage of time. This is the case even more than in a conventional photograph, because the images take so long to develop that it becomes a record of time passing as much as a record of what you're photographing.

Lutter: Exactly. And that's why I think it's such a fortunate amalgam of this subject matter with my way of working. You know, my background is in sculpture. I'm not trained as a photographer. And even as a much younger artist, working with film and conventional analogue photography, I was always completely overwhelmed by the idea that people would buy a 35-millimeter roll of film, with 36 images on it, and you could expose them so quickly, and you could do many of those rolls of film a day. Never mind the image flood we are exposed to now in the digital age. And then you're sitting there with all these images, and you have to edit them and think about each and every one of them. For me, it was always completely clear that I would try to do all that decision making in the beginning. It's not that I don't make bad images—I do, and they go out the door—but I do a lot of hard thinking ahead of time about what I want to do, and where I position myself, at which angle, and how I will do it. Much of the project planning

phase clarifies aspects of the image I anticipate and allows me to consider conceptual changes long before I actually make an image.

Rail: Now that you've been doing it for such a long time, to what degree do you have a clear idea of what the image will look like? Because it seems like there's a fair amount of chance involved in each exposure, depending on how the light behaves.

Lutter: When I set out to work on a project, I have the image ready in my mind. I know exactly what I want it to look like. During the preparation, I endlessly consider the position of the camera, the path of the sun, and the number of daylight hours I have with what angles and what elevation. If possible, I visit a site many times before I start setting up. Once in the camera, I hardly notice that the image appears upside down and left-right reversed. What can still, despite my many years of experience, present surprises are my exposures. In Greece, it turned out that the white marble in the brilliant Greek sunlight was so powerful that I had to adjust my exposure times accordingly. For every project there is something entirely new I must learn.

Preparing the project for the Times of course involved a lot of planning. There wasn't time to visit Athens before the project started, but by the time I decided to accept, Lukas and I had already spent a full day on the phone looking at bird's-eye views of the site, scanning maps and elevation charts, sunrise and sunset hours, the path of the sun. We tracked weather conditions not only following temperatures and fires but also the wind. The wind not only fed the fires but the meltemi winds in late summer and early fall can be extremely forceful. We had to prepare strapping devices and sandbags to secure the cameras during the long exposures. We had no margin of error: we had only a few days in each location and the publication deadline was fixed and unforgiving.

Rail: Because of the reversal of black and white, the sky is so dark in the Athens photographs. There's a feeling that you snuck in surreptitiously at night to take the pictures. Obviously, that's not what happened. But it adds to the awe-inspiring nature of the images, I think.



Vera Lutter, Marble Statue of Aphrodite Crouching: October 21, 2012, 2012. Unique gelatin silver print, 14 x 8 7/8 inches. © Vera Lutter. Courtesy Gagosian.

Lutter: Yeah, and we did get onto the Acropolis very early. That was one of my requests, because even though we found ways of leaving part of our equipment on site, the cameras—and we had three of them—still had to be carried up and down that hill. So I asked if we could get early and late access to avoid the burning sun at least in those hours.

Rail: It must have been amazing to be there without the crowds.

Lutter: It was breathtakingly beautiful. When we walked up the hill, the rocks were still radiating heat from the day before, but the night had cooled off and the temperature was pleasant. Scents of rosemary and thyme had developed overnight. Once on top of the hill you walk into this incredible environment, and Athens, the city, is at your feet, sleeping, in total silence and darkness. It was an incredible experience and an amazing privilege to have been in this location with hardly another person there. Very few guards stay overnight on the Acropolis. At such a moment one feels the sacredness of the site.

Rail: That spiritual aspect comes through strongly in these pictures, a feeling that these are sacred spaces.

Lutter: I'm so glad, because that's what fascinated me from the onset about these Greek temples. If you just look at them as an architectural diagram, they appear formulaic. But if you visit one of them, there is such overwhelming beauty and majesty and scale. I was always marveling at what moved the people of that time to build these structures. They had many gods, they didn't just have one god, and many different gods were honored with temples. In Paestum, an ancient Greek city, there are two Hera temples and one Athena temple. But it's also wonderful to think about the idea that different places are protected by different spiritual entities.

Rail: There is something about your LACMA photographs, too, that evoke a sense that this is an almost sacred space that you're photographing, a space dedicated to art and the contemplation of art. That was a four-year project?

Lutter: Yes, isn't that incredible?

Rail: The two projects are such extremes. In Athens, you had this incredibly tight deadline, and at LACMA you had over four years.

Lutter: LAMCA was also extraordinarily ambitious, because I photographed outside and inside the museum buildings, and my longest inside exposure, in the Old Masters gallery, was seven months. So many different aspects had to be taken into consideration to work in a museum, and I was making predominantly large images.

Rail: I saw the video that LACMA made of the room-sized camera being hoisted up to the top of the walkway in the museum.

Lutter: That's also, of course, working with Michael Govan, the director of LACMA. Nothing is too much for him. He is fearless and will not be deterred when he wants to work with an artist. He's absolutely unique in that way. Have you seen the film about the big boulder by Michael Heizer, *Levitated Mass*, a documentary about a 340-ton boulder that was moved from a quarry in Riverside, CA, to LACMA?

Rail: No, I haven't.

Lutter: It's fabulous. It shows the whole evolution of the rock being taken in from the desert and brought to LACMA and what had to happen in order for that to succeed. It's a complete Sisyphus story. I mean, that's wrong, because Sisyphus failed, and he succeeded. But I think this is Michael Govan—sometimes the harder it gets, the more inspired he is. He considers whether the content and the work that would come out of a project are interesting to him, and then he does what it takes. He's one of a kind, a fantastic collaborator for an artist.

Rail: In one of the videos that LACMA made about Museum in the Camera, Govan describes your images as being repositories of memory, which is particularly significant in this case, because some of the museum buildings were being demolished, and your images became memorials to those buildings. But I also wanted to ask about your pictures of paintings in the museum: those were so interesting to me, because they're nothing like a copy or an illustration of the original. They become completely different works of art, because of the tonal inversion, but also because of the reflections of the light off of their surfaces. There's one painting in which there are these dark spots where the light reflected off of the varnish...

Lutter: The Georges de La Tour, *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, [ca. 1635–37]...

Rail: Right, and it becomes a completely different piece of art; it's quite transporting. Then there are other pieces, like *The Death of Lucretia* [Ludovico Mazzanti, ca. 1735–1737], where your photograph suggests quite a different reading. Can you talk about that a little bit?



Vera Lutter, Ludovico Mazzanti, The Death of Lucretia, c. 1730: February 10 - March 16, 2017, 2017. Unique gelatin silver print, 72 1/8 x 56 inches. © Vera Lutter. Courtesy Gagosian.

Lutter: It's hard to fully analyze these processes. Much of my response to an image is intuitive. I also want to preserve a record of how the piece was presented inside a gallery, and how it was illuminated. The image of a painting, which I eventually make available to whoever is interested in looking at it, is like a union of the original and of what I hoped to find and bring forward. Once it's presented to the public, it meets the memory and the imagination of the viewer, and a new dialogue starts. I like that idea very much.

I was very, very interested in photographing in the Old Masters gallery. It has probably to do with my upbringing and going to museums, even as a child, and having many memories in my mind, these visions in front of my inner eye. But then, in my conversations with Michael about all the things we could do, we expanded that to the idea that I would also photograph two-dimensional pieces. I had never done that before. I have photographed sculpture at the Met and at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, but I've never photographed paintings before. I was very interested and excited about it, and a bit scared, because I didn't know if I could succeed in

telling a new story. These are masterpieces of art in and of themselves. There's nothing to add, there's nothing to correct.

The choice of Lucretia was entirely intuitive on my end. It was the first painting I chose. Over the many years that I've done this, I've developed a way to calculate my exposure times based on empirical notes that I've taken ever since I started to do this kind of work and later developed into very extensive, sometimes overwhelming, charts. There are pages and pages and pages, and everywhere small numbers. It's dizzying, and many months of work. But it enabled me to accurately calculate my exposure times. They were all one-offs, right, it was 64 days for Lucretia, more than two months, and you can't run it again. And I did that completely right. Out came this piece that we were all immediately, incredibly excited about. So that was sort of the confirming moment that what I was trying to achieve was working—to peel away some layers of that onion and show different aspects of that painting, which of course are there for all of us to see at any time, but are probably overpowered by color, and maybe also by the convention with which we tend to see. We are very used to seeing in particular ways. And when there's a shift, it's an opportunity to see the same thing differently.

Rail: That's a perfect description of what your pictures do in general, which is that they take something that we're familiar with, and make us look at it in an entirely different way. It's kind of magical in terms of those paintings. You're offering another way of thinking about the work and interpreting the work.

Lutter: I'm actually very happy to hear that because, you know, we don't want to litter the world with more images that nobody needs.

Rail: In terms of seeing things differently, I've looked at your photographs of urban sites before, but, in the context of the pandemic, they hit me differently. They're so depopulated. I looked at them before and—understanding what your process was like, and the exposure times—I knew that people may have wandered in front of the camera, but they were just not showing up in the print. But looking at them recently, during the height of the pandemic, I had this sense of, oh, that's reality. It's how the streets looked in those days. It was kind of eerie.

Lutter: It's also eerie because we have recaptured that sense of the possibility of being alone. I think that was completely lost. I recently reconnected with an old friend who said that Covid was a dream come true for artists. I wouldn't go quite so far, but most artists are loners and we all got official approval for being alone for endless hours, and we dropped so many obligations.

Rail: It was very strange to walk around the city during those times. Putting aside a project like LACMA, how do you decide what to photograph? I didn't realize you'd never done a commission before, like the project for the Times, so how do you decide what you want to photograph next?

Lutter: That's a hard one to answer especially after these two pandemic years. I am still processing what that time did to me.

Rail: Really?

Lutter: Yeah, my work naturally evolved. Metropolitan architecture has become so dense that we can hardly see it anymore, and what we see often does not interest me. Industrial sites have largely disappeared from our cities, and access to most everything has been heavily restricted after 9/11. The culture we live in is much more fearful now. My work involved a lot of travel and trust. Covid put an end to most of that, and even now, when things are easing up, our relationship to travel has changed. But more to your question, my work always starts with an image in my mind. I often live with that image for a long time, finding out if the image sticks with me, if it has persistence, where it comes from, and whether I really consider it important. Many ideas are

years old when they come to realization. Once I decide to do something, I have to find a match in the real world to my mental image. Sometimes I look for it actively, and sometimes I wait until I encounter it. I always know when I come across it. Then the work starts: project planning, project preparation, and eventually my exposures, in which I hopefully make the image I had envisioned.

After the great effort with the project at LACMA I needed some recovery time, and then came COVID. My fantasy now is to go to a really faraway place, somewhere I have never been before and see what I find. These places have become scarce, certainly in Western civilization. But will that be possible anytime soon? I don't know.

Rail: I feel like we're all sort of holding our breath, waiting to see when things are going to improve. Speaking of traveling, I really love the photographs you made of airports. Looking at them recently, I was kind of surprised that more artists don't use airports as a subject, because they're sites of such potential and such emotion. The departures, the arrivals, people going off on adventures or returning home to their loved ones. Your photograph of the Lufthansa plane [Frankfurt Airport, IV, April 13, 2001] is such a great image because that plane looks so ominous—it's soaked up all the light and it's so dark. What made you decide to photograph there?



Vera Lutter, Frankfurt Airport, IV: April 13, 2001, 2001. Unique gelatin silver print, 81 5/8 x 168 inches. © Vera Lutter. Courtesy Gagosian.

Lutter: The choice of my imagery has gone through an evolution since I started photographing in this way. It began with metropolitan architecture here in New York when I arrived, which for me was a way of exploring and appropriating my new world. From there, I expanded to industrial sites, which is very much the environment I grew up in.

Rail: Where did you grow up?

Lutter: The Ruhr Valley in Germany, which was heavily industrial at the time, the 1960s and '70s. Now there's hardly any industry left. At the time there was a lot of coal mining and the coal was used to melt the steel. At night, the sky would light up red, when they poured the steel. The entire city would light up. The car industry was very close to where we lived. They worked in shifts, and these enormous car parks were always illuminated. And there was the chemical industry, looking entirely apocalyptic, with clouds of green and purple smoke rising from enormous smokestacks.

Rail: Why did you come to New York?

Lutter: I had a grant and had finished the Academy of Fine Arts in Germany, and I just felt like I needed a change. I needed to see something new. There were some older students who I was friends with, and they said you should go to New York, it's great.

Rail: Before you came to New York, you were studying ceramics and sculpture. Had you already been interested in photography before you left? Or was that something that you found here?

Lutter: I had dabbled in it. I had started to build little installations and make arrangements, and I had a camera, and I made collages from the photographs. I was trying to shake loose a little bit of what I had done, and I had come to a stalling point, I think. And so I played around a little bit with photography. I had studied during the '80s and conceptual art was in, and you were supposed to use a new medium every time you did anything. And it was the end of painting. Remember the end of painting?

Rail: Yes, I do.

Lutter: It's so funny when you think about it today. But my painter friends were quite distraught. So I was trying to fit a little bit into that mold. But I have no education in photography. I came to New York and the grant I had received required me to be in grad school. I had just finished school, and I'd kind of had it with school. But I thought, okay, I'll go to photography school and learn something practical. It was '93, and I thought: I'll learn how to make good prints, and I can print my own portfolio. Little did I know that in grad school, you wouldn't learn any of this, right? But once I had arrived, I had the idea to very conceptually capture my arrival to New York, in this loft where I lived. It was supposed to be a one-off conceptual piece. At the time, the School of Visual Arts still had fabulous dark rooms, and I occupied them most of the time. But there was a moment when I said, you know, I'm not going to spend the rest of my life making camera obscura images in darkened rooms. But then a good friend who had helped me a lot said, you know, I've never seen something like this before. You should try this again. The beginnings of my work with photography had a lot to do with arriving and being in New York. It was both easy, because I was so inspired, and incredibly hard, because I came entirely by myself and knew nobody here. And, you know, when you come from somewhere else, I think for the rest of your life, you are defined by this sense that: I am not from here, and I'm no longer from there. Home is a place in suspense between here and there. To this day, I walk along the beaches of Long Island and look out over the water and think: there's France. So my series of voyage and transportation, the airplanes you asked about earlier, addresses that.

Rail: Oh, that's an interesting way of thinking about those images.

Lutter: I looked to create a relationship between the vessels used for transportation and my camera. Both are defined by their interior void, which ultimately fulfills their function. The vessel that transports merchandise or people is an empty container fulfilling its role by transporting goods. My camera is an empty shell which, in its dark interior void, enables the transfer of light into image. The form and the shape of these objects, ships, planes, dirigibles or oil rigs, are reminders of the purpose they serve. Thinking about bridging distances, belonging here or there or neither, took me to the Transportation and Voyage photographs, and to the planes you asked about. I had mentors who became friends, businesspeople who took to my art. They appreciated my work, and they opened doors for me—not least the possibility to work in the Frankfurt Airport. It could have been any airport. It just happened that I was welcomed there. And, I mean, as unlucky as I was with the timing of my LACMA exhibit, I was lucky with my timing in Frankfurt. I worked in April and May of 2001. After 9/11, the world changed, and no one would ever receive clearance again to move about an airport the way I did in Frankfurt.

Rail: I want to ask about a piece that seems quite different from the majority of your work, and that's the Moon Wall. What is the derivation of that?



Vera Lutter, Moon Wall XII, 2021. Archival pigment print, 51 1/2 x 84 1/2 inches. © Vera Lutter. Courtesy Gagosian.

Lutter: The moons started in 2010 when I traveled to Germany to photograph this incredibly beautiful, old medieval Benedictine cloister and church. There's a small hotel in that area, and I stayed in the attic room, and I would look out at night and the moon would always reflect on the water of the lake. The work I do is a pretty solitary operation, you can't really have a home in the conventional sense, you can't have a family, you can hardly have a social environment. When you work like I do, and when you travel the way I did—being in a different place almost all the time—the moon became an anchor, a companion. The moon was everywhere. I have a Paris moon, a Los Angeles moon, I have a moon from Marfa and a moon from Venice, a Berlin moon and a moon from the eastern shore of Long Island and a German moon. It started in that place in Germany, where I really had the feeling that I was in medieval times; it was romantic and lonely. You cannot really photograph the moon with a camera obscura. It moves too fast, the exposures are too long, my paper is not light-sensitive enough. So, I learned to work with fairly advanced equipment for digital cameras, and I learned a bit about astronomy, and along the way I made many moon pictures. On that wall [in her studio], where, at the moment, are the Greek images, I started hanging a small copy of every moon image I made. After a while, the wall was full of prints, and suddenly I realized: that's the piece.

Rail: It's beautiful. You've talked about the way you work being very solitary. And in the pictures themselves, while there may be ghostly vestiges of people occasionally, you don't see any people, the pictures have a solitary feel. As a viewer, I feel like I'm alone, myself, immersed in the piece. They're very meditative, contemplative pictures. I've read that you have a meditation practice. Do you see a connection between your meditation practice and your work?

Lutter: The work came long before I started meditating. But I think I always had incredible patience and persistence when I wanted to create something, even before photography. I don't have that same patience and persistence for other aspects of life. It's just sort of there and it has to do with being alone in the process of creating. But since I started to meditate the practice has affected every aspect of my life. It is grounding and clarifying and supports concentration. It's like a quiet companion relating to everything I do. I started to meditate when I needed something to ground myself. Life can be confusing and uprooting. I was looking for a way to bring myself back to myself. My work benefits from it, everything benefits from it.