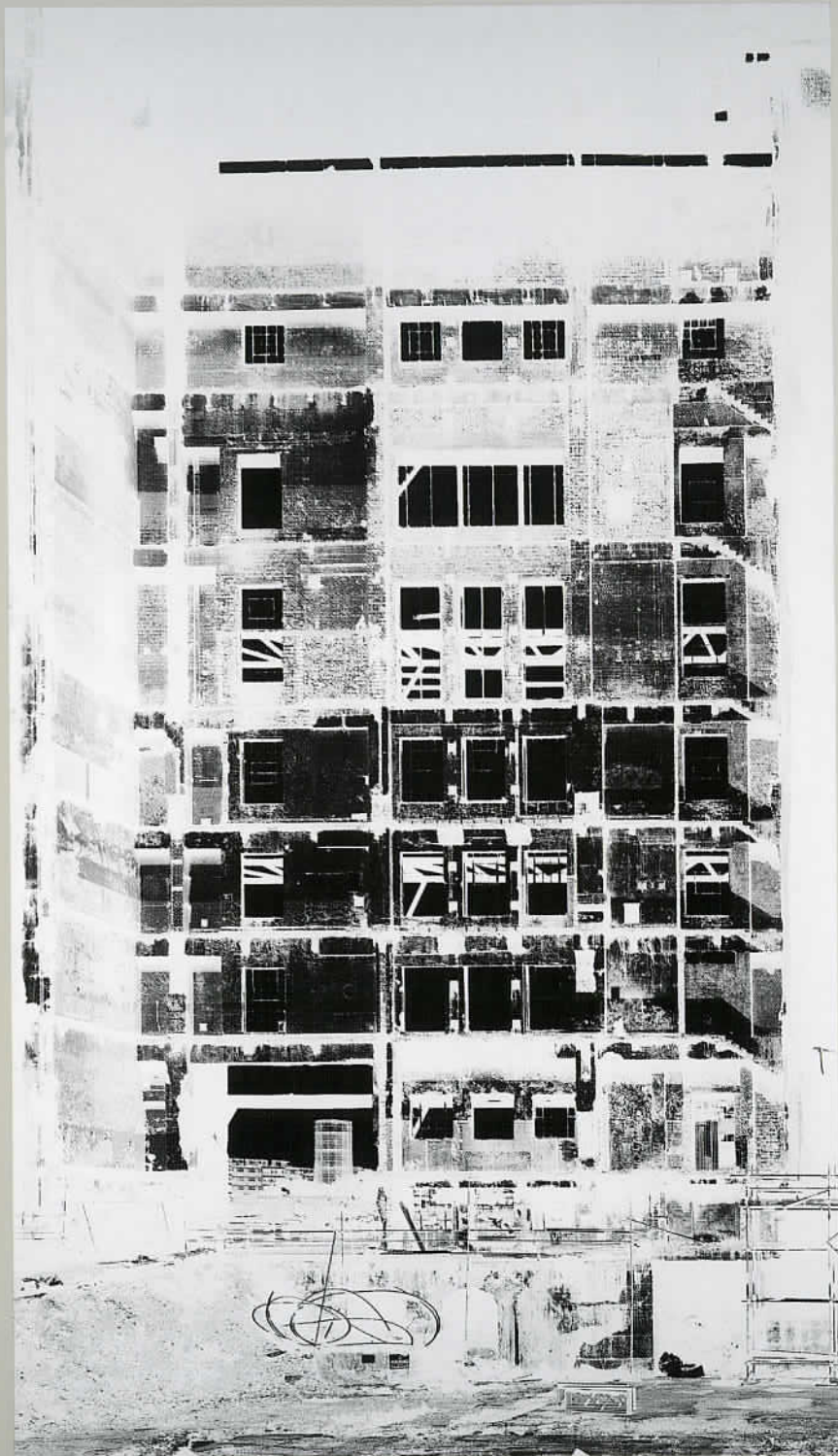


VERA LUTTER: SPECTERS OF NEGATION

Jonathan Crary

At a time when many artists are working with large-scale photographic images and installations, it's tempting to engage the images of Vera Lutter in the context of these contemporary trends. Lutter is clearly playing an important role in this broader cultural reevaluation of the cognitive and aesthetic status of the photographic medium. Her work, like that of a number of other internationally known artists, is inseparable from this historical moment when globalization has radically transformed the way images circulate and take on meaning, and when new imaging technologies have rendered obsolete many of the most enduring assumptions about photography and its relation to any presumed 'reality.' However, Lutter is also pursuing lines of thought and creative pathways that simply have no parallels anywhere, and it is the remarkable singularity of her practice and of her images that this essay addresses.

By now it's well known that Lutter works with the principle of the camera obscura to generate her work. I say 'principle' because there is no durable model of what, in fact, a camera obscura is. It is anything that works from the understanding that when light passes through a small aperture into an enclosed darkened interior, an inverse image of the outside environment will be visible to some degree on a wall or surface opposite the opening. The photographic camera, as it was developed in the nineteenth century, is the most familiar application of the camera obscura. However, for several centuries before photography, the camera obscura was used in other ways, sometimes for drawing, sometimes just for the demonstration of how focused light rays could produce an image. A camera obscura could be a small box-like object; it could be a large room-size space, as it has often been for Lutter. Some historians suspect that the concept of the camera was first discovered by accident in the ancient Mediterranean, where a combination of bright sunlight and tightly shuttered rooms may have occasionally, and without human intervention, produced the phenomenon of inverted images. For many centuries such optical occurrences were incorporated into forms of magical or wondrous display, but it wasn't until the late



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Unique gelatin silver print, 62 x 35 inches (81.3 x 88.9 cm)

renaissance that scientific understanding led to the fabrication of the first functional camera obscuras. By the 1600s, philosophers had arrived at one of the most influential conceptualizations of the camera: the analogy between the camera and the human eye. The analogy was extended by thinkers such as René Descartes, John Locke and G. W. Leibniz to assert that the human mind, not just the eye, was modeled like a camera obscura. Basically, for several hundred years the Western imagination believed that the mind and the eye functioned like a camera obscura, and as such were able to perceive the world directly and truthfully. Much of our attachment to photographic imagery is still bound up in the residual power of this older faith in the possibility of a true representation of the world.

But the culture of modernity, as it took shape in the nineteenth century, developed an abiding suspicion of anything purporting to be a direct or unmediated version of the real. In the work of two of the most consequential modern thinkers, Marx and Freud, the camera obscura was demoted from its status as a model of truth to a metaphor of distortion and falsehood. Marx used it to diagram the operation of ideological mystification, in which imaginary representations of social relations were passed off as reality; Freud believed it was analogous to the way in which the unconscious mind controlled or censored which contents of the mind entered into the space (or room) of conscious awareness. Lutter's relation to the camera, though, stands over and above both the classical celebration of its objectivity and the modern critique of its duplicity since she draws deeply on a wide register of its historical resonances and meanings.

One of her most consequential choices has been to use the camera obscura to produce negative images. In other words, she is deploying the camera obscura for its photographic possibilities but she has chosen to present what is effectively the direct luminous trace of that photographic procedure instead of going through secondary processes to achieve a positive image. Her images record the immediate inscription of light on photo-sensitive materials within the camera's interior. In that sense they have more of a claim to truthfulness than more conventional pictures produced through subsequent processes and manipulations. For Lutter, the 'truthfulness' of the camera is in the very operations of inversion and reversal that Marx, Freud and others saw as falsifications. Her use of the camera recalls the philosopher Hegel's account of the 'inverted world' where black is white and white is black, but for Hegel, inversion and 'the power of the negative' were only stages in a larger process, inexorably leading

to greater knowledge and social unity. Lutter's sense of the negative, both in the actual formal aspect of her images and on a conceptual level, is closer to the thought of Theodor Adorno. For Adorno, the negative, which emphasizes difference and non-identity, was a means of resisting the rationality on which forms of social control depended.

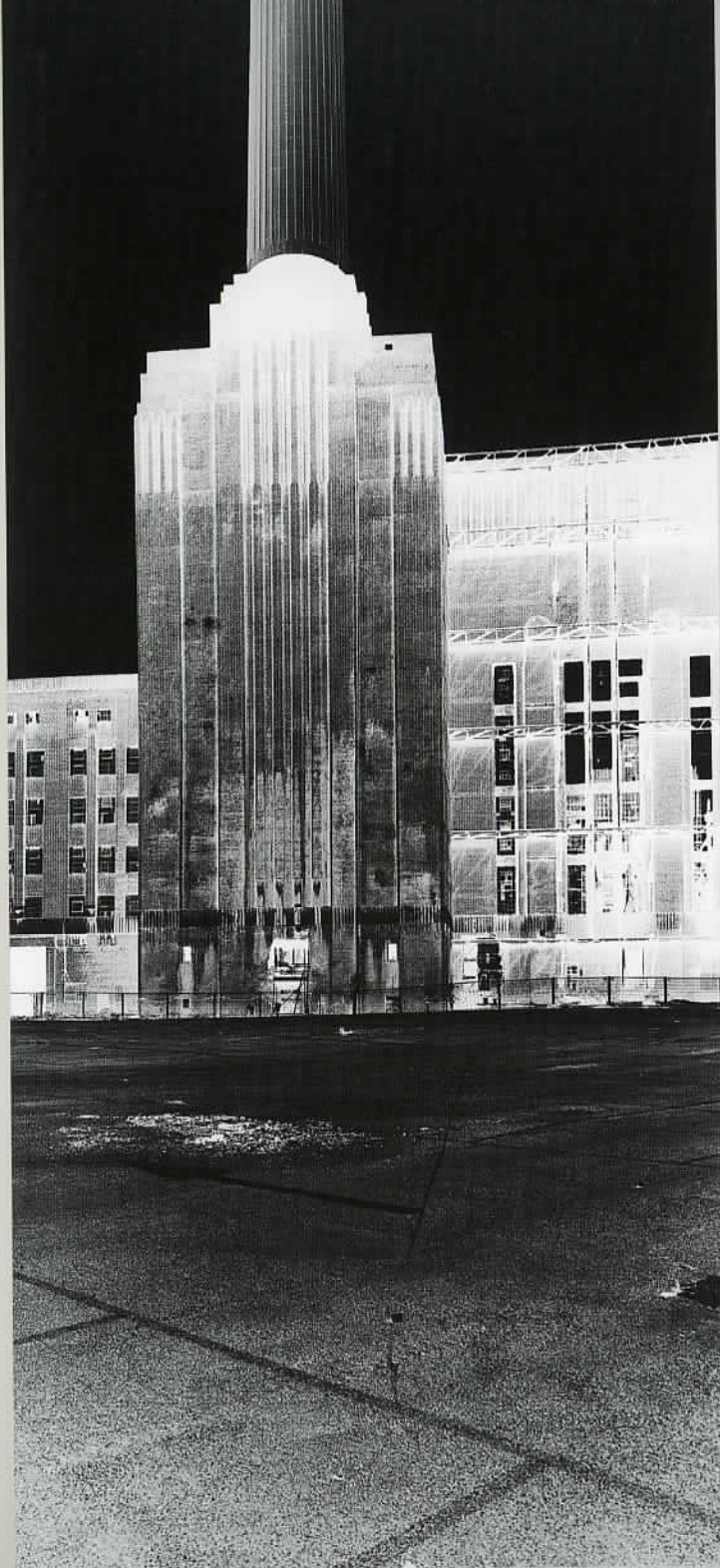
The effects of Lutter's images depend on the extraordinary conjunction of her particular choice of motifs with the negative format. The world she holds up to us may have familiar elements in it, but it remains a sealed realm of Lutter's creation. It is an uncanny aggregate of places in which we as spectators can never intuit any prospect of feeling 'at home.' As many recent critics have insisted, the uncanny is no longer best understood in the individual psychoanalytic terms given it by Freud, but instead as a broader characterization of central features of modern urban existence. It is a sense of estrangement that is forced on us by contemporary reality itself. For Lutter, the distancing from the familiar takes place first on the level of the sign—that is, the visual syntax of black and white photography, perhaps the most familiar of all naturalistic codes. We intellectually understand this reversal as a mechanical fact, but emotionally it continues to disturb us by evoking a world with some familiar contours but which remains foreign and unknowable. There is an indeterminate opacity to her images that disrupts any attempt to navigate them intellectually or to imagine human activity taking place in them. This frustration of any cognitive mastery is the antithesis of the rational and illuminating goals associated with the camera obscura in the 1700s.

By limiting our access to familiar or habitual visual cues, a negative image deprives us of the ability to invest it with other familiar sensory associations, such as sound. Thus, Lutter's world seems not only nocturnal but implacably silent, even when the objects represented (jet engines or immense industrial structures) are, in principle, highly auditory objects. It is a visual figuration of an effect of silence comparable to what de Chirico achieved by very different means in his 1911–1914 paintings. Aesthetic uses of the negative image came first in film, rather than still photography. An early influential example was in F. W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*: An innocent traveler is on his way by coach through the mountains to a haunted castle when the film switches abruptly from a positive to a negative black and white image, turning dark pine trees into a forest of white. It is an effect calculated less to evoke the supernatural than to relocate the place of the fantastic to the arena of technological invention and control. Since Murnau,

hundreds of other filmmakers and photographers have made related uses of the same technique, including Jean-Luc Godard in *Alphaville* (1965), which conjures up an urban-techno night world with certain affinities to Lutter's work.

Part of the uncanniness of Lutter's images is their evocation of absence. There is a pervasive sense that something is missing which ought to be present, but it is not possible to fully articulate what it might be. Estrangement overlaps with an effect of deprivation, situating us in a viewpoint that could be termed melancholic. For important cultural critics like Walter Benjamin, melancholy was something distinct from a state of individual sadness; rather, melancholy was a particular sensitivity to the dislocating experiences of modernity. It was a privileged position from which the disappearance of stable meanings from the world could be most acutely apprehended. Melancholy, in this sense, is a piercing insight into the impossibility of a state of immediacy, of recovering the origins of things, or of finding order, permanence and coherence in the world of appearances. In Lutter's work, there is a related sense of deprivation—a sense that something substantive is either withheld from us or no longer accessible. Sometimes her images recall the work of German author W. G. Sebald, whose photograph-filled texts often record the unsettling dissonance between individual experience and the built world of technological culture. The unsparing narration in his book *Austerlitz* (2001) of passing through airports, train stations and other inhospitable urban milieus seems akin to Lutter's rendering of city spaces, jet runways and power plants. In spite of the imposing physical presence of such sites, they effectively function as vacant points in more abstract networks of circulation and flow, whether of objects, bodies or streams of energy. As spaces they are the antithesis of anything affectively like a dwelling or a home, and they constitute a world in which the desire for a return to a home or community of origin fitfully persists, but in which any route back (or forward) is blocked by the catastrophes of modern history. A related sense of the image as a modern form of ruined memory pervades the work of both Sebald and Lutter.

Photography has become so naturalized and familiar over the last century and a half that we have forgotten that at the time of its invention, many people responded with uneasiness to its disconcerting capacity to create uncanny likenesses of people and things. Since then, the ubiquitous phenomenon of exact likenesses within our era of digital and now biotechnical reproducibility rarely awakens our lost or repressed surprise at the double as a kind of hallucinatory phantasm. One of the impressive



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Unique gelatin silver print, 67 x 33¼ inches (170.2 x 84.5 cm)

achievements of Lutter's work is to recover something of the spectral power of the photograph and its effects of doubling. Since the nineteenth century, the word *spectral* has come paradoxically both to connote that which appears to the eye and to suggest its unreal or ghostly character. Beginning with the writings of William Blake, Karl Marx, Max Stirner and others, the 'spectral' became a powerful way of describing what was assumed to be the fraudulent and delusional quality of life in modern society. Even the very recent political analyses of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt assert that we are all now living under 'the spectral reign of global capitalism.' Such accounts carry with them the implication that another 'unmasked' order of experience might be possible within a transformed social world—a world in which there presumably would be a more directly experienced 'reality,' where things would in fact be what they appeared to be. Whatever Lutter's thoughts about global capitalism might be, her work suggests that spectral effects are a more enduring feature of human experience, rather than something that could be overcome or eradicated. Her images intimate that 'spectrality' is what we all live with, that it is an inevitable condition of our functioning in our world at present. The longer we contemplate her work, the closer we come to the apprehension that her negative images are not reversible, that they are not part of a dialectic movement of positive and negative, of dark and light. Once seen, her photographs never offer up the possibility of transposition to a more familiar set of surfaces. Rather, we find ourselves inhabiting her world on its own terms, amid its own rigorous code of black and white. It is a place of suspended temporalities where the threshold between revelation and fear, between beauty and desolation, is kept stunningly imprecise.

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