

May 5, 2019

Interview with Vera Lutter

Michael Govan

Michael Govan You're an artist who uses photography, although it's not photography in the regular sense. It's the most ancient, primal form of photography—a pinhole camera on a very large scale. And you're an artist who I connect deeply with, whose work seems full of feeling, intuition, emotion, even though you are using a camera. You and I have known each other for a long time, and I recall years ago I told you that if you ever had an idea, come to L.A., we'd find a way to do something together. One thought we had was for you to make pictures of LACMA and parts of LACMA that soon may not be here anymore. Now, with your residency at LACMA completed, I am interested in your reflections on how you were thinking about transforming the museum through your work, this notion of moving yourself and your cameras—objects—into the museum.

Vera Lutter I don't know I would say that I ever wanted to *transform* the museum, but I wanted to examine the artworks and galleries, see them through my eyes and with the perspective of my camera. Transformations can happen in many layers. At LACMA we are thinking about the imminent transformation of the museum's architecture. My initial interest was to render the interiors of the galleries in their current configurations and, through the transpositions in my work, reveal hidden or unrecognized aspects of the spaces and the art.

MG Obviously it's not transforming the museum, but the work that comes out of your process is literally transformed; it's not what it was before.

VL In my work, transformation occurs through my selection of the location and the subject, but also through many other variables implicit in my process, such as the change of scale, the negative form, a reversal of sides, a switch to black and white, and the occasionally unusually long exposure times. For example, considering the interior images I made, my shortest exposure was five days on the Helen Frankenthaler [p. 67], whereas it took six and a half months to successfully expose inside the European old masters gallery [pp. 12–13]. We did that while the gallery was open to the public. Obviously these were specific choices I made as an artist.

MG Through that process did you learn anything about the nature of the artwork—old master painting, for example—that was surprising?

VL I looked to emphasize the sculptural aspect I found in some of the old master paintings—aspects that support form, dynamic, a sense of movement, abstraction, and, of course, beauty. By drawing these characteristics out of their embedded forms and sometimes radically simplifying the image, such elements became more apparent. In my photograph of *The Death of Lucretia* [p. 45], the woman's fall turns into an ascension. In my image of the School of El Greco work [p. 43], the sleeve of Saint Andrew's coat looks like a blossoming flower, seemingly giving birth to his hand, which points up to the cross that he carries—his vision.

MG Yes, those were the kinds of discoveries we would talk about when we looked at various pictures in detail. Now that you've had a chance to sit with this whole group, are there things that stand out for you?

VL Every image seems to hold its own secret—some surprised me, some revealed themselves only slowly. In my photograph of *Bacchus and Ariadne* by Guido Reni [p. 41], everything suddenly seems to be sculpted in marble, whereas Frankenthaler's *Winter Hunt* turned into a massive photogram. Here, a sudden transformation from a dynamic expression to a discrete dynamic occurs.

MG There's a shift in emotion for a lot of these works. Some of the pictures—for example, the Dutch seascapes—were already intended to have a kind of story quality, but in your hands the image has become really dark and stormy and conveys a whole different sensibility.



Top:
One of Lutter's large-scale cameras, built directly into the European old masters painting and sculpture gallery and concealed behind a wall.

Bottom:
Lutter's "trunk" cameras photographing artworks in the European art galleries.



VL That speaks to my idea of finding new ways of to expose the content of an image. As you said, I am not introducing something that isn't already there, but I am looking to magnify it.

MG Is there a way to step back and see the whole project as a way to think about the museum?

VL Yes, it's like zooming in and out with a long lens, moving from microcosm to macrocosm within the world of the museum, art, and context, while examining individual works, wondering how they belong together and appreciating how someone else brought them together. In the case of the European old masters gallery, it was learning about [former chief curator of European Paintings and Sculpture] Patrice Marandel's installation.

MG Is there anything that's changed or anything you felt in putting all this together and partially *living* in the museum?

VL I found myself recognizing how each work speaks to the one next to it, how important it is to see them in context, and my desire to continue this exploration. To make it bigger, make it even more detailed, create more connecting points between the individual pieces, do what we didn't have the opportunity to do, or redo what didn't go right, and expand on it. That's the excitement of the museum—it's rich in so many different aspects. I regret, for instance, that we didn't include photography in our enterprise.

MG Once you make these discoveries, you tend to want more. But something even more important—which is the opposite of thinking about the entire museum—is the way your work allows us to focus in on the detail without trying to come up with a logic for the whole. Like looking at the hand of the Apostle Saint Andrew with such care and such focus that it becomes something else for a moment.

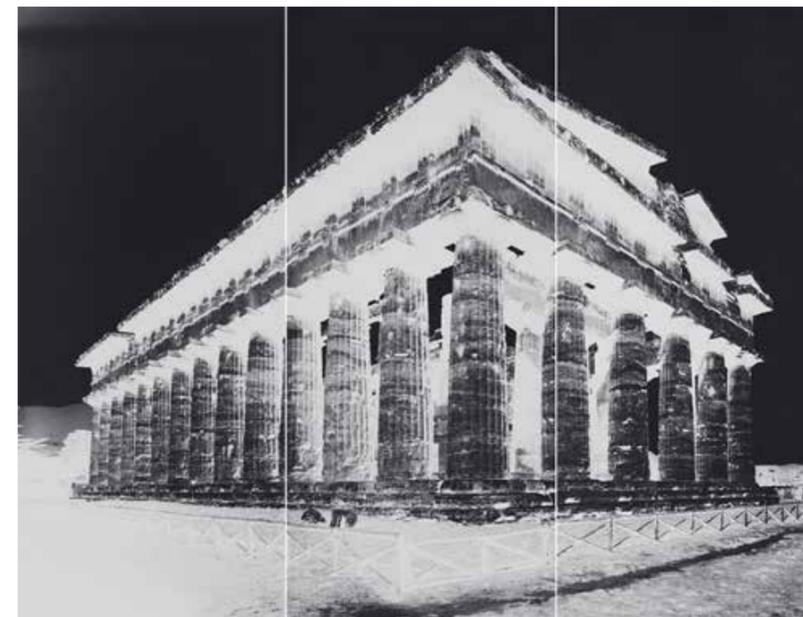
VL With my specific technique, I can emphasize details that have been overlooked before.



MG It's interesting, because in a curator's hands, any organization of objects has to make sense. As a whole, it either has to tell a narrative or be inclusive of a category. For me one of the things you brought to LACMA is this idea that as an artist you had license to look at feathers and fingers and paint drips and have no regard for the coherence of the whole. I think that's actually how people often wander through a museum, without thinking about the broader narrative.

VL Of course, there is structure, content, and a deliberate reason within every piece of art I chose. But it is nice to look at art without having to make sense of everything, to experience it without knowing why it was made. In my *Art of the Pacific* work [pp. 70–71], I experimented with a new choreography of objects. The objects cast in my image come from the same region, but not from the same island or tribe. Bringing together what fascinates me and seeing how these amazing, sometimes intimidating objects enter into a dialogue with one another is incredibly fulfilling for me.

Vera Lutter, *Zeppelin, Friedrichshafen, I: August 10–13, 1999, 1999*. Unique gelatin silver print; 55 × 81 in. (140 × 206 cm). Courtesy of the artist

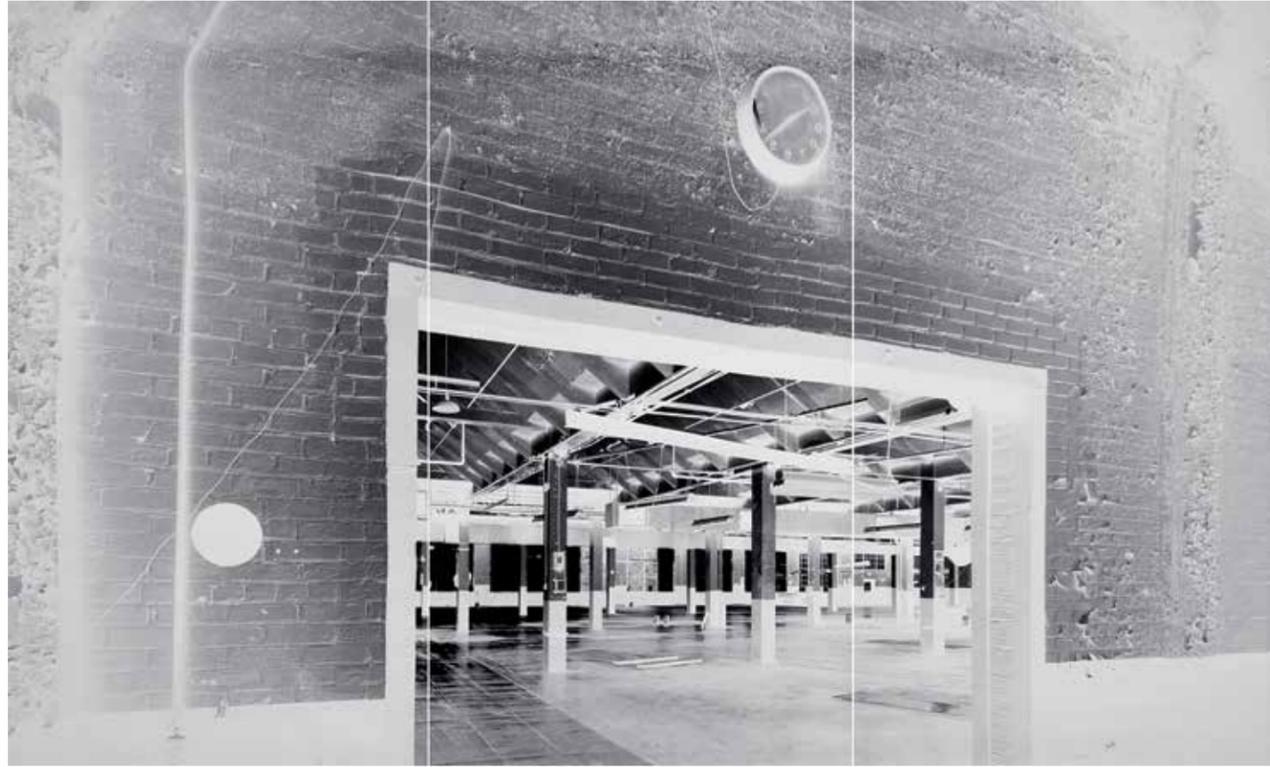


Vera Lutter, *Temple of Nettuno, Paestum, XVIII: October 18, 2015, 2015*. Unique gelatin silver print; 96 × 126 in. (244 × 320 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Kelvin Davis through the 2017 Collectors Committee, M.2017.124a–c

MG I would argue that you've helped free the artworks from the museum in some way, through close looking. We do with our eyes what you did with your camera—looking closely over time, making the object our own, reconsidering it in different ways. Your project is an analog for looking, right?

VL It is. The possibility to work in such immediate contact—not only with the art, but also with the entire museum—helped cut away a boundary that sometimes stands between the viewer and the art. The works had to come very close to my lens, and they took on a monumental yet intimate presence when projected inside my camera. In the long hours of setting up an image for exposure, boundaries collapsed, allowing me to perceive an object's characteristics very directly.

MG In a lot of your work, you've taken the broad view—a cityscape, a dirigible, a giant hangar, a temple—but with this project, I was actually surprised how deep you went in making your trunk camera photographs. They are all about intimacy—putting your box camera right up close to the work for a day and a half while the museum is closed. It's a little bit the opposite of a lot of your work, which is really more grand.



VL That's right, but even though the work is grand in appearance, it's rich in detail. The grandness of the body of work that led up to my project here can initially overwhelm or intimidate due to its monumentality and content, but that same scrutiny of detail happens there, too, and yields an intimate proximity.

MG Yes. I think about the peeling paint and the stopped clock in the empty factory at Dia:Beacon that sort of seem to overtake the bigness of the space in that image, for example. But with the copy-stand works you made at LACMA, you're talking about a feather, a finger, a peeled piece of lemon, a mask...

VL A very personal dialogue develops when I work with art so intimately. Due to the process I chose, the work is at times abstracted, and allows a more immediate focus on the structural elements. That happens through the transfer of tonality, but also through a change in contrast, shifting the familiar into foreign territory.

Vera Lutter, *Nabisco Factory, Beacon, IV: September 14–19, 1999*, 1999. Unique gelatin silver print; 100% × 168 in. (255 × 427 cm).
Courtesy of the artist

MG Even with landscapes, it seems especially clear that they're painted, down to the brushstroke. And you've often included the frame, so that its carved marks come out in a way that you don't even notice normally—I learned so much more about LACMA's frames from some of your pictures. The reflections in your work are so amazing to me, because I am very conscious of the glare when I'm looking at varnished surfaces. Sometimes they're the star of the show. They're like presence—I won't call it spiritual—but it's like they stand in for presence in a moment in time. You take such long exposures that it's the opposite of the snapshot, but those marks convey an immediacy, to me.

VL The strong reflections of light on the varnished old master paintings assume a highly distinct role. In my photographs they are attributed to the various elements involved—the art in front of my camera, its surface structure, the museum environment, the lighting, and the duration of my exposure. The works I photographed in situ in the galleries are really a portrait of what was there at LACMA at that very time. They are documents of the museum's history. In my image of Saint Francis [p. 63], the big black cloud in the upper part of the work is the result of light reflecting off the varnish. It is like a signature of the location, a manifestation that will never again be like this. The dark reflection Saint Francis looks toward becomes part of the fascinating transformation of the painting in my photograph.

MG In that picture in particular, the glare almost transforms it into an underwater scene. It's like one of those spotlights you see in underwater photography. You see the light and the darkness above. In that picture, the light is centered at the top, so that glare seems almost cosmic as well.

VL And in my box-camera photograph of the Saenredam painting, the glare looks like a handful of black sparkle. It's a result of the same phenomenon, but with a rather different result: dark stardust.

MG When I'm in a museum taking a picture of something for my own notes, I work so hard to make sure that it is glare-free. But now I kind of like glare, because it acknowledges that you're taking a picture of a thing, in a place, at a time. Museums have all these lights bouncing left and right off the surfaces, creating hot spots and low spots—we often don't even consciously register them—yet in your hands they become monumental.

VL It helps to acknowledge an original situation, since it allows the work to expand beyond its own genius. Like Marcel Duchamp did with the large glass when it cracked.

MG Because of the length of the exposures, there are no people in a lot of your pictures. In the outdoor ones, especially, there's a sense of something disturbed, something that moved during the exposure and affected the way the light hit. But here it's the opposite—you've memorialized the ephemeral into a very physical thing.

VL I don't know the visitor numbers at LACMA, but hundreds, maybe thousands of visitors walked through my exposures inside the European old masters gallery. They all left their traces. If they hadn't come, the image would appear slightly different.

MG Can we talk for a minute about the outdoor pictures? I figured that through your process of making images in negative—the way you transform things—LACMA's buildings would come across as a beautiful memory. That happened, but there were a lot of other things that happened. The way you've framed darkness; the way palm trees and other trees glowed with light and interacted.

VL In my first image of the sculpture garden [pp. 4–5], we appreciate the richness of art—the monumental torso by Auguste Rodin, made even more brilliant and monumental in my work than in reality, due to the negative portrait of bronze. We appreciate the Robert Irwin palm garden and *Urban Light* on the far side—all this under the shifting light of the palm trees. Yet suddenly we notice the bicycle on the far side of the image, tied up on the sidewalk. Charmingly, it echoes my presence, as I came with that bicycle to the museum on the day I made the image. The solarized version [pp. 94–95] adds a layer of strangeness to the scene we apparently know so well. Partially due to the process, the inversion reverses, and due to chemical processes, white lines occur on the outlines of certain forms.

In the outdoor images, I look to touch on the grandness and the complexity of LACMA's environment. I seek to transmit beauty—the most beautiful works being those from the sculpture garden. The interior courtyard view with the Maria Nordman sculpture



Lutter's large-scale movable camera, installed on the bridge connecting LACMA's Hammer and Art of the Americas buildings.

Lutter and her studio assistants moving her camera into place to photograph the B. Gerald Cantor Sculpture Garden (see pp. 4–5, 92–95).



[pp. 92–95] is another transfixed museum experience. It displays an open field, a piece of artwork, and two different building structures. I feel like the viewer of my photograph can anticipate saying this was a museum environment, even if they've never been to LACMA. And then there's the view of LACMA from the bridge [pp. 8–9], which to me is a hugely important image as it gives evidence of the disorientation that can arise in that courtyard area, especially when you're on the bridge to which we craned the camera. The near-incomprehensible complexity of this image shows how intricate the architectural situation is.

MG Yes, you do get the chaos. Your logic is—if you reduce it so much, then it will come to order in a way it doesn't in the real world.

VL It's good to touch on the idea of creating order through reduction and simplification. My intention of course is just that—to give structure and create relations, not necessarily to make what you see identifiable or more identifiable, but to create my own vision of this situation. The idea of disorder may occur because we are left with so few gray tones to fill in information. The area of the courtyard, for example, is strongly overshadowed,



Lutter in her temporary studio at LACMA with curator Jennifer King.

resulting in many large white surfaces in my photograph that abstract the image as a whole. But on the ground are the traces of a ballet that occurred over the two days of my exposure—tables and chairs were moved around, leaving a history of the visitors. This lends sweetness to the image, creating an immediate human relation.

MG And in the image of the Nordman, you basically captured everything *but* her work. Her work is a ghost, because it's white space, so it's as if it were cut out.

VL It's as though my work turned into sculpture, giving evidence of the object, which in turn disappeared. The Nordman work appears to be cut out, as it didn't reflect any light; its shadows did the same. Suddenly the lines of those two vacancies connect and become a new abstract form—like the Nordman piece itself, they exist between two- and three-dimensionality.

MG With the copy pictures, other than just technical flaws, how do you decide if something didn't work?

VL There is no general set of criteria when I edit my work. There are indeed technical aspects, but the piece as a whole has to hold, and sometimes a piece does even *with* technical flaws. I photographed the Jan Porcellis three times—two times to scale or slightly smaller [p. 57]. We both love those. Enlarging it didn't work; I think the painting lives within its intimate scale. The unfolding drama is embedded in its scale.

MG Yes, there's not that much going on in that picture. And when you blow it up, you have to live by different rules that are something more like abstract painting, where the volume and the physical distance between actions and energy have to be tuned. If something's too close together, it doesn't work; same if it's too far. The space between things becomes banal rather than intimate.

VL You are entirely right. Whereas the Pieter Saenredam appreciated when I enlarged it [p. 59]. The elegance of the architectural interior appears to be magnified in my larger version. The reversal of color turns the illumination into mystery.

MG The other thing I think I wanted to address was the African show *The Inner Eye*, which resulted in some of the most interesting and unusual images [pp. 74, 75, 76–77, 79, 80–81, 89]. The material itself translates and transforms in strange ways, but there's also the complication of the background. The modernity of the architecture starkly contrasts with the more organic forms made in wood, bringing it to the fore in a way that is completely different from being in the exhibition, when our eyes focus in on the art rather than the building.

VL It was a unique and wonderful opportunity to record inside an actual exhibition, especially since this exhibition was so very beautifully installed. With my camera and perspective, I succeeded in amplifying the boldness and the spirituality in these magnificent archaic artifacts. My long exposures enabled me to render apparent the intricate details and relations of various objects. There are gray tones revealing the reflection of objects in the side of a vitrine; there is the shadow that a piece projects onto the wall. Sometimes a piece appears twice, once in an installation and then as its own reflection, while the photograph in which we study this is itself a reflection. Capturing these environments in an inclusive way that doesn't discriminate resonates the same way as when we appreciate the glare of light on the varnish of an old master painting.

In the image of the power figure [p. 79], we see the exit sign, 6th Street in the background, the palm trees behind the figure, and the vitrine in front of it. The tripod of my camera is visible in the reflection. If you're willing to see all of that at once, you can—it's there.

That's not what you're looking at when you're in the exhibition. Intentionally looking at the art and trying to understand it, one tends to miss many relationships in the room.

MG The image of the African mask is particularly extraordinary because it has this crazy, complicated industrial ceiling over it [p. 75]. And then, since you took it through glass, you have ghostly reflections of other things behind. All these elements appear to be as real as anything—in your images it's hard to tell what's a reflection and what's not. And then there are the textiles on the wall behind that are reflected in the Plexiglas. It's confusing in a good way.

VL And you can't find this anywhere but inside a museum, where so many different elements come together, they don't always record in our memory, but they do in my work.

MG The Indian and other Southeast Asian works you photographed don't have architecture behind them because we were packing those. They were in a closed gallery, and some stone sculptures that were small enough to move were shot in front of the copy stand camera. In that case, these eerie, powerful images have no context. It's like you've turned the volume up on their structure and power and mystery. I know you photographed the flute ornament [p. 73] in that way, with the copy stand.

VL I wanted the flute ornament to arise out of a dark void, isolating this primordial ghost from all other context. In reality the Vishnu sculpture I was able to photograph reveals its massive weight at first glance [p. 87]. However, I allowed the Nepali Vishnu [p. 88] to be ephemeral and rise as though he were floating weightlessly. The Nepali libation vessel of the god Bhairava's head is a uniquely fascinating object, hard to fathom, nearly frightening and immensely powerful. In my enlargement [p. 91], these elements were heightened even more.

Installing the Art of the Pacific gallery to be photographed by Lutter's movable camera.

Lutter's installation of the Art of the Pacific gallery.



MG With your image of the Cambodian Vishnu, it seems like you put it back into a ruin, because we were packing boxes around it, and in your work it almost looks is as if it is sited in a ruin.

VL This apparent contradiction perpetuates the mystery. In my work, I can leave open whether the fragmentation is original and of the ancient site, or a fragmentation imposed by the museum in an attempt to create order.

MG And, finally, the textiles. These are very two-dimensional and very patterned, and you present them in such a way that it's impossible to tell whether they're positive or negative because we have no reference to figurative elements or shadows or volume or anything that would give us that clue [pp. 82, 83, 85].

VL For those works painted on barkcloth, it is almost irrelevant to know how much physical body they have. Their beauty lies in the delicate differentiation of tonality, which actually proposes weightlessness. I wanted to portray these works using the play of museum light that renders multiple shadows around the pieces, allowing a softness to play around the edges. In my images of these delicate objects, it is not always clear what we are seeing. The tender movement of the piece is visible in my image in its shadow—the wall becomes part of the object.

MG The picture of the Samoa barkcloth [p. 83] is a testament to the museum itself, because it was the conservators and the curator who figured out a way to show it without glass, which would have ruined your image. They also let the cloth's thin, jagged edges be free in space, so that they actually moved a little bit with a breeze, in a way that wasn't dangerous for the piece. Your image seemed to really take advantage of that hard work by the curators and conservators to give the piece life. Your image, made over time, makes concrete the fluctuations of the edges with multiple outlines.

VL Yes, the painted patterns are stable, whereas at the edges of the pieces light and shadow display a gentle movement. The museum's presence again is felt.

MG Your pictures of objects, other than those with a modern frame of reference, look a little like William Henry Fox Talbot salt prints, where early photography was trying to hold on to things in still-life form. Those Talbot images tended to depict static objects because of the need for light. Do you see any connection to that idea of the museum putting objects in vitrines and presenting them to the public? It strikes me that museums were born not that far in time from the invention of photography, and that the impulse to photograph and the impulse to display objects in museums are the same.

VL What an inspiring analogy you draw between the invention of photography and the desire to capture and preserve. Inviting me to bring my photography into the museum is an extension of these dual impulses. In early photography the artists looked for an equal image reproduction of an object, whereas I look for a transposition or, as you said, transformation.