



VERA LUTTER TIME TRAVEL

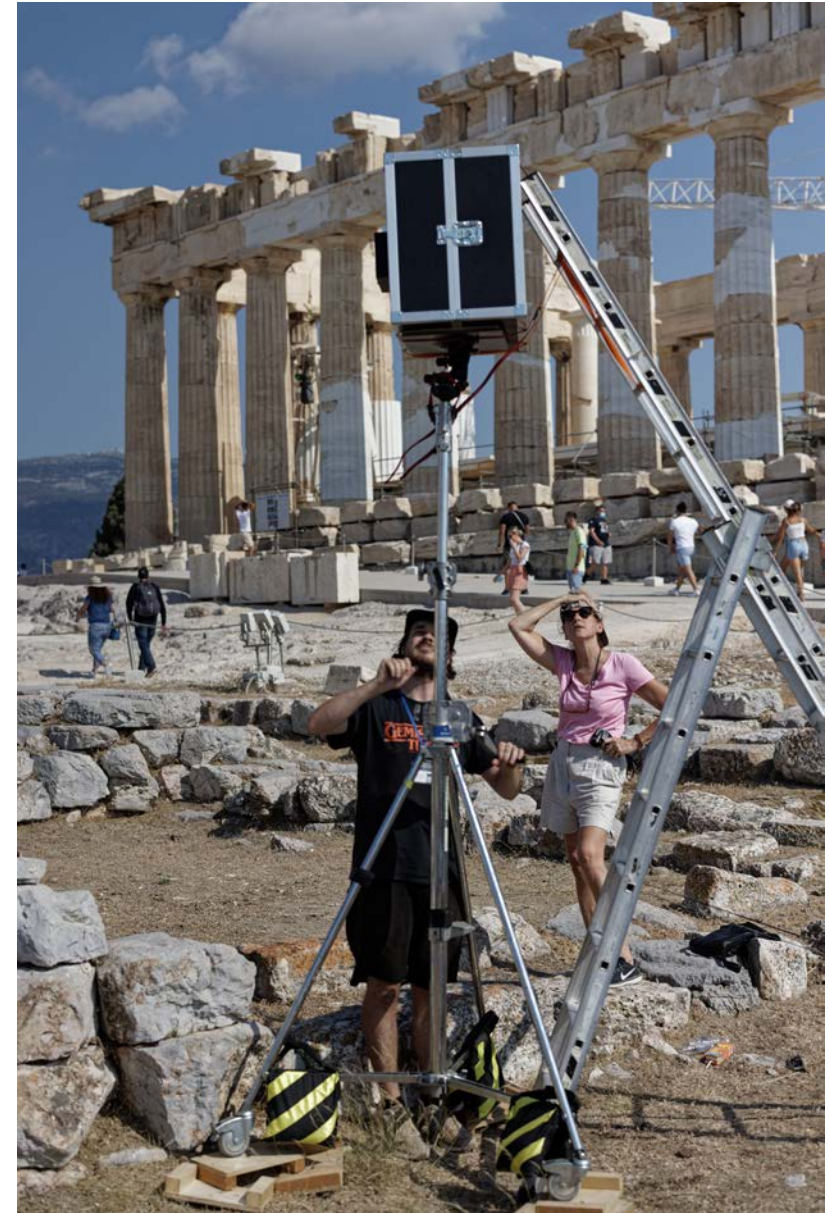
JEAN DYKSTRA

Late in the summer of 2021, Vera Lutter received a call from *The New York Times*. Kathy Ryan, the *New York Times Magazine*'s longtime director of photography, wanted to send her to Athens to make photographs to accompany an essay the paper was running called "Searching for Plato with My 7-Year-Old." In the piece, Thomas Chatterton Williams wrote about passing on the lessons he had learned from his own father to his seven-year-old daughter on a family trip to Athens, lessons that included an (age-appropriate) introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of Western thought developed by Socrates and Plato. Sitting among the rocks and columns of the Agora in Athens, Williams wrote about feeling a shiver down his spine as he contemplated his surroundings, the place where so much of Western philosophy and wisdom was debated and developed. "An overwhelming proportion of the world we take for granted today was birthed in these cramped spaces," he wrote.

For Lutter, who had never accepted an editorial commission before, the invitation was timely. Her father had recently died, and she had been spending the summer taking care of his affairs in Germany, which was experiencing record rainfalls and fierce flooding. It had been something of a "lost and sad summer," as she describes it, when she got the call from the *Times*. In Athens, by contrast, it was hot and dry, with a temperature hovering around 110 degrees Fahrenheit, and fierce winds, known as the *meltemi*, blowing across the Aegean Sea, fueling the wildfires that plagued the country that summer. The paper's deadline necessitated a far tighter schedule than Lutter normally works with, but the opportunity to photograph Athens's ancient structures and monuments "went right to the core of my heart," she says. So she contacted her assistant, Lukas Vogt, and left a rain-soaked Germany for the sun-blasted city of Athens to photograph the Parthenon, the Erechtheion temple, the site of Plato's Academy and, some 40 miles south of Athens, the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounio.

Lutter was able to get access to the Acropolis early in the morning, when there were no crowds. As she arrived in those early hours, steam rose off the rocks, rosemary and thyme scented the air, and the city of Athens slept at her feet. At the Temple of Athena, built in the sixth century, B.C., to honor the goddess of war and guardian of the city, the sacredness of the site was palpable. As Williams wrote in his text, "I had wanted to impress upon my daughter the feminist aspect of Athens, a city brought to life by the mythological victory of Athena, goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare, over Poseidon, ruler of the sea." In Lutter's photographs, the temple stands against an impenetrably black sky, one that is tonally reversed from the bright blue of Athens in the daytime; the dark shadows that pool where the columns meet the structure's horizontal beam (known as the architrave) glow in her photographs, like a row of lights. A tree on the right of her image (on the left, in reality) seems almost to explode with light, and several of the columns are dappled with shadows. The quiet stillness of the image allows us to take in the details carved into the columns, the surrounding rock out of which the temple was carved, a glimpse of the city, in miniature below the hill. The dark sky—darker than it ever is in reality—gives the sense that Lutter snuck onto the site under cover of night. Her photographs of these ancient structures, fragments of what they once were, convey a sense of awe, in all of the word's meanings: astonishment, wonder, trepidation, reverence. All of this, summoned using the most rudimentary camera, a light-tight box with a fixed pinhole that allows a beam of light into the structure. That light then casts an image onto the back of the box, which Lutter lined with light-sensitive photographic paper. It should be said, though, that Lutter's process is anything but rudimentary. She's developed a method for determining exposure times that involves pages and pages of numbers and calculations and, in the case of the images she took in Athens, elevation charts, bird's-eye views of the sites that she researched online, the timing of the sunrise and sunset, and the path of the wind. All of which allowed her to have a fair idea of how the image would imprint itself—upside down, left and right flipped, and tonally reversed – in her camera.

Since Lutter turned her midtown apartment into a camera obscura when she first moved to New York City in 1993, she has photographed urban structures, industrial sites, landscapes, airports, and museums, among other subjects, using various camera obscuras, some as small as a suitcase, others as large as a shipping container. In some ways, though, her photographs of ancient monuments—the Temple of Athena in Paestum, the Pyramids in Giza, and more recently the Acropolis, Plato's Academy, and the Temple of Poseidon—seem especially suited to her practice. Excepting the lucky few (relatively speaking) who have been to Athens and visited the Acropolis, most of us experience these monuments, so crucial to western mythology and history, at a remove. In the pages of an art-history book, say, they feel familiar, unsurprising. In person, though, "There's just such overwhelming beauty and majesty and scale," observes Lutter, adding, "I was always marveling at what moved the people of that time to build these structures." That sense of beauty and majesty radiate from her photographs of the Acropolis and the Temple of Poseidon, releasing a kind of collective memory of the stories that originated there, the mythological battles, the philosophical debates.





The camera obscura dates back to at least 400 BC, and it's suggested that Aristotle, appropriately enough, figured out how to safely view a solar eclipse using a camera-obscura-like instrument. The mechanism has been used by artists since at least the 15th century, when Leonardo da Vinci described it in his *Codex Atlanticus*, and artists have long used it as a technical aide for painting and drawing. But while Renaissance painters used the camera obscura in order to transfer and trace the scene in front of them onto a canvas with accuracy and verisimilitude, Lutter uses it to create images that transform and transcend their original subjects. Despite using a photographic process that involves no darkroom manipulation (no dodging or burning), much less digital alteration, she produces photographs that are radical revisions of her subjects, allowing us to look differently at scenes and objects we think we know. "In early photography the artists looked for an equal image reproduction of an object," she told Los Angeles County Museum of Art director Michael Govan in an interview, "whereas I look for a transposition or, as you said, transformation."

Her works rest at the opposite end of the photographic spectrum from, say, Henri Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment. They have an entirely different relationship to time, capturing, instead, the slow accumulation of many moments. One consequence of her process is that while people may have wandered in front of her camera obscura—and in the case of the photographs in Athens, they almost certainly did—there is no evidence of them in the images. An inevitably crowded tourist site not only appears empty, as if it's only just been discovered, but there are no indicators of contemporary life. No tourists in shorts and sneakers, no backpacks or sunhats. It's as if the images themselves are relics from another era. Lutter's pictures upend photography's relationship to truthfulness and documentary assumptions—they're more interpretive, more revelatory and open-ended—but they also upend our way of looking, demanding more time and attention from the viewer. The tonal inversion that characterizes the negative image is initially disorienting, and the slow and patient manner of looking they require is at odds with the pace at which we swipe through images every day on our phones—or the way we rush past the works in a museum, for that matter. "Much of my response to a work is intuitive," she says. "The image that I eventually make is like a union of the original and of what I hoped to further find and bring forward. Once such a work of mine is presented to the public, it meets the memory and the imagination of the viewer and a new dialogue starts."

Creating a dialogue rather than a document—that is what Lutter has been doing with her photographs for close to 30 years. Even the most humble of the sites she photographed in Athens is an invitation. In contrast to the photographs of the Acropolis, which rises up on the hilltop above the city, her photograph of the steps of Plato's Academy shows an uneven, corroded set of stairs surrounded by a ghostly tangle of leaves and branches. What's left of Plato's Academy is in a public park in Athens, and the staircase leads down

to a lower level of the park, where additional excavation had been done. The photograph shows steps carved into the rock, nothing more, but they welcome us into Plato's world, asking us to imagine not only what might have been there, but what might have taken place there, the ideas that were shaped in conversation.

This is not the first time that Lutter has photographed ancient ruins, nor the first time the characters of history or classical mythology have found their way into her work. In 2012 and 2013, she made photographs in the Greek and Roman wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, focusing on individual sculptures—a marble torso of Apollo, a statue of a gowned woman, sculptures of Pan—as well as vitrines filled with smaller figurative sculptures or vessels. Lutter made three photographs of a marble statue of Pan from around the first century AD, showing a shaggy haired, bearded figure standing on hooved feet, half goat, half man, that seems to float against an empty, horizonless background. The three images have been made using different exposure times, so that the fertility deity and the protector of shepherds and flocks seems to emerge slowly into being (or to evaporate into the ether, depending on the order in which you view them). Her image of another Pan sculpture is photographed from below, looking up, emphasizing his muscular torso while his hooved legs disappear, mid-transformation. Pan is a slippery character, associated with metamorphosis, among other things, and in that sense, a good symbol for Lutter herself, whose transformative powers are evident in these images.

Lutter's camera obscura is a singular way of making a picture, but it also represents a way of looking—one characterized by patient and prolonged attention. Take, for example, *Vitrine, June 17, 2013*: We see some twenty small figurative sculptures—models for larger versions, presumably—on plinths inside a glass case. A series of museum labels, in small type, tracks along the bottom of the vitrine, but the glass in the front of the case has captured the reflections of the room behind it, so we see four patterned window grates, suspended brightly in the image's upper left, and the columns of the gallery behind the camera. The multiple reflections caught in the glass give what is actually a shallow vitrine the feel of an endlessly vast space. Out of that space emerges the beautifully carved, glowing figure of a boy—headless, like most of the other figures in the case. Because he is carved out of basalt, a hard, black, volcanic rock, rather than marble, the figure appears illuminated, and suspended in mid-air, like a spirit. In the same way that the boy's figure in the photograph slowly, over time, absorbed the light in Lutter's camera obscura, our attention comes to rest on his figure, and everything else in the image fades in significance. "I was interested in the fragmented body, the rupture between the once-perfect antiquity and what we see today," Lutter told Michael Govan. It's that rupture that animates the viewer's imagination, that engages the viewer in dialogue with her remarkable images.

