

The Image Factory

Francesco Zanot

It all started with an epiphany. After receiving a diploma in sculpture at the Academy of Munich, where she trained in the spirit of conceptual art, Vera Lutter moved to New York in the mid-Nineties, to study at the School of Visual Arts. She settled in a loft on the twenty-seventh floor of an old building in the Garment District. The view from her window was nothing like what she used to see on the old continent. It is a matter of intensity: in New York everything is faster, brighter, more hectic and more exhilarating. In an effort to capture this energy, she decided to convert her room into a camera obscura. She sealed every crack so that the light could enter only through a small pinhole in one blacked out window. On the wall opposite the pinhole, she unrolled sheets of light-sensitive paper onto which the outside world left its trace. The result is not simply an image, but the image combined with the medium that captured it. The outside world penetrated through the pinhole and into the room, rendering the paper's surface into a tangible testimony of this passage. It is a photograph, a sculpture, and the record of a (technical and scientific) phenomenon, as well as the photographer's (physical and emotional) experience. Everything together, compressed into a single object and filled with meaning, history and vitality. And so, it began.

For Vera Lutter, photography from the window is decisive, just as it has been for many photographers since the dawn of this medium, starting with Niépce's view of the rooftops at Le Gras and Daguerre's *Boulevard du Temple*. Almost all of the works she creates are the result of the same process. The subjects change, but not the way they are represented: halfway between the rigor of a scientific procedure and the magic of a shamanic ritual. Using a camera obscura, she has photographed several cities in Europe and the United States, trees and nature, historical monuments and museums, the Venice canals and the Egyptian pyramids. Very different places and different content, but united by the distinctive transformation process they undergo in Lutter's artmaking practice. In the same way, she also photographs a wide range of subjects, generated by industrial processes, machinery and infrastructures for the transportation of goods and people, with this becoming a recurring theme in her work, establishing itself as an important aspect of her practice. Here, among factories, construction sites and warehouses, Vera Lutter finds the same sense of challenge and industriousness that animates her creative process. Like these places and objects, her works are monumental endeavors. And like them, they are not simply visible, but are the result of a vision.

Vera Lutter's interest in industrial sites and monumental infrastructures, is rooted in a fundamental relationship of continuity that exists between such subjects and her artistic practice. Starting with the camera obscura itself: her first camera was the very room in which she lived in New York City, she has gone on to build special cameras for every image (or group of images). In fact, each of Lutter's photographs is preceded by extensive preparations that include the construction or modification of a standalone structure, created according to the needs of the image. The act of making, of building, of transforming a material into something else, is therefore at the base of both -what is seen in the field of the projection- and what happens in the counter-field of the outside world. Her camera obscura does not only function as a factory of images but is in turn the object of a manufacturing process. Vera Lutter starts with the raw building blocks, constructs a manufacturing apparatus and sets it in motion to create images.

Something similar can be said of the infrastructures tied with the theme of transportation and travel: just as goods and people are transferred from one place to another via different means (cars, trains, ships, airplanes, zeppelins...) and their environments (highways, ports, airports...), Vera Lutter's works are created through a process that implies a series of transfers. Passing through the pinhole, light travels inside the camera obscura and hits the light-sensitive photographic paper. The image emerges from streams of photons crowded within the light beams, and the camera obscura is the arena where this event manifests. From a more abstract perspective, the camera obscura is also the channel through which ideas are transformed into phenomena. From the mind to the body. Sometimes Vera Lutter recuperates shipping containers, normally used for maritime and intermodal transport, she modifies them and uses them as her camera obscura. In this manner she photographed the shipyards of Rostock, among the largest in Europe, active since the end of the eighteenth century. Concluding the circle.

Time plays a key role in Vera Lutter's work. Her photographs often require extremely long exposures which can extend from a few minutes to several months. Each exposure time is dependent on the size of the pinhole and the external light conditions which allow the image to fully mature on the light-sensitive paper in her camera obscura. The titles of all her works provide a record of this lapse of time: for example, *Zeppelin, Friedrichshafen, V: August 23–27, 1999* required four days of exposure time, during which the airship was moved in and out of the hangar, leaving an ethereal and ghostly trace in the final image. These extended exposures remind us that photographic time is not an abstraction or a theoretical whim but is an expansion during which something always happens. In fact, the extended exposures impart to time a body, a substance. Here, time is a subject like any other: industrial sites, machines, airplanes... We can perceive its presence.

In describing her relationship with this primary element of photographic language, Vera Lutter has often referred to Andy Warhol's films, such as *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1965), which consist of a single shot that lasts several (almost unbearable) hours, pointing out how she condenses into a single image what Warhol's works stretched to an indefinite number of frames. An extraordinarily rich image. Full. Solid. A concentration of images. An almost-cinematic image, in the sense of its ability to move forward and backward in time. A pure photograph, though little photographic in nature, as the work opposes the representation of an instant, which is typically associated with its medium: Vera Lutter discards the decisive moment in favor of everything that remains, resists, and still exists.

Vera Lutter's works are deeply connected with some of the oldest images and methods in the history of photography. They are created with a camera obscura. They require very long exposure times, so that whatever moves too fast in the frame is not captured (Daguerre's *Boulevard du Temple* appeared deserted in 1838 despite being one of the busiest streets in central Paris). Like daguerreotypes, they are one-of-a-kind and cannot be reproduced, because they are impressed directly onto light-sensitive paper. Like daguerreotypes, they have a sculptural value, as the image adheres to and combines with the support onto which it is imprinted. Like the film matrix of most analog photographs we know, they are negative images. However, in this case, they cannot be reversed. Perpetual and immutable negatives. Vera Lutter brings to light the part of photography that is usually hidden. Instead of existing as material in an archive, the negatives

are elevated to the role of protagonists. At the same time, Vera Lutter shows her subjects in a unique and surprising way, while paradoxically using a well-known method of representation accessible to all. Light turns into shadows and vice versa. We sink into an ambiguous and gelatinous dream. A hallucination. Photography, after all, never shows things as they are, but interprets and translates them into something else. Apparitions. Ghosts. The negatives highlight the structure of the subjects, tracing their skeleton: what remains before they disappear.

Vera Lutter's works reproduce the way our memory functions, selecting some basic elements and blurring all else into a blinding glare or an impenetrable darkness. Her images have an indefinite quality. It is not a matter of inaccuracy, but of a peculiar unfinished form, *non finito*. Therefore, it is no coincidence that, to describe these works it is necessary to use language generally applied to the fields of sculpture and architecture. Michelangelo. Rodin. Giacometti. Medardo Rosso. In 1894, the latter wrote: "[...] The most important thing is that, by looking at a subject, one can perceive what is missing. There are no limits in nature, thus there can be no limits in the artwork." Vera Lutter's photographs leave room for the invisible.

Through her work, Vera Lutter gives evidence to the monumental character of the places and objects she depicts. It is a matter of temporality. The subjects of her photographs are timeless. They have overcome the trial of the instant moment, projecting themselves into the dimension of permanence. And it is a matter of space: the main elements involved are monumental in scale. Starting with the subjects themselves: their dimension is one of their most important features. Zeppelin airships are among the largest flying machines ever built; the Battersea Power Station is the largest brick building in Europe; the Effelsberg Radio Telescope has a record diameter of 100 meters, useful for detecting remarkably distant objects like pulsars, interstellar dust, galaxy nuclei, and jets of matter emitted by black holes; the Hambach coal mine is one of the largest in the world, where the digging machines at work have reached a depth of about 300 meters below sea level. United by their otherworldly appearance, these artifacts constitute a kind of earthly apotheosis: gigantic catalysts of energy and thought, of individuals and communities. Relatedly, the apparatus that Vera Lutter created to make her works is also impressive in scale. Her cameras are the size of a room. They are architecture. Habitable spaces. The German artist lives in the belly of the photographic device. She affords herself the privilege of visiting the cave where the images are formed. It is an extension of the early gesture of the photographer putting his head under a black cloth: here her whole body disappears inside the apparatus, merging with the medium itself.

Finally, Vera Lutter's works are monumental in scale; they match industrial standards (she uses the largest prefabricated light-sensitive paper available) but they also question these standards (numerous works are the result of the combination of multiple sheets to create diptychs, triptychs, and polyptychs that are not concerned with the multiple structure of classical art compositions but are the result of pushing against imposed limits). From this process objects emerge that invade the viewers' space triggering a physical confrontation. They are spectacular works, not in an ostentatious sense, but because they put the experience of the public at the center, engaging it by transporting it into a dimension that goes beyond the ordinary. On the border between appearance and disappearance, Vera Lutter's images confront us with the complexity of the systems that humans have implemented to conquer, understand and move within the world. They imply the activation of a continuous process of recognition (which has

now been mainly delegated to machines), while avoiding any notion of classification and fragmentation of reality in favor of a simultaneity of its parts. Here, the past merges with the future, ancient ruins with new discoveries, and the familiar with the unknown. They are ensemble works. *Gestalt*. Through these works it is possible to experience the seductive sensation of getting lost without looking for a way back.