

Windows on an Absent World

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Little in the history of photography or art prepares us for an image like Vera Lutter's *European Old Masters: December 7, 2018–January 9, 2019* (pp. 12–13). Most immediately, the photograph is immense, at over seven feet tall and ten-and-a-half feet wide. No catalogue illustration can do it justice. The image is barely but perceptibly divided into three vertical panels, equally reminiscent of traditional triptych painting and Cinerama, the triple-projector, super-wide-screen format popularized in the 1950s. Even more striking, the image depicts a world in black and white where light and dark are reversed. Greco-Roman marble sculptures are a deep charcoal gray and ooze creamy white shadows, once-tenebrous old master paintings are hauntingly bright, and a radiant ceiling is lined with black-hole light fixtures. It is an utterly foreign world, but also a familiar one—at least for some viewers. Former denizens of the old masters galleries at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art intuit that the scene is flipped left to right; the rest of us perhaps notice the reversed lettering emblazoned above the lintel in the Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter gallery, visible through the doors at the left (but nearly invisible in the reproduction). Much else unsettles in this work, to which we will have to return with more patient eyes.

Lutter produced *European Old Masters* as part of a two-year residency at LACMA in which she photographed artworks, galleries, and buildings in configurations that would soon no longer exist due to the construction of a new permanent collection building



André Kertész, *Broken Plate, Paris*, 1929. Gelatin silver print; 7% × 9% in. (19.4 × 24.8 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XM.195.59

designed by architect Peter Zumthor. Lutter employed her signature camera obscura technique to produce large-scale, direct negatives—works that can hardly be described as documentary. Architecturally scaled, black and white, tonally and laterally reversed, divided in three, museal (in both depicted subject and anticipated exhibition), depopulated, works like *European Old Masters* beggar received categories. Before we can venture a reading of this or any other photograph in this body of work, we are compelled to name or perhaps invent a genre or format adequate for Lutter's imposing and elusive images. Simply put: what *type* of images are these?

Modern Windows on the World

At least since the Renaissance and Leon Battista Alberti's famous treatise on painting, the primary analogy for the painted picture has been a window on the world. The analogy was extended to photography time and again as early photographs were taken from windows—not least, Nicéphore Niépce's circa 1822 view from his study and Louis Daguerre's circa 1838 *Boulevard du Temple*. Numerous photographs were also taken of or through windows, such as William Henry Fox Talbot's *Oriel Window, South Gallery, Lacock Abbey* (c. 1835), Josef Sudek's mid-twentieth-century series *The Window of My Studio*, and André Kertész's *Broken Plate, Paris* (1929), a materialist anticipation of René Magritte's more famous paintings *La condition humaine (The Human Condition)* (1935) and *La Clef des champs (The Key to the Fields)* (1936), both entertainingly crude plays on the metaphor of painting as a window. John Szarkowski, then head of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, cemented and augmented the analogy with



Vera Lutter, *Studio, XX*:
June 1–21, 2005, 2005.
 Unique gelatin silver print;
 91½ × 168 in. (232 × 427 cm).
 Courtesy of the artist

his 1978 exhibition “Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960.” Here, photography was conceptualized either as a mirror of its creator—a model said to span Alfred Stieglitz; *Aperture* magazine, co-founded and initially edited by Minor White; and the (mixed-media) montages of Robert Heinecken and Robert Rauschenberg—or as a window onto the world, a template that ostensibly included Eugène Atget, Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1958), Diane Arbus, and Garry Winogrand.

Lutter’s photographs fit uncomfortably in this lineage. Her *Studio* series (2005–7) foregrounds the introspective mirror paradigm advanced by Szarkowski. In *Studio, XX: June 1–21, 2005*, for example, Lutter transformed her studio into a set where older photographs—in this instance, from her *Beacon* series (1999)—are interspersed with comparably sized mirrors. The result is not only a revisitation of earlier work, but also a “correction” of the tonal and lateral reversals: negatives of negatives become positives, and mirror images are mirrored and restored to their “proper” left-right orientation. Lutter’s *Studio* series thus reflects on her working process as well as on past work; it affords the viewer insight into her camera obscura, darkroom, studio, and oeuvre. The power and import of this series notwithstanding, it is the metaphor and reality of windows that more profoundly structure her work.



André Malraux working on his book *Le Musée Imaginaire* at his home near Paris, 1953. Photograph by Maurice Jarnoux

Among the photographs Lutter made at and of LACMA, the old metaphor of a window on the world survives in works like *Frans Snyders, Game Market, 1630s: February 10–April 3, 2017* (pp. 52–53). This image is many things—a negative reproduction of a seventeenth-century painting; a nearly two-month exposure; a still life comprising a black swan, a white carcass, and iridescent peacock feathers turned even more subtle shades of gray; a nightscape of Antwerp; and the figuration of a ghostly larder—but it is not a direct challenge to the window-on-the-world model inherited from the Renaissance. Instead, it challenges the fundamental relationships between originals and reproductions, museums and books, art and art history. According to United States intellectual property law, a candid reproduction of a two-dimensional artwork is considered a slavish copy and thus is generally not entitled to copyright protection. Lutter’s photographs are anything but slavish copies. But her two-dimensional photographs of two-dimensional paintings test the boundaries of conventional artworks and their reproduction. Unlike the large-format photographs of, say, Jeff Wall or Thomas Struth, which borrow from the conventions of painting to assert their colorful presence on museum walls, photographs like *Frans Snyders, Game Market, 1630s* are assertively black-and-white photographic reproductions of actual paintings.

If works like *Frans Snyders, Game Market, 1630s* can be said to be museum photographs, they are a perverse realization of André Malraux’s *musée imaginaire*, the “museum without walls” produced through the compilation of black-and-white photographic reproductions of artworks from every era and corner of human history.¹ Only rather than Malraux’s museum without walls, Lutter’s photographs require a museum *with* walls.

These are not tableau photographs that coerce photography into a museum logic, but the precise opposite: the materialization of an imaginary museum in which the museum with walls is forced to confront the impact of photography. Almost a century ago, Walter Benjamin correctly proclaimed, “It is indeed significant that the debate has raged most fiercely around the aesthetics of photography-as-art, where the far less questionable social fact of art-as-photography was given scarcely a glance. And yet the impact of the photographic reproduction of artworks is of very much greater importance for the function of art than the greater or less artistry of a photography that regards all experience as fair game for the camera.”² Benjamin had in mind the same small reproductions handled by Malraux. Lutter’s photographs of artworks bring the debate initiated by Benjamin and Malraux into the halls and onto the walls of contemporary museums. The logic of the museum is at war with the logic of photography; Instagram-worthy installations inflame the war rather than broker peace. Lutter’s museum pictures do not enter the fray polemically so much as reflect on its constituent components from the distance of archaic technologies, extended exposures, and real presence.

What’s more, Lutter’s photographs for museums *with* walls go a significant step further than any original-reproduction debate. Late nineteenth-century (and contemporary) art photographs, as Olivier Lugon demonstrates in his magisterial study of photography and scale, aspired to be hung like paintings on a wall. In the middle of the twentieth century, by contrast, large-format photography abandoned its aspirations to mimic easel painting in favor of emulating the wall-sized mural: “From being an image *for* the wall, the photomural turned photography into an image *as* the wall.”⁵ Lutter’s works refuse simple assimilation into either the tableau or the photomural tradition. Yet just as *Frans Snyders, Game Market, 1630s* is an image *for* the wall, *European Old Masters* is an image *as* the wall. As Lutter has said, describing her very first pinhole camera photograph, taken in the mid-1990s in a loft on the twenty-seventh floor of a commercial building in New York’s Garment District, “The scale was a given, as the space I was working with was architectural, and the wall onto which I projected was the wall of the room.”⁴

Has Lutter merely replaced the window-on-the-world model with one favoring wall paintings and photomurals? Hardly. If previously the relationship between windows and walls could only be defined negatively—the former being a hole or puncture in the latter—modernity introduced (and we daily experience) walls of windows. Lutter appears



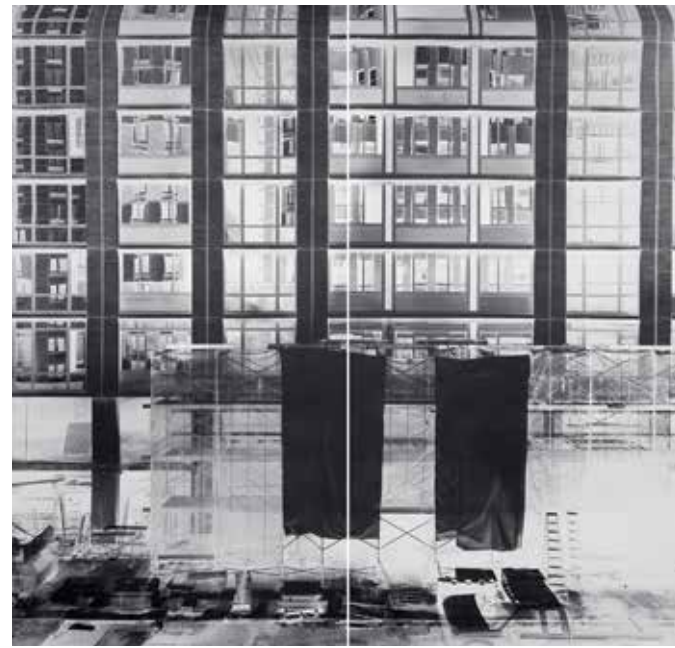
The Bateman Mercury, Roman, 2nd-century copy after a Greek original of the 4th century BCE. Marble; 76 × 50 × 25 in. (195 × 76.2 × 58.4 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, William Randolph Hearst Collection, 48.24.15. Installed in *To Rome and Back: Individualism and Authority in Art, 1500–1800*, Resnick Pavilion, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2019

to have been among the first artists to recognize the material underpinnings of the window-on-the-world metaphor and she remains one of precious few to create work that responds to these new and pervasive conditions.

Let us return to the epiphany Lutter experienced in her loft in New York. As she tells it (and critics hear it), the epiphany lies in the transformation of the room into a camera. But the story itself—and the subsequent decades of work—betray an equal or greater emphasis on the role of windows:

Through the windows, the outside world flooded the space inside and penetrated my body. It was really an impressive experience on all levels, and I decided to turn it into an art piece: the space, the room inside which I had this experience, would become the container to transform that very experience. The room would become a transfer station from outside to inside, the window itself the eye that sees from inside out. I placed a pinhole on the window surface and replaced my body with a sensitive material, and that was the photographic paper.⁵

Among the most astonishing and unrecognized qualities of Lutter’s multi-panel photographs is that they take the precise form of windows in modern commercial buildings or, better yet, recreate the glass curtain walls that dominate modern architecture, from high-end offices and luxury residential towers to museum structures such as LACMA’s Resnick Pavilion or the planned permanent collection building. In this regard, a work like *333 West 39th Street, XXIV: May 9–11, 2012* is doubly reflective. The larger series from



which it derives charts the two-year rise of a luxury apartment building across from Lutter's Midtown Manhattan studio. *333 West 39th Street, XXIV* captures the nearly finished building, along with the reflections of Lutter's building in its newly installed windows. Those windows, in turn, roughly share their dimensions with the windows in Lutter's building *and* with the sheets of photographic paper that constitute the diptych: around 106 inches tall and 56 inches wide. The vagaries of industrial prefabrication produce a confluence no less powerful for being unpremeditated. In other words, the scale not only appears given by the wall/photo paper onto which the camera obscura image was projected, but was also implied by the scale of the windows and the views they afford.

Less by design than by necessity, similar glass curtain walls are ubiquitous in the photographs Lutter made at LACMA. They are visible in the Renzo Piano–designed Resnick Pavilion as captured in the backgrounds of *African Figures: June 13, 2017* (pp. 80–81) and *African Power Figure: June 13, 2017* (p. 79), and throughout the photographs of the original campus, such as *LACMA with YANG NA, 2011–PRESENT, IV: March 15, 2017* (pp. 92–93). They are unavoidable because glass walls are our windows on the world, especially in contemporary museum architecture. And yet it is precisely within the context of museums that we anachronistically adhere to a Renaissance model of the window on the world.

Vera Lutter, *333 West 39th Street, XXIV: May 9–11, 2012, 2012*.
Unique gelatin silver print;
106 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 112 in. (271 × 284 cm).
Courtesy of the artist



Vera Lutter, *Frankfurt Airport, IV: April 13, 2001, 2001*.
Unique gelatin silver print;
81 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 168 in. (207 × 427 cm).
Courtesy of the artist

Simply put, Lutter's photographs place the viewer before a window—not a small Renaissance window or a metaphoric window on the world, but a specifically modern window. Often this modern window is a glass curtain wall that allows unencumbered vistas, interrupted only by the thinnest divisions roughly every four feet, as if reproducing the slender mullions that join large panes of glass. Especially in her multi-panel works, Lutter presents the world as if seen not through a window, but rather through a glass wall, the modern glass curtain walls (through which) she so often photographs. Exemplary is *Frankfurt Airport, IV: April 13, 2001*. The triptych measures nearly seven feet tall and fourteen feet wide. Do these panels not approximate the panes of glass in nearly every airport terminal? As such, can they fail to create the appearance of a nocturnal scene at once mundane and mysterious—if not quite a vision of the Flying Dutchman, then at least a contemporary ghost ship commanded by the Hansa of the air? One can only imagine the response the work would elicit if installed in the windows of an actual terminal gate at night. One stands before a work by Lutter as if viewing the very scene depicted through a wall of glass. Only that scene is a black-and-white world, with dark figures, bright shadows, and reversed script, eerily still and vacant. It is a foreign world made immediately present. And, as such, it is the ideal format with which to document the passing of one LACMA and anticipate the birth of another.

Museum in Ruins/Modernity as Ruin

Photography has long been employed to preserve in image what society and time have condemned in reality. No single impetus catalyzed Lutter's two-year residency at LACMA, but it would have been unthinkable without the impending demolition of the old campus in favor of a new building and a new curatorial approach. This is familiar terrain for Lutter. Between 1998 and 2003 she photographed the rooftop sign and derelict interior of the Pepsi-Cola factory in Long Island City, New York; subsequently the factory was replaced by glass-walled luxury residential towers and the sign was granted landmark status. In 2004 Lutter spent a month photographing the decommissioned Battersea Power Station in southwest London, then an industrial ruin, now "being brought back to life as one of the most exciting and innovative mixed-use neighbourhoods in the world," according to the developer's promotional material.⁶ Most relevant, in 1999 she was invited by Michael Govan, then director of Dia Art Foundation (and now director of LACMA), to photograph the interior of the abandoned Nabisco factory in Beacon, New York, that would soon become Dia:Beacon, the permanent home for Dia's Minimalist-focused collection. Whereas the *Beacon* series depicts a pregnant emptiness, the photographs at LACMA capture a fullness from which life has already begun to drain. Works like *LACMA from the Bridge, III: April 3–5, 2017* (pp. 8–9) are of a piece with the earlier series, but they are also significantly more. For the LACMA series does not document derelict buildings—industrial ruins waiting their luxurious commercial resurrection—so much as a museum model in decline.

Lutter follows a long line of photographers—at times celebrated, more often anonymous—commissioned to photograph not only doomed structures but also vanishing ways of life. Such images are often instrumental and ideological: on the one hand, opprobrium to justify destruction (consider, among countless examples, the photographs of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project, c. 1956–72); on the other hand, romanticism to inspire preservation (consider, among equally numerous examples, Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian*, 1907–50). The most successful photography from the perspective of modern art history has tended to perform a certain neutrality or even aesthetic refusal bordering on the (quasi-)scientific. But even these revered ventures—the photographs

of the Mission héliographique in 1850s France, say, or the 1935–44 American Farm Security Administration photographs—regularly indulged in romantic heroism, supercilious contempt, or both. Today we understand that to document means not only to record and to teach—in Latin, *documentum* is both proof and lesson—but also to participate in the determination of the proof and even in the subject of the lesson.

As proof, Lutter's camera obscura photographs are a useless indulgence. A snapshot offers more serviceable proof in fractions of a second than Lutter's photographs gather over the course of weeks or months. If the works are documents at all—a tenuous prospect, as we will see—it is because they contain lessons that could only be gleaned over the course of months and years. If so, what lessons do they contain?

Two images face off at the center of Lutter's series of photographs of LACMA interiors: *European Old Masters: December 7, 2018–January 9, 2019* and *Art of the Pacific, II: September 21, 2017–January 5, 2018* (pp. 70–71). The two triptychs are among the largest images in the series and, by a wide margin, the most involved. *European Old Masters* is actually Lutter's third attempt at capturing this gallery. The first lasted over six months and was foiled when a contractor unknowingly lifted the roof of the camera obscura. The second attempt, which was also exposed for half a year, produced a nearly perfect image unintentionally vandalized when a curious visitor shined a flashlight directly into the aperture of the camera obscura. The third version arose only at the (metaphoric) eleventh hour. The (relative) haste is palpable. In order to obtain any image in the limited weeks remaining before the gallery was shuttered, Lutter opened the aperture considerably, yielding an impressive clarity, but one that could surely not compete with the second version, whose tiny aperture and six-month exposure would have yielded a truly incomparable image. What's more, by the time Lutter began the third version, key artworks had already been moved into storage, leaving a somewhat desolate gallery, like a house awaiting the movers. When Lutter completed the work—the last of her photographs at LACMA—the gallery was closed, permanently. An analogous gallery will not be reconstituted in the new Zumthor building. *European Old Masters* is an unexpectedly fitting epitaph to its eponymous gallery.

A gallery for European old masters will not be reconstituted in the new building because that curatorial conceit will not outlive the old campus. As Govan asked in the 2013 exhibition “The Presence of the Past: Peter Zumthor Reconsiders LACMA,” “What if art objects could be methodically rotated to describe many cultural stories and not just one chronological and geographic historical narrative?”⁷ Lutter’s *Art of the Pacific, II* nods in that direction. The mask, memorial figure, ceremonial board, and other works were assembled and arranged by Lutter without any claim to describe a single chronological or geographic historical narrative. Instead, the selection and arrangement are willfully eclectic, a reflection primarily of Lutter’s interests and aesthetic—not unlike other artist-as-curator ventures. Only this three-and-a-half-month-long “exhibition” was closed to the public, as evinced by the unnavigable forest of pedestals and cases, and open only to Lutter’s camera obscura—an “exhibition” literally and unequivocally made to be photographed.

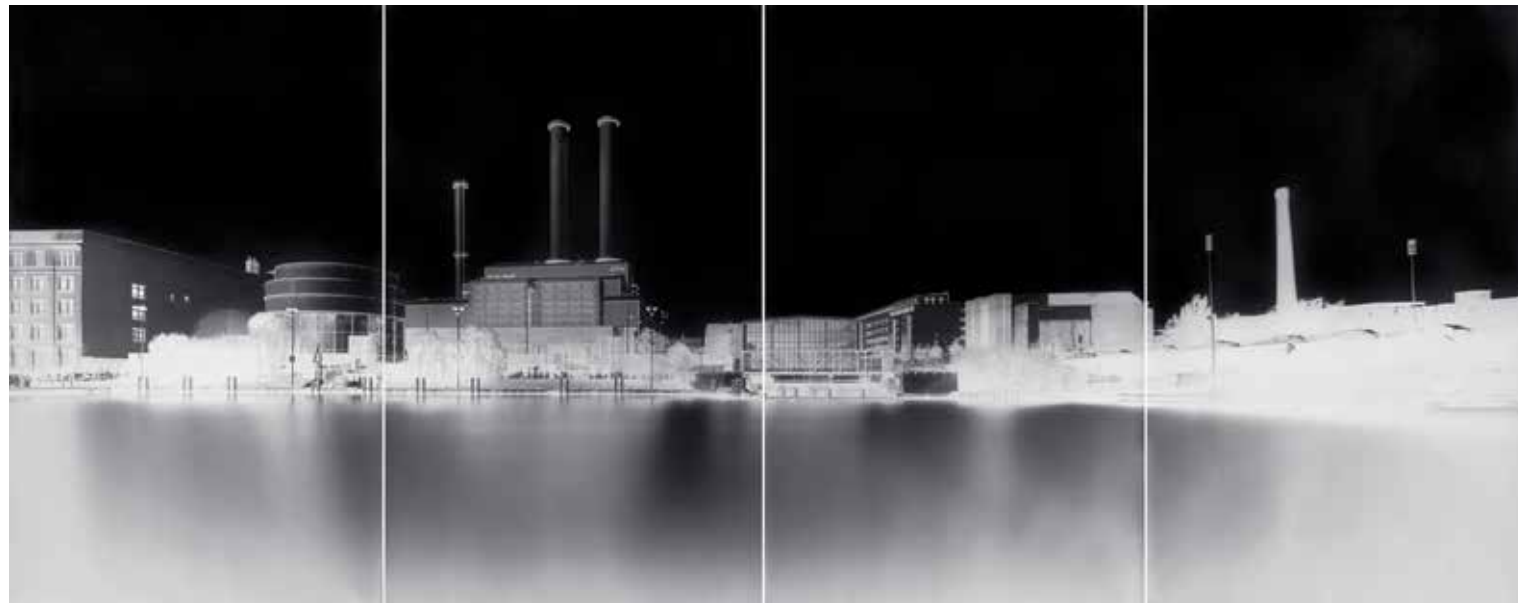
No simple lesson can be drawn from the juxtaposition of *European Old Masters* and *Art of the Pacific, II*. But complex lessons abound. Above all, these works demonstrate Lutter’s abiding insight that a museum is more than its collection and its architecture, more even than its galleries and gardens. Museums create worlds—worlds in which artworks and viewers find their places. Lutter’s museum photographs gather residues of the fading world of European old masters and hint at the unborn world of the eclectic global, even as they belong properly to neither world. They remain in limbo and so construct a world without proper past, future, or present. Steeped in the passage of time, Lutter’s museum photographs seem to defy it. Their explosive temporality will first be fully visible when they are exhibited at LACMA.

Traditional camera obscura images are a play of inside and outside. One enters the camera obscura in order to see an image of the world outside projected inside its chambered darkness (lenses and mirrors can correct up/down and left/right reversal, but artists such as Zoe Leonard, whose camera obscuras have familiarized art-world audiences with the centuries-old technology, just as often leave the image horizontally and vertically flipped). Camera obscura images are by definition site specific—they can only project the world that lies immediately outside their enclosure. And Lutter has

previously engaged with site specificity in a highly sophisticated manner. Emblematic is *Holzmarktstrasse, Berlin, III: August 26, 2003*, in which she turned Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin into a large camera obscura. Behind the gallery lies a hidden and stunning view of the Spree River and its opposite shoreline, replete with an industrial power plant. Lutter turned the gallery into a camera obscura, photographic darkroom, and ultimately exhibition space. The result was a spatial approximation of an operational camera obscura, in which an image of the Spree and shoreline could be projected onto a screen inside the darkened gallery. Of course, Lutter’s dark image was exhibited in the same gallery, now brightly lit, and rather than simply reproducing the outside world, *Holzmarktstrasse, Berlin, III* orchestrates a wondrously involved relationship between inside and outside, present and past.

In her series for LACMA, Lutter couples the site-specific associations of camera obscuras with the architectural scale of her images to realize, to a degree perhaps never before achieved, Roland Barthes’s famous dictum on photography: “What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority.”⁸ For Lutter, spatial immediacy is less the material tactility of the photograph (as Barthes speculated) than the phenomenological presence of a life-size scene often located just outside the room—as seen in a camera obscura or through a glass curtain wall. If Lutter’s spatial immediacy is immeasurably more immediate than Barthes’s, her temporal anteriority is far more proximate. It is the temporality Walter Benjamin discovered through the musings of the Surrealists—above all, Louis Aragon and André Breton:

[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded,” in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution—no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.⁹



Vera Lutter, *Holzmarktstrasse, Berlin, III: August 26, 2003, 2005*. Unique gelatin silver print; 87% × 224 in. (221 × 569 cm). Courtesy of the artist

Vera Lutter's *Holzmarktstrasse, Berlin, III: August 26, 2003*, installed in *Vera Lutter*, Galerie Max Hetzler, Holzmarktstrasse 15-18, Berlin, 2004



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Vera Lutter's images—made with the outmoded technology of the first photographs, depicting objects that have begun to be extinct—capture, like Benjamin and the Surrealists, modernity itself as ruin. But more than any text by Breton or Benjamin, Lutter's photographs present the recent past as ghostly presence. Above all, *Rodin Garden, I: February 22, 2017* (pp. 4–5) turns day into night, Rodin's dark bronze torso into the white marble that inspired it, and Robert Irwin's *Primal Palm Garden* (2010) into an enchanted forest. It presents this inverted world as if visible through three panes of glass, each nearly eight feet tall and four feet wide, comprising a curtain wall that is our modern window on the world—only, in Lutter's hands, it is a window on a recently lost world, a world whose ruins may still be visible just outside the galleries and whose ruined residues will remain forever inscribed in exceptional works like *European Old Masters*. These images are uncanny in the Freudian sense: not shockingly foreign, but the opposite—excessively familiar, distressingly homey, utterly present no matter the purported absence. And yet in their quiet grandeur, they carry the seed not of revolutionary nihilism so much as collective contemplation. They allow us to perceive the museum as neither fully past nor entirely present, as they bear witness to its incomplete dissolution and inchoate rebirth.

1 See André Malraux, "Museum Without Walls," in *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 13–127.

2 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 520.

3 Olivier Lugon, "Photography and Scale: Projection, Exhibition, Collection," *Art History* 38, no. 2 (2015): 392.

4 Vera Lutter quoted in Peter Wollen, "Vera Lutter," *Bomb*, (Fall 2005), 48.

5 Lutter quoted in Wollen, 48.

6 "Welcome to Battersea Power Station," Battersea Power Station, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://batterseapowerstation.co.uk>.

7 *The Presence of the Past: Peter Zumthor Reconsiders LACMA* (exhibition, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, June 9–September 15, 2015).

8 Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 44.

9 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 210.