

Rodney Graham and Vera Lutter

Time Traced

Essay by Lynne Cooke

For the exhibition *Time Traced : Vera Lutter and Rodney Graham*, at Dia Art Foundation, New York, 2000.

The camera obscura, like the pinhole camera with which it is virtually synonymous, is based on a phenomenon long understood. When light passes through a small hole into a darkened chamber, it produces an inverted image on the opposite surface plane. In the seventeenth century, Jonathan Crary contends, "the camera obscura was without question the most widely used model for explaining human vision, and for representing the relation of a perceiver and the position of a knowing subject to an external world. For two centuries," he concludes, "it stood as a model, in both rational and empiricist thought, of how observation leads to truthful inferences about the world; at the same time the physical incarnation of that model was a widely used means of observing the visible world, an instrument of popular entertainment, of scientific inquiry, and of aesthetic practice."¹ Countering claims that the camera obscura "as a device or metaphor within an actual social or discursive field" is ahistorical, Crary sought in his pathfinding and influential book *Techniques of the Observer* to demonstrate how it was grounded in a nexus of specific sociocultural relations and discourses, and how the demise of this paradigm by the end of the nineteenth century meant that for Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and their peers, "the very apparatus that a century earlier was the site of truth [became] a model for procedures and forces that conceal, invent, and mystify truth."²

Canadian artist Rodney Graham and German-born Vera Lutter both draw on the formal operation of the camera obscura in their practices. Both also engage, albeit quite differently, with the conceptual legacy of this apparatus, utilizing it as a filter to probe visionary as much as visual heritages from the art of the past. Also highly relevant, therefore, is its pivotal role as a technical aid in painting from the Renaissance onward, whereby it facilitated the plotting of complex spatial tableaux from delimited viewpoints, as witnessed in Canaletto's meticulous vistas of Venice, in addition to introducing optical effects not normally visible to the untutored eye, such as the halation of surface highlights integral to Johannes Vermeer's luminous interiors. Dutch art patron Constantijn Huygens hardly exaggerated longstanding convictions when he enthused in 1622: "It is impossible to express the beauty [of the camera obscura image] in words. All painting is dead by comparison, for this is life itself, or something more elevated, if one could articulate it."³ As the usurper rather than the subservient assistant to painting, the role of the camera obscura here closely predicts that attributed to photography at its inception in the 1840s.⁴ Heirs of Freud and Marx, as much as of pioneering practitioners of photography and certain Old Master painters, Graham and Lutter revivify this ancient device in service to debates currently at the heart of the late-twentieth-century image-saturated world. Over the past twenty years, Graham's work has drawn on a wide range of media and materials, from film, video, and photography, to books, texts, graphics, drawings, architecture, and music. In his protean vision, the camera obscura is usually employed in relation to but distinct from photography per se.⁵ *Camera Obscura Mobile* (1996), for example, takes the form of a two-person carriage, modeled on a nineteenth-century vehicle used for delivering mail, which functions as an actual camera obscura. Devised originally for an arboretum in rural France, in "Time Traced" it is positioned in Dan Graham's Rooftop Urban Park facing the two-way-mirrored glass pavilion. Its occupants thus engage not only with the external vista via the illusory projection but contend with Dan Graham's very different notion of the conditions of spectatorship. In the American artist's project, perception is posited as a reflexive, bodily

based phenomenological activity, one that is, moreover, inherently social and participatory in character. Seated in the carriage, Rodney Graham's viewer, by contrast, establishes an immobile, disembodied relationship to the external world, as if having traveled, at least in imagination, back to an era in which the prevailing model of vision was derived from and embodied in the camera obscura. In such an age, for those who understood its optical underpinnings, "it offered," according to Crary, "the spectacle of representation operating literally transparently, whereas for those ignorant of its principles, it simply afforded the pleasures of illusion."⁶ Today, as a corporeally based theory of vision is hastily and blithely discarded in favor of the fictive, disembodied, ungendered but visually privileged self that purportedly inhabits virtual or cybernetic arenas, Rodney Graham's vehicle takes on an insidiously disquieting role, as at once a playfully nostalgic device and a timely reminder of the historically governed and located character of all visual paradigms.

Taking the form of an architectural model for a yet to be determined metropolitan site, Millennial Project for an Urban Plaza (1986) proposes the creation of a wondrously modernistic building housing a camera obscura trained on an oak sapling whose growth to maturity it will monitor. Its vast, concave, faceted, and beaded glass screen will fracture the image into myriad shards, for Graham's design draws on the optical principle of a compound eye. Once again, the elements of the medium of visual production have been elegantly turned against themselves. Sidestepping a straightforwardly adversarial stance, Graham hones criticality into a subtle tool with which derisory environmentalism may be traduced. Motivated by ecological aspirations, that is, by a desire to green the modern city, Joseph Beuys began 7000 Eichen (7000 Oaks) at Documenta 7 in Kassel in 1982, a project that aimed to plant individual trees paired with stone steles throughout the metropolitan context. Far more skeptical and disenchanting, Graham has described his work as "concerned in one way or another with culturally swept-out or depopulated landscapes and images of nature construed from the perspective of Romanticism and its critique."⁷ Thus, his lone heroic protagonist highlights the ways in which token entities, whether in the guise of parks, wilderness preserves, or solitary memorials, are utilized as palliatives and decoys that conceal the thorough-going and irreversible destruction of the natural environment undertaken in the interests of capitalism, modernization, and urban development. Destined to a relatively brief and vulnerable life compared with the obdurate stele which it gradually over-reaches, Beuys's tree too often is transformed into a beleaguered trophy in an urban wasteland; by contrast, Graham's seedling patiently attended by its utopian edifice, is ultimately comically absurd, more mocked than acclaimed.⁸

In his recent series of monumental photographs of Welsh oak trees, the Canadian artist dispenses with the mechanics of the camera obscura while retaining vestigial references to it as a central precursor to lens technologies. Shot on large format eight-by-ten-inch glass plates and printed in black and white on color paper, each of these seven images silhouettes a solitary tree, that potent symbol within the Romantic pantheon.⁹ "True" to its initial registration on the photographic plate, when presented upside down in a huge print the inverted image vividly registers dissent from canonical orthodoxies that situate photography within a discourse of naturalistic pictorial codes, as it eloquently rewrites Romantic tenets now grown hollow and sentimental.

While for Graham the camera obscura and photography remain discrete practices and discourses that may be used to intersect and inform each other, for Vera Lutter they have become synonymous. Her luminous monumental images are created from pinhole cameras designed as temporary rooms or adapted from existing ones according to the particular conditions of the location she intends to depict. Unlike Graham, Lutter retains the negative form, eschewing conventional transfer to a positive image as a procedure that

would introduce an intermediary between the act of registration and the art object that the viewer scrutinizes. She, however, rights the image for presentation. For related reasons, her photographs are presented directly on the gallery walls, unframed and unmounted. Notwithstanding the heightened immediacy that these decisions impart to an encounter with the work, the constructions and conventions that subtend a reading of these images as figures of representational transparency and realism are never undermined, and their relation to the history of art-of painting as well as photography-is never elided.

Typically, Lutter's compositions betray a rigorous, stringent mode of composing that capitalizes on the axial and planar. Where not heightened and clarified overtly by the vantage point that frames the image, a geometrical grid still implicitly defines and structures the picture. Recognition of the considerable amounts of labor and of the physical as well as technical complexities involved in securing such vast yet fragile records always informs a reading of the finished work. In addition, deliberate contrasts between stationary and transitory elements allude to the unpredictable interface of a partially mobile matrix, the duration of the process of recording, and the final static image. Contrary to most photographic processes, these pictures do not capture a single moment in time but evidence the slow building up over days, even perhaps weeks, of the image. In *Zeppelin, Friedrichshafen, I: August 10-13, 1999* (1999), for example, the inflatable was moved in and out of its hangar several times during the course of the exposure: the adjacent positions it occupied on returning to base are consequently traced as a series of visual echoes across the shadowy field of the print. By contrast, for the second version of this subject, the zeppelin not only stayed home throughout the process but the doors of the building were never opened. The cavernous penumbral interior was consequently transformed into an effulgent space, a secular reprise on a soaring Saenredam sanctum, invaded by a sleek phantasm in place of the first version's spectral alien.

Through her choice of subjects, which range from this antique precursor of the air bus to an abandoned warehouse built in the 1920s, to an iconic, venerable sign gracing the New York skyline, Lutter alludes to previous historical moments, and to the aesthetics of the sublime and visionary. In grandeur and gravitas, her photographs are akin to Graham's stately portrayals of majestic Welsh trees. As self-conscious descendants of the work of such legendary pioneers as Carleton Watkins, the works of both artists are at once imbued with a certain pathos yet resistant to sentimentality as they poignantly acknowledge the prohibitions, limitations, and qualifications that today confound all attempts to revive idealistic or utopian philosophies. "The world is beautiful-that is its watchword," Walter Benjamin famously wrote in what has become one of the seminal texts in the history of photography. "Therein is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists, even where most far-fetched subjects are more concerned with saleability than with insight. But," he conceded, "because the true face of this kind of photographic creativity is the advertisement or association, its logical counterpart is the act of unmasking or construction," concluding, "As Brecht says: 'the situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reproduction of reality reveal something about reality.'"¹⁰ At a moment when photography in its manifold guises has become a ubiquitous, even dominant, medium within current art praxis, when those who are nominally fashion photographers now produce many of the most acclaimed and influential images within contemporary art practice as well as in visual culture at large, when fashion spreads provide a creative outlet for artists whose preferred medium is the camera, Benjamin's distinctions and injunctions might seem obsolete. For Graham and Lutter, however, such issues are not merely pertinent and timely: they are fundamental.

Notes

1. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 27, 29.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
3. Constantijn Huygens, quoted in Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Vermeer of Delft: His Life and His Artistry," in *Johannes Vermeer* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1995), p. 26.
4. This is epitomized in Paul Delaroche's much quoted remark, "From today painting is dead," quoted in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980), p. ix.
5. The sole exception to this is *Rome Ruins* (1978), a series of ten color images made early in his career. When his cameras were stolen, Graham improvised, building two pinhole cameras, one from a cigarette pack, the other from a match box, with which he shot tourist views of the Roman Forum and its environs.
6. Crary., p. 33.
7. Rodney Graham, quoted in Ellen Ramsey, "Rodney Graham, James Welling," in *Vanguard* (February-March 1987), p. 33; quoted in Madeleine Grynsztejn, *About Place: Recent Art of the Americas* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1995), p. 16.
8. Although Beuys envisioned a vast reforestation project, in recent years mostly single trees, each with its with basalt column, have been planted, usually adjacent to art institutions.
9. For a fuller discussion of the theme of the lone tree in Romantic aesthetics see Simon Schama, "Part One: Wood," in *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 21-242.
10. Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 255.

The traces of time, abstract photography of the deserts of Africa from the air, aerial view of desert landscapes, Genre: Abstract Naturalism, from the abstract to the figurative, contemporary photo. Beach in Broughty Ferry, Dundee, Scotland. Beautiful blue sky and sailboats on the horizon. Shabby weather and time wall of an old building. Traces of the previous layer of red paint are visible. Background - Snow and shadows on it. In 3D computer graphics, ray tracing is a rendering technique for generating an image by tracing the path of light as pixels in an image plane and simulating the effects of its encounters with virtual objects. The technique is capable of producing a high degree of visual realism, more so than typical scanline rendering methods, but at a greater computational cost. This makes ray tracing best suited for applications where taking a relatively long time to render can be tolerated, such as in still The caveat here is that I only want to record the time used by the function itself, not the cpu time used by functions that are called by the function and which are also traced by my script. e.g. if both function foo and bar are traced by my script and the total cpu time for function foo is 2000, but function. Right now I have the following dtrace script to get the total cpu time per function, but I don't have any leads yet on how to change it such that I get the cpu time results as described above.