

Taken with Time: A Camera Obscura Project

Ann Hamilton, Vera Lutter, Abelardo Morell

by COLETTE COPELAND

With a generous grant from the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, The Print Center commissioned three internationally renowned contemporary artists — Ann Hamilton, Vera Lutter, and Abelardo Morell — to create site-specific work utilizing the camera obscura. Each artist researched and responded to an aspect of Philadelphia’s history, creating images from this ancient photographic device.

Invented in the 5th century B.C.E. by Chinese philosopher Mo-Ti, the camera obscura (which means “dark room” in Latin) was used by artists in the 17th and 18th centuries as a drawing tool. In the 19th century, large camera

obscuras functioned as a site of entertainment. A few such cameras still exist today (<http://brightbytes.com/cosite/what.html>). The camera obscura is a darkened box or room with a pinhole in one of its walls. The light from the pinhole projects an inverted image onto the opposite wall. With the invention of photography in the mid-19th century came the decline of the camera obscura. Over the past two decades, a small number of contemporary artists and photographers began to engage these antiquated techniques in their artistic practice.

Each of the featured artists’ works employs time as a metaphor. The show title, “Taken with Time,” literally refers to the long exposure required for image production. Time also refers to history, both past and present. Hamilton, Lutter, and Morell adapt the formal elements inherent in the camera obscura process to explore time as a fluid entity — capturing not a single moment, but a span or duration.

Ann Hamilton is known for her large-scale, performative, sculptural installations. Text — the written and spoken word — always features prominently in her work. For this project, Hamilton chose five sites in Philadelphia (including two libraries). Using miniature pinhole cameras, she captured people congregating in social spaces where text is read or written. In the Free Library photographs, a person sits at a table reading. The twenty-minute exposure blurs the figure into a ghostly form. The imposing architectural background remains clear and in focus, while the figure dissipates. The images suggest both a public and private space. The unchanging nature of the building contrasts with the tempo-



Abelardo Morell: *Camera Obscura Image of the Philadelphia Museum of Art East Entrance in Gallery with a de Chirico Painting*, 2005, chromogenic print, 72"x 92.5", edition of 3 (Commissioned by The Print Center, courtesy of the Artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NYC. © Abelardo Morell)



Ann Hamilton: *Free Library of Philadelphia, reading • 2*, June 2006, digital pigment print, 21.5"x9" (Commissioned by The Print Center, courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery. © Ann Hamilton)

ral quality of the people — who could represent the past, present, or future.

In the microphone series, Hamilton photographed Bloomsday participants who gather every June 16th at the Rosenbach Library and Museum to read aloud James Joyce's *Ulysses* in its entirety. Here, time is frozen as each figure, poised behind the microphone with their mouth open, is caught unaware, suspended in mid-speech.

Hamilton's photographs from Old St. George's Church and Gloria Dei Church show the duality of a spiritual gathering — the fusion of the spiritual and physical worlds. To emphasize this, Hamilton shows a diptych of both the positive and the negative images. The religious service embodies both the solitary experience of prayer and the unity of a public congregation. Some images reveal ethereal figures, while others remain bereft of human presence.

Hamilton chose Carpenter's Hall, the site of the First Continental Congress in 1774, as the location to enact her final piece for the exhibit. A large circular wooden pinhole camera with multiple apertures was constructed for the project. The camera was placed in the center of a large 19th-century round table. Hamilton asked five groups to sit at the table and read aloud in unison from a text of their choosing. During the reading, Hamilton orchestrated the multiple long exposures.

Since Hamilton used small pinhole cameras, the resulting negative images were quite small and inverted. By scanning, reversing, and digitally printing the photographs, a large-scale, final image was produced. The intrinsic qualities of the camera obscura, such as the long exposures and blurred images, speak to Hamilton's themes of public vs. private and absence vs. presence, as they relate to history — both written and performed.

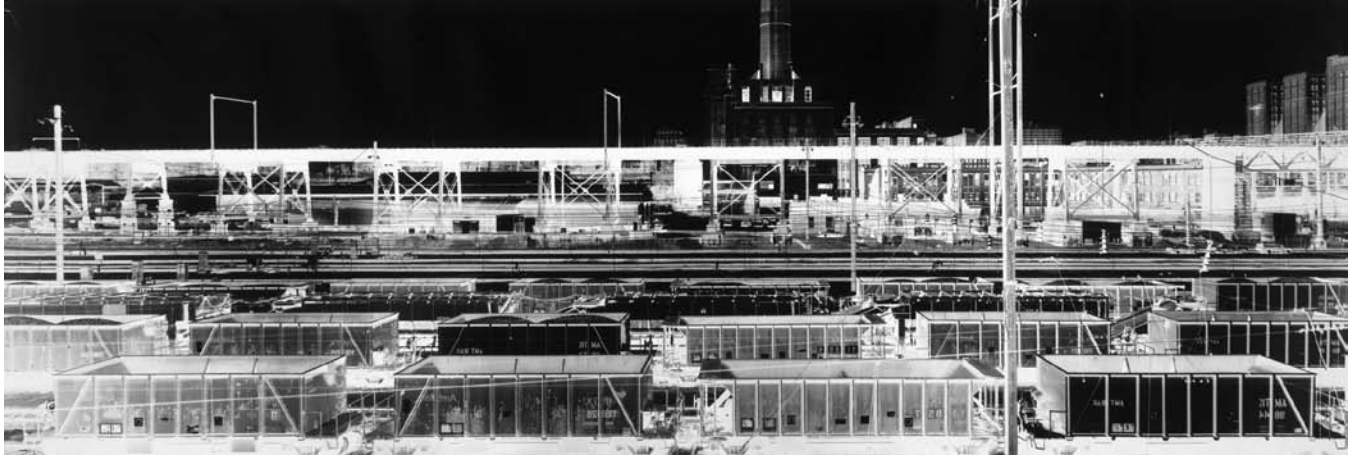
Known for her monumental photographs of industrial sites, German artist Vera Lutter chose 30th Street Station as the site for her work. Lutter commissioned a local artist to custom build the 20'x7'x8' camera obscura (resembling a large shipping container) in a parking lot across from the train station. Unlike Hamilton, Lutter makes unique, one-of-a-kind prints. She attaches photosensitive paper to the wall of the camera obscura, directly exposing the image. Lutter remains inside the camera during the exposure, burning and dodging — a private performance for one. Because of the size of the photograph, the image must be processed in large trays. The resulting photograph is a technical phenomenon — at any stage during the process of exposure or development, there are opportunities for mistakes and failures.

Normally, 30th Street Station is a hub of activity. Passenger and cargo

trains pass through the station, while cars line up waiting to drop off and pick up passengers scurrying to their destinations. Ironically, Lutter's photograph does not reflect any of this activity. Apocalyptic in its tone, the image is featured as a negative print. Devoid of human presence, the black sky and lack of movement in the rail yard and trestle bridge suggest a bygone era of industrialization. Historically, Philadelphia was an important manufacturing city and 30th Street Station served as the locus of interchange and intersection, where companies transported goods up and down the northeast corridor.

Typically long exposures capture movement, defying photography's claim of freezing the decisive moment in time. Lutter's eight-hour exposure challenges this notion. The long exposure time erases all traces of movement. Fleeting in and out of the frame, the figures and cars do not leave imprints of their presence in the image. Lutter's photograph speaks to the end of the industrial age — marking a pivotal point in Philadelphia's history.

Abelardo Morell converted Gallery 171 in the Modern and Contemporary Art wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art into a giant camera obscura. Recognized for his black-and-white camera obscura photographs of domestic spaces, this is Morell's first color work. He documented the projected



Vera Lutter: 30th Street Station, Philadelphia, IV: April 20, 2006, unique gelatin silver print, 51"x146.8125" (Commissioned by The Print Center, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, NYC. © Vera Lutter)

image with three large-format cameras, requiring a six-hour exposure.

The resulting photograph is a complex, multi-layered composition. Without knowing the process, viewers at first glance might mistake the image for a digital collage. Through a small pinhole in the window, the outside of the Museum's east entrance is projected onto a Giorgio de Chirico painting. Rumor has it that Morell convinced the museum personnel to allow him to bring in the de Chirico from another gallery and place it on the wall. A ladder is left in the left corner of the frame, as well as picture hooks where the other painting hung. The ladder functions as an indicator of scale. It might also reference Duchamp and his ready-mades, given that the Philadelphia Museum of Art has a large collection of Duchamp's work.

Built in the neoclassical style, the Philadelphia Museum of Art was the first fine art museum in the country. The upside-down Doric (or Ionic?) columns projected onto the de Chirico suggest to me an inversion of art history. By choosing to project neoclassical architecture onto a surrealist painting, the photographer challenges the tradition of classical art. Morell also plays with the illusion of interior vs. exterior and natural vs. constructed while deconstructing the layers of time. The museum's architecture references the distant past, while the Modern and Contemporary Art wing of the museum represents a more recent past and present. The camera obscura brings the natural world inside the mu-

seum, confining it to the space of the precious art object. The superimposition of all these elements produces a paradoxical illusion.

"Taken with Time" is an ambitious exhibition. Commissioning three artists to produce new bodies of work outside the safety net of the sterile white gallery walls, required a tremendous amount of tenacity in securing permits and funding. Bravo to curator, Jacqueline van Rhyn. Like the process of the camera obscura, there were many opportunities for failure. Like the camera obscura, the final photographs are illusive, requiring decoding. Understanding the significance of the Philadelphia sites and their respective histories enhances the experience of the work. First century Roman philosopher Seneca stated, "Time discovers truth." Hamilton, Lutter, and Morell's work reveals truth and histories that are not apparent to the naked eye. Time collapses, as the past, present, and future merge.

"Taken with Time" was on view at The Print Center, Philadelphia, PA, from September 7 to November 11, 2006. ■