

Uta Barth at the Getty

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Text by [Jessica Simmons-Reid](#)



Uta Barth, *...from dawn to dusk (December)* (2022). Pigment prints. © Uta Barth. Image courtesy of the artist; 1301PE, Los Angeles; and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles.

In her poem "[There's a certain Slant of light \(258\)](#)," Emily Dickinson invokes the weightless "heft" of a beam of winter light—acutely slanted, knifelike, due to the sun's low angle in the sky. This light, she writes, is "An imperial affliction/ Sent us of the Air -"—an ominous force capable of marking both the landscape and the psyche while paradoxically leaving nary a "scar."¹ Here, Dickinson juxtaposes the intangibility of light with its elemental ability to function as a conduit for somatic transformation. A touch of light, or its absence, can bestow life, growth, or death. It can also alchemize a fleeting image into a permanent one. In this vein, Dickinson's poem is inherently photographic: Her words apprehend a transient choreography of light, leaving it indelibly burned to the page.



**Uta Barth, *Peripheral Vision*
(installation view) (2022–23).
Image courtesy of the artist and
the Getty Museum.**

This poem always comes to mind when I consider the photographs of Uta Barth, who, while digressing from Dickinson's focus on light as a source of darkness, echoes the poet's incantation of light as a phantom mark-maker. Barth's photographs, currently on view in *Peripheral Vision*, her mid-career retrospective at the Getty, study light as if it were both an intimate bedfellow and an enigmatic archeological wonder. Her images trace and excavate light's myriad shapes, forms, and illuminatory properties, often juxtaposing the limitations of our human vision with light's alchemical dispositions. Predominantly presented in series, Barth's photographs suggest the rhythmic cadence of a poem itself, each image functioning as a meter within a larger verse, while the exhibition as a whole presents these interrelated bodies of work in a manner that recalls a series of unique cantos.



**Uta Barth, *Peripheral Vision*
(installation view) (2022–23).
Image courtesy of the artist and
the Getty Museum.**

The series *...and to draw a bright white line with light* (2011) functions as one of the more potent examples of Barth's visual poeticism. Installed as two closely-hung diptychs, four ethereal photographs of a diaphanous white curtain illuminated by washes of sunlight line the gallery wall, suggesting hazy, mercurial geometries of line and shadow. (These works read as decidedly abstract, a term that, interestingly, Barth has eschewed²). Appearing faintly in the first image and prominently in the last, a sinuous line of glowing light snakes through the bottom portion of the photographs, connecting their compositions and seemingly extending into the liminal space beyond their frames like a string of pregnant pauses. In the third photograph, the presence of the artist's hand lightly gripping the curtain ultimately punctures the illusion of non-representation while simultaneously deepening the work's conceptual reference points. By physically manipulating the movement of the curtain, Barth gestures at the titular action of drawing with light—a phrase that echoes the etymology of

the word photography itself (from the Greek *phos*, meaning “light,” and *graphê*, meaning “drawing”). *Graphê* also translates to “writing,” thus positioning Barth’s work as a continuously unfurling poem of light.



**Uta Barth, ...and to draw a
bright white line with light (11.2)
(2011; printed 2021). Pigment
prints. © Uta Barth. Image
courtesy of the artist and the
Getty Museum.**

Barth’s site-specific project *...from dawn to dusk* (2022), commissioned by the Getty in 2018, can be read as a culmination of the ideas explored elsewhere in the exhibition. Over the course of a year, Barth photographed various surfaces outside the Harold Williams Auditorium (monochrome travertine squares, corners with multilayered geometries) from sunrise to sunset, positing the space as a blank canvas for capturing fluctuations of light and shadow. The resulting photographs—all square, including a stunning time-lapse video—vacillate from unplaceable fields of luminescent lines that recall Dickinson’s sharp slants of light, to spectral compositions that exude the shimmering properties of light itself. While the Tetris-like installation distracts from the works’ subtleties, the heft of the project lies in its embodiment of the mutability of light—photography’s root. While a photograph harnesses light as both medium and material, Barth, in turning her camera toward this phosphorescence, frames it not only as her primary subject, but also as an elusive gestural language worthy of deciphering.

Uta Barth: Peripheral Vision runs from November 15, 2022–February 19, 2023 at the Getty Center (1200 Getty Center Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90049).



**Uta Barth, *Peripheral Vision*
(installation view) (2022–23).**
Image courtesy of the artist and
the Getty Museum.



Uta Barth, *Sundial (076)* (2007).
Chromogenic prints. © Uta
Barth. Image courtesy of the
artist and the Getty Museum.

1. Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). ↗
2. Cameron Turner, "Against Narrative: Uta Barth on Photography, Experience, and Perception," *Newfound*, volume 3, issue 2, 2012, <https://newfound.org/archives/volume-3/issue-2/interview-barth/>. ↗



Jessica Simmons-Reid (MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; BA, Brown University) is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles and Joshua Tree. She's interested in the interstitial space between the language of abstraction and the abstraction of language, as well as the intermingling of poetry and politics. She has contributed essays and reviews to *Carla* and *Artforum*, among others.

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