

Yve Lomax

## **LIVING CONTEMPLATION**

The photographic images of Awoiska van der Molen draw me into looking and looking again; and the more I look and stay looking, the more I'm drawn into a process of contemplation. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that these monochromatic images bring contemplation, a living contemplation. But having made this articulation, I must take care how contemplation is expressed.

We are perhaps accustomed to seeing contemplation as a separate and solitary activity; however, the 'living contemplation' that desires to be expressed here – and experienced – is far from that, for with this contemplation separation is radically called into question, and particularly the separation between a subject (contemplator) and object (of contemplation). With 'living contemplation', I am a subject that loses herself and, at the same time, no object is standing separate from me awaiting comprehension or recognition.

What's going on here?

Let's say that with 'living contemplation' (I borrow the term from the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who also borrows the term) there is a deactivation of both subject and object. And let's say immediately that an instance of such deactivation can also be found with an understanding of 'making use'.

While I'm looking and looking it can be said that I'm making use of these photographic images. With the utilitarian or instrumental idea and practice of use that dominates much of life today, it is the case that in using something you're taken as someone who is independent of the object about to be put to use. For utilitarian and instrumental use, the world comprises separated subjects (users) and objects (what is used); however, there is a much older sense of use that bears no relation to the modern day meaning of 'to utilise something'. Indeed, this older sense of 'to use' (an example of which can be found with the Greek verb *chresthia*) brings no object of utility. Here the process doesn't pass from an active subject towards an object separated from her actions; rather, both the user and the object used imply each other. It is a relationship not made up two elements; rather, it is a relationship of reciprocal immanence. There is simply no prior or independent subject: in putting

something to use I'm found only in the middle of a process and, what is more, my very existence is affected by it. In other words, I'm not a subject that uses an object but rather a subject that constitutes itself only through the using. At this point, what is used and the one who uses it are inseparable, which is to say that subject and object are, in the words of Agamben, 'deactivated and rendered inoperative'.

It can be said that in looking, I am making use of the photographic images that are before me, and it can also be said that, as my existence is affected by this use, I'm making use of my (own) self; but what is crucial is that these images and this self are not as object and subject – what is crucial is that deactivation is taking place.

With separation deactivated, contemplation and use have something in common, and there is nothing stopping an intimacy between them. Indeed, once separations between subject and object are 'as nothing' there is a contact that immediately brings intimacy that is not private and closed but, rather, open and public.

The photographic images that have drawn me into looking let me see the visible, the barely visible ... they let me see mountain, they let me see minutiae of rock, and then a mist, then trees, branches and twigs, and then a place or a land or the pitch black of a shadow and, at the very the same time, the startling light of a particular time of day; but these are not objects to be comprehended, let alone objects represented.

In many respects I have no desire to make verbal descriptions of these images – they just need to be looked at. Yet what does need to be said is that these are not images jostling for attention amid the million or so images that push their way into sight almost every minute of the day. For, what these photographic images are prepared to do is to wait and wait, and wait even further; in fact, these images let time idle in as much as, with them, 'use' becomes unproductive. And it is precisely this idling and waiting that enables and saves living contemplation.

What is key with this contemplation is that which has been separated as subject or object has not become destroyed through deactivation but, rather, released. They are released (from themselves) for new possibilities, new uses,

and what there is to experience here is nothing other than potentiality itself, and that is living potentiality, and that experience is potentiality 'in use' and not exhausted.

Living contemplation is living potentiality; and I must add this living is not a possession to be gained. The experience of living potentiality is no one's to own; it is never mine or yours alone; for as soon as there is potentiality something truly common takes place that brings the most remarkable intimacy to being and the world – where there is potential, there are always already many (if there is a potential to speak there cannot be only one being who speaks it).

Through the living contemplation that these photographic images patiently enable, what there is to contemplate is not only your (human or animal) potential for acting but also that of the world – that mist, that darkness, that rock or tree, that sky and sea – and, moreover, photographic images. And this is where contemplation and use are at their most inseparable, enabling a time that knows no measure and with which comes, for whomever and whatever, the common and intimate experience of a non-instrumental life.

This is a life not beset with separations (divisions cut, walls erected, borders controlled). It is to be experienced – and loved – with the photographic images of Awoiska van der Molen that will wait and wait for you to look – it is beautiful and, undeniably, it is political as well.

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