

The Living Mountain



"Time is the wheel-track in which we roll on towards eternity, conducting us to the Incomprehensible. In its progress there is a ripening power, and it ripens us the more, and the more powerfully, when we duly estimate it. Listen to its voice, do not waste it, but regard it as the highest finite good, in which all finite things are resolved."

-Alexander Von Humboldt

"The sublime is tied in an essential way to the *end* of art in all its senses: that for which art is there, its destination or *telos*, and the cessation, overcoming, or suspension of art.

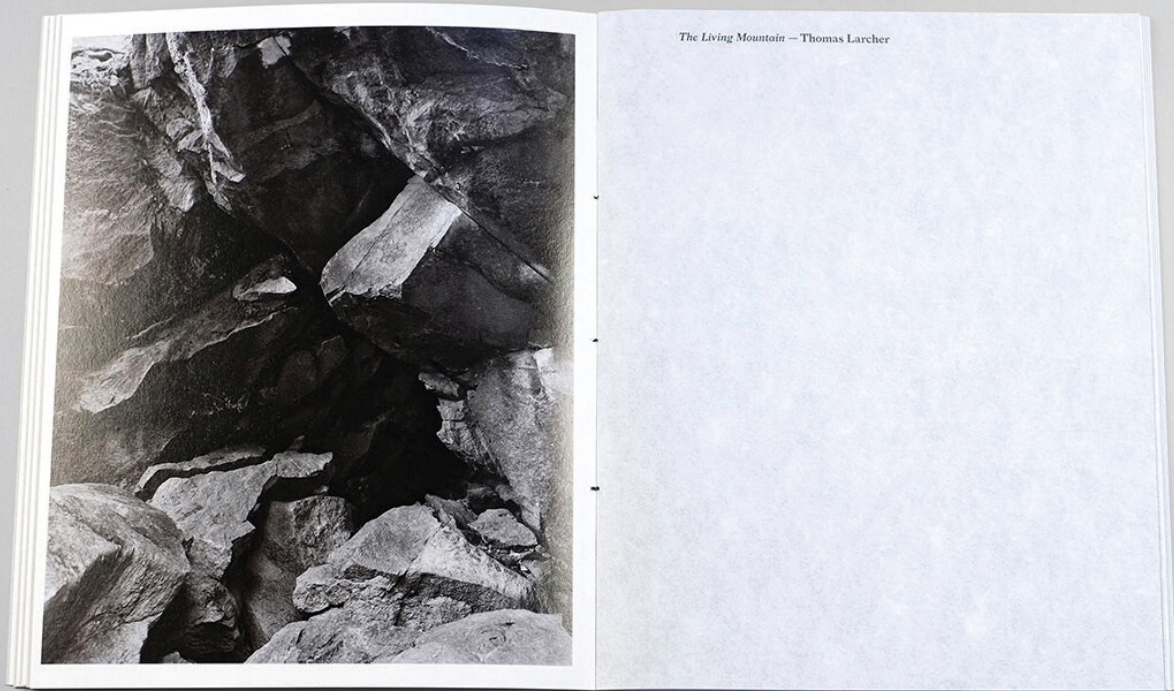
-Jean-Luc Nancy

Few books coming out this year have had me as excited as Awoiska van der Molen's *The Living Mountain*. Her 2014 book *Sequester* has become a gold standard for what photobooks could be, with its brilliant sequencing, sombre tones and startling compositions. This is a hard standard to live up to, but rest assured: This slim book, containing only 17 images (I point this out only as its refreshing to see photobooks that are this succinct) does not disappoint. *The Living Mountain* is Awoiska van der Molen's most recent monograph, and features photographs from her travels in the Austrian alps alongside composer Thomas Larcher. Within the book is also a reproduction of Larcher's scores, and performances of Larcher's music alongside van der Molen's photographs will be happening in Amsterdam, London and Innsbruck in 2021. Based on Larcher's [article about the process of composing](#), it seems we'll see more of van der Molen's photos in these performances as well, so for those of you lucky enough to live somewhere these will be taking place, definitely keep an eye out for these.

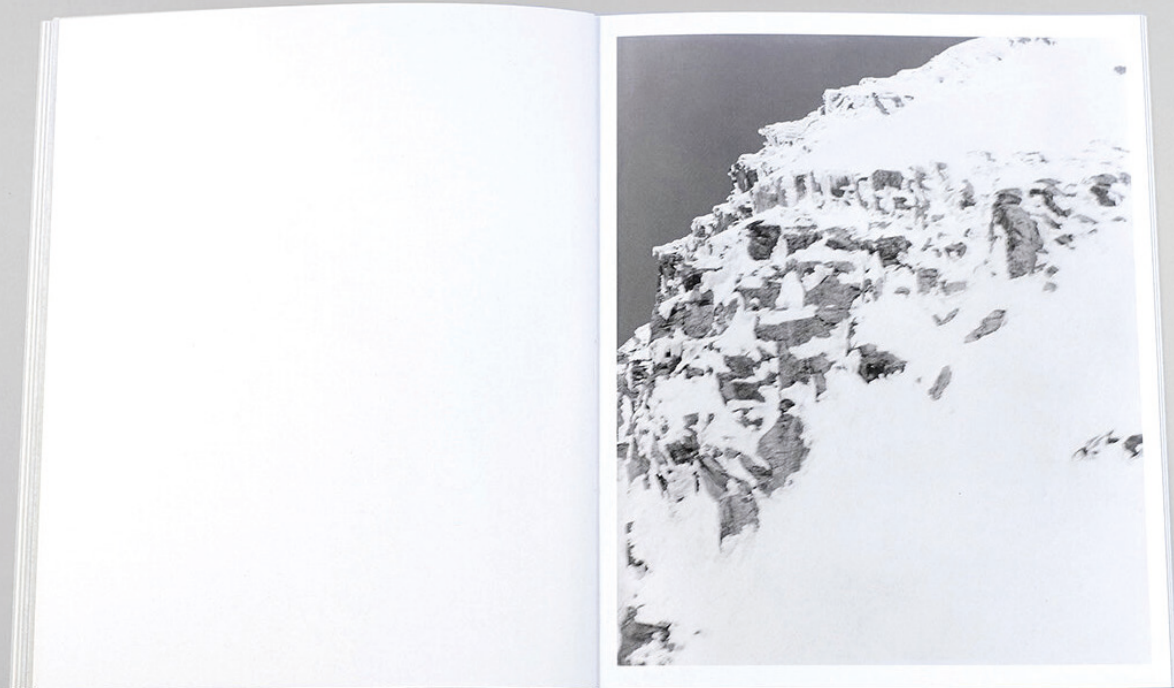
The Living Mountain takes its name from Nan Shepherd's book of the same name, which is an extended meditation on the Cairngorms mountains. To quote Shepherd, "Walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, transparent, or light as air, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body." Sharing this sentiment, Awoiska van der Molen describes her work by saying "Regardless of how personal the starting point of my work may be, in the end I hope my images touch the strings of a universal knowledge, something lodged in our bodies, our guts, an intuition that reminds us of where we came from ages ago. A memory of our core existence, our bedrock, unyielding certainty in a very precarious world."

The book continues van der Molen's collaboration with Hans Gremmen and FW:Books, and unsurprisingly, the design, layout and printing is excellent. Where *Sequester* featured several sequences printed on black paper, *The Living Mountain* replaces this with an alternating pattern of white and grey, almost cardboard-like paper (which was also used in her 2017 book *Blanco*). This alternating paper emphasizes the subtlety of tones and gradation in these sparse landscapes; Awoiska van der Molen is a master of the myriad of greys the alpine region presents, from the light, almost white snow, to the deep greys of the mountainside itself.

My reading of this book cannot be removed from my own experiences of hiking and backpacking. The sequencing of the book mimics the layers of the landscape that so often structure mountaineering, even while avoiding the obvious picturesque scenes that so overwhelmingly dominate the landscape genre. The cover shows us a mountain far in the distance, and when we open up the book, we enter a forest-filled highland terrain, where massive boulders that have been toppled off the mountain throughout the millennia dot the landscape.



Suddenly, we come above all this and into what always feels like a whole different world: that of the mountain. Here, the photos alternate between the vast, open landscape and more unsettling details. One photo seems to me to show an avalanche in waiting (although the perspective of it makes it hard to comprehend the scale of the mountainside), while the next shows a cavern from which the rocks below may have fallen.



While van der Molen has emphasized that her work is largely about the experience of being in nature, rather than the landscape itself, it seems to me that the pictures also reveal a deep fascination with time-scales beyond human comprehension. How many thousands of years does it take for these massive boulders to be formed by the lashing wind and rain seeping into the mountain? And, then, how many more years did it take for these monumental rocks to tumble down the mountainside and settle, at last, at the foot of the mountain, where they become permanent fixtures among the moss and the pines? As this process continues indefinitely, will these mountains be reduced to nothing but a pile of rubble? Mountains, these great stone formations, seem to us to exist almost outside of time. Yet, in van der Molen's pictures, they become strangely mortal—fragile even; the burden of time does not weigh lightly on even the most imposing mountain.



These pictures of the mountainside itself also make clear Awoiska van der Molen's ambitions. This is the literal mountainside, the very mountain itself, yet it is unrecognizable as such. Our hope of understanding the mountain, of comprehending its totality, comes to a rocky ending. We can only grasp at fragments of the mountain. As van der Molen put it herself, "I am not interested in landscape, but it's a wanting to be in that state of being in nature, it's a longing for a place where I want to be, and it's maybe a mental place. I go away from everything in the present and move in these quiet situations."

Thankfully, however, this inward-oriented approach nimbly avoids any danger of anthropomorphizing. While so much of the landscape genre ceaselessly aestheticizes and anthropomorphizes the natural world, van der Molen's landscapes are mysterious, barren, and dark. These are sublime in the 18th century sense, where remote crags were terrifying, utterly alien, and yet, deeply moving. Indeed, van der Molen seems to have heeded Edmund Burke's call that "in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate." It is no mistake that these alps were the landscape of the 18th century Grand Tour, where authors and painters travelled to experience the sublime back in its heyday.

What value, though, can we draw from the sublime today? As Emily Brady writes in *On the Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, the sublime "engenders a distinctive type of aesthetics-moral relationship, and one that can contribute to our moral attitudes toward natural environments" (183). The sublime—and certainly the sublime as exhibited in van der Molen's images—humbles us before the world. Furthermore, aesthetic experiences of this nature cannot avoid having moral implications: In a world where we unavoidably assume our dominion over and right to the natural world, Awoiska van der Molen reminds us of our primordial relationship to the natural world, in which the alpine mountains do not exist simply for our aesthetic enjoyment, but rather, remains treacherous, mysterious and impenetrable.

