Interview with Alphonso Lingis

conducted by Bobby George & Tom Sparrow

BG & TS: As you know, we’re planning to enter your body of work through the lens of photography and geography. We thought we’d start our conversation there, at that conjunction. What motivated you to start to include photos in your text?

AL: In *Excesses* I thought I had to show a temple at Khajuraho, for readers who had never seen images of them. I also wanted to include a Nuba man photographed by Leni Riefenstahl—a photograph that, when I first came upon it, made me decide to go there (the text does not explain that).

The photographs are not inserted at places in the text that they would illustrate; they are put before the chapters. They bring readers to the places and people that the texts will describe and discuss.

When in 2009 I went back over 40 years of photographs to pick out those that were published in *Contact*, I was astonished and moved to find that I remembered every one of those people, so many only encountered for a few minutes on the street—and remembered the place, the time of day, the circumstances where I encountered them, the words we ex-
changed. It made me realize that the photographs show not simply a particular individual, but a setting, a field or arena where events took place. As Leni Riefenstahl’s photograph had sent me to East Africa, the other photographs in the book send readers to places far away and now long ago.

The images are in their own way narrative—and the texts in their own way depict. In recent decades so many philosophers have denounced the idea that language is representation. They have not analyzed the way language lays out a setting of the world, makes us see people and events. We speak of absent things, far-off things and things that have passed on, and language depicts them and makes them continuous with the environment visible about us.

**BG & TS:** In a way, it seems to us that philosophy has not always taken photography seriously, at least not seriously enough. Not unlike language, philosophy has denounced photography as representation. Yet, your texts and photos announce a ‘setting, a field or arena’, at once intimate and distant, moving beyond these criticisms. Can you articulate this oscillation between language and photography, and how you see the expansion into a new geography?

**AL:** Thinking about photographic images, I think we come to revise the way philosophy distinguished between reality and image and between subjective and objective. Discover images that the things, and not the human mind, engender.

Since Descartes and Locke and their friends, a critical question for philosophy was: How can I be sure that I am not dreaming? How to establish the difference between perceptions that genuinely exhibit real things, and dreams that are concocted within the mind by the mind? “Images” in general were taken to be fabricated by the mind itself.

I instead set out to recognize that the things themselves engender “images” or doubles of themselves—shadows, hal-
os, the images of themselves they project on water, on the
glass of windows—and also on the surfaces of the eyes of
mammals, birds, fish. For example, the puddle of water that
appears shimmering on the surface of the road ahead in a hot
day is not “subjective,” produced by the mind; it is engen-
dered by the road and the sun and everybody in the car sees
it.

I then was really struck by the fact that these real or ob-
jective images the things generate captivate us and excite in
us the pleasure of seeing. For Heidegger we are always on the
lookout for implements, obstacles, paths, objectives. To the
contrary, I recognized that when we step out into the world
we are captivated by the shifting profiles and angles the
things exhibit, the shadows and the reflections, the glitter on
the lake and the radiance blazoning the outlines of the
clouds, the shifting shadows and light on the face on the per-
son we are talking to. And all this excites pleasure and keeps
us fascinated and delighted by the things arrayed about us.

Merleau-Ponty distinguished between the “real properties
of things”—the shape and size and color when we are in the
optimal viewing position and all the “perspectival defor-
mations” which we take as relays toward that vision of the
real shape, size, and color.

But I think that all these perspectival variations, shadows,
reflections swarm in the environment about us, and we do
not only take them as transitions toward the sight of the real
shape, size, and color. They captivate us in themselves, de-
light us, excite pleasure.

It is true that the mind can also fabricate images—in
dreams, daydreaming, “imagination.” So I distinguish:
— the appearances in which things reveal their real shape,
size, color to us stationed at the optimal position and right
lighting.
— the appearances that we take as transitional toward
those real appearances. For example, seeing the table as rec-
tangular even though we are looking at it from an angle.
— the perspectival variations, shadows, reflections, etc.
the things themselves engender.
— images that are fabricated within the mind by the mind. These can be simple, false, or creative, artistry.

Photographic images are made by light and the camera; the photographer only positions and focuses. But the pleasure of photographic images is to capture images that the things themselves engender, in certain lighting, in shadow, in specific ways they group together.

Thinking about language and photographic images also leads to new conceptions of both. The concept of representation is obscure and misleading. Words do not simply stand for, stand in the place of, things that are absent. They do not simply stimulate our minds to produce images of things. I was very struck by Heidegger’s statements about how words invoke and summon forth things. (I think of the words of the medium who summons the dead to appear in the room.) When he speaks of the bridge over the river Rhine, we do not simply attend to an image or concept of the bridge in our own minds; instead we attend to the bridge itself where it is, on the Rhine. The words of a novel lay out a landscape, a situation, events about us. (We do not simply look at the words and imagine the object each word refers to.) (Nor do the words simply direct attention to a landscape we have already imagined.) With the words that name the protagonist and some details of the setting, the whole protagonist and the complex setting form about us. Last summer I read Knut Hansun’s *Growth of the Soil*. Written in a spare, economic language. But as I read the book how present and how dense and complex life in the Norwegian landscape in the last century hovered about me.

In looking at photos I took 40 years ago, I trembled to realize how it all became present again in the image—the shy or ironic feeling of the person, the density of life in that per-
son, the spot on the road one day in India, the rhythm and sounds of that day—all those reflections and images radiating off the person, the road, the things of the setting. That is how I came to recognize a kinship between language and photography—that power in both to invoke and summon forth, bring things into presence.

You ask about the new geography language and photographs unfold, a wonderful and striking thought. I am afraid I have gotten involved in the “ontological status” of images and of the vocative power of language. But I shall stop now; I shall have to ponder your question more.

**BG & TS:** Certainly the photographs in your texts recall scenes that are, for you, autobiographical. The affective content of these images must be much thicker for you than it is for your readers, although your words often work to generate a rhythm that is capable of drawing readers into the photograph and the scene it is borne out of, thus providing a certain tangibility to your prose. Levinas, in “Reality and Its Shadow,” speaks of how the musicality and rhythm of images has the capacity to render the spectator a passive participant in the spectacle itself. As a photographer, do you see yourself as spectator or participant in the rhythm of your photographs? Whatever your view, do you find that your photographs have the ability to convey to readers the autobiographical content of your travels?

**AL:** I will not talk about the experience of professional photographers, those who produce wedding albums, architecture and landscape books, mesmerizing images for celebrities and commodities. I just want to talk about walking when one walks with a camera.

I had long resisted buying a camera, thinking that there was something false about collecting images of things seen and people encountered and who have passed on, trying to
retain the past. I thought that what was real was what from a trip left one changed. I started taking pictures when a friend who was taking me to the airport gave me a camera on the way.

I soon realized that the camera had changed my perception. The light: it was no longer just cleared space in which things took form; it had direction, it led the gaze, its shafts excavated situations isolated in the dark, sometimes it spread in a scintillating, dazzling, blazing medium without boundaries. Shadows took on substance; they stretched, flowed, condensed things in themselves. It occurred to me that I saw them that way when I was a child. Things looked different: the contours of shadows and of things that overlapped other things pushed out the contours that contained things in themselves. Flat surfaces showed corrugations, grain, stubble and texture, and sheets of gleam. And the continuity of the landscape drifting by would be abruptly broken by momentary events—the spiraling neck of a heron probing the space, the poised pause of an antelope, the legs of a child in an arabesque she will never be able to do once grown up, the grin of a passerby at something inward. The landscape is abruptly splintered, a segment isolates, magnetizes, and pulls the glance into it.

A gesture, some steps, a contour, an encounter stops passing, stops transitioning, and breaks out, presents itself. A profile turned, an overlapping of wagon and wall, a gleam or zigzag line of light, most often only there an instant. But disconnected from the field, from situations passing, from orientations and goals. Purely present.

Abruptly you stop. That gait, that stride that kept your body going on arrested, that sweep of the eyes braked, your breath stopped, your heart beat skips. Redirected, you are pulled into that disconnected segment where a strange light glimmers, a bird bobs his head, a smile flashes. You feel that tense poised pose of an antelope contracted in your body,
that smile flashing in the face of a stranger in the road fills all space and flashes in your eyes.

This transfiguration of the environment into scintillating moments of pure presence, and these moments of ecstatic participation, are the reason to walk with a camera. To be sure these moments of rapture in the midst of forest trees all around, in the midst of a crowded street happen without a camera in one’s hand. They are the reason our eyes are not, as Heidegger would have it, always interested, on the lookout, looking for objectives, paths, implements, obstacles. Our eyes are fascinated by the immensities outside, never tire of looking, because of these disconnected moments of surprise and pleasure, of rapture.

But with the camera in hand, these trance moments become metaphysical; the sinewy movement of a branch on the surface of a lake is doubled, displaced, into your eyes and heartbeat and also across the camera into far-off places and rooms where it will dance again in a long vanished light. A camera, one could say, is a tool or an instrument. But when you install a light switch, it is all lined up first in the mind: the wire that will conduct the current to the interruptor, the wire that will bring the current to the ceiling light, the wire that send the current on, the wire that will bring excess charge to the ground, the insulated pliers that will twist and connect the wires. With a camera one never did understand the process, the chemical compounds on the film, the digital breakdown of the image. And unlike the hand that wields a chisel or that aims a rifle, the hand that raises the camera and touches the button does not become skilled. With a camera decades ago, there was some manipulation; one had to check the light meter, to set the speed and the focus; now the camera does everything.

And then you wait to see the result. The camera will do things the eyes did not: it will flatten the landscape, crowd in adjacent things the eyes had kept back, enlarge the out-
stretched hands. A stroke of chance presented the enchanting fragment and the moment; now a stroke of chance produces the image of it in different scaffolding. By chance enchanted, or trivialized. You discard or delete 95%, 99% of the images.

There was the moment of enchantment, of trance; the camera only recorded it (transformed, perhaps wretched). But the photo image retains its bond with the fragment or event that once became pure presence. We look at the image of our godmother, immigrant from the old country, standing in a field of high grass holding us when we were a six-months-old baby, and we are transported back to that field and the warm bosom of that woman long dead. We look at the image of our grandfather, scrawny youth in his uniform, who never returned from the Great War, and we are transported to a place we never have been. Looking over photographs one has taken over the decades, the years of one’s life are transformed into hundreds, thousands, of disconnected momentary trances. They are gifts the world gave. They are gifts to give others. You go back a few days later to give her that photograph you took of the street vendor; she calls her children, her mother, you laughing take photos of them to give them a few days later. In a far-off land you give your friends, the rascally grin a street kid in Calcutta gave you and them, the colors a frog in Madagascar gave to the heavenly light.

**BG & TS:** Mesmerized, inspired, and enchanted by the depth of your response. It reminds us of experimentation, and childhood innocence and exploration, both a call to Heraclitus and a new path forward for philosophy.

In a way, Orson Welles revealed a new cartography, and new possibilities for thought, with his search for time. With the introduction of depth of field, Welles explored these layers and recesses, experimenting with the adventures of life that comprise our immanence.
Not yet knowing what was possible, Welles pioneered a cinema of time, a new geography, or ethics and aesthetics of affects. As Deleuze called it, Welles constructed, or revealed, “a little piece of time in its pure state”. Paul Klee, perhaps, had something like this in mind, when he suggested we take a line for a walk, and this is precisely where we locate your unique philosophical expressions.

As a philosopher, as a traveler on a line of experimentation, taking a camera for a journey, exploring fields and terrains for philosophical inquiries, or searches, what role do you see education, or pedagogical guidance, playing in this adventure? Which is to say, do your adventures have pedagogical effects?

AL: The terms “education” or “pedagogy” never signified much to me, even in the classroom, where I selected books that gave me illumination and excitement and shared them with young people, regularly receiving, with gratitude, insights from them.

I first thought about gratitude some thirty-five years ago, in France. Gratitude is an action. Giving thanks. When someone arrives with a bottle of wine, we look at its color in the candlelight, savor its perfume, pour it into our best glasses, pour it to all our guests before we fill our glass. When someone gives us a gift, we do not just put it on a shelf and sit down to talk about whatever. We receive the gift, it takes time, we take it in both hands, take it in with our eyes, turn it about, contemplate its features. And we show it, share it with others.

Easter week on the Côte d’Azur, the year that I was teaching at the Université de Nice. Chris had taken a break from her studies and had come to spend two weeks with me. Nice was filled with thousands of especially Parisians who had come to escape the dreary end of the Parisian winter on the Mediterranean coast. But, quite untypically, it was rain-
ing here, steady, unending rain day after day, and the Parisians were gloomily drinking bottle after bottle of wine in the cafés and restaurants. I had an old VW bug and I said to Chris: “Why fight it? Let’s go up into the rain!” We put on coats with parkas and got into the car. Chris’s guitar was in the back seat. We headed into the Maritime Alps that rise abruptly to ice-covered summits behind the city. I was driving at random, just going up, and at a certain moment noticed a dirt road and drove up it. After some twenty minutes it ended at a stone wall some twelve feet high over which we saw some rooftops. “It’s a fortified village,” I said. “It must date from the sixteenth century when the Mediterranean was patrolled by Saracen pirates.” We got out of the car; the rain had diminished to a misty drizzle. We found the gate in the wall; inside there were some twenty stone houses. Here and there, there were breaks in the roofs where the tiles had been blown off and broken. “It’s deserted!” Chris exclaimed. We wandered down the lanes and came upon a chapel; we were able to push open the door.

Inside, on one wall there were naïve frescos. We were silenced, and Chris seated herself on the floor facing the simple stone altar.

After awhile I walked outside and wandered to where the terrain was highest. Black clouds were rolling over the ice-covered mountain peaks and furling down between them like ink dropped into water. From time to time there were bolts of lightning that blazed across the ice sheets. Then I looked down, and far below a break in the clouds had opened a shaft of light under which the Mediterranean blue sparkled silver. My body standing there felt awkward, unworthy of the grandiose heights, and instinctually settled to the ground. My eyes gazed quietly into the distances, and from time to time my body shifted into one or other of the simple yoga asanas that I had learned. My mind was emptied of everything but the black clouds and the glaciers.
After perhaps an hour or so I got up and wandered down the lanes of the village. On the other end of the village I came upon Chris, seated on a rock softly and intently playing her guitar. We had separately realized what grandiose gift our eyes had been given, and felt the need to do something to receive it, something modestly worthy of it.

When it was dark we drove back down in silence. Back in my apartment, we made sandwiches and opened a bottle of wine. After, Chris took up her guitar again, and I heard her strumming like she had played on the mountain. I wanted to write about this scene which was, I thought, the most grandiose my eyes had been given to see. I wrote about it to a friend. As I wrote I saw the words were making the scene more intense to me and settling it deeper into my heart. My letter took a long time, with many crossings-out and rephrasings. I realized that I could not share the event on the mountains unless I had written as well as I could, written better than any lecture on a philosophical text that I had prepared that year.

It was then that I realized that thought—which is about data, about some things or events that are given, which comprehends, takes in, what is given, ponders it, feels its weight, and produces words that are understandable and open to others, that exist for others—thought is gratitude.

I was in a shikara, a kind of gondola, in Dal Lake in Kashmir, as the day came to a close. It was my first trip to India, and also the first time I had a camera. I was shy about photographing people, thinking it intrusive and objectifying. As the boat moved by I had turned my camera to the row of willow trees trailing down along the shore. Then suddenly I saw in my viewfinder that there were men bathing in the river. Embarrassed, I pushed the camera down and looked up. But they had seen me, and were waving and shouting “Thank you!” I was puzzled, and eventually thought that they were grateful for being taken worthy of photographs. That a
foreigner had come from afar and instead of photographing palaces was photographing poor people. A few days later I developed the roll and went to give the men their photos. After that I set out to give everyone the photos I had taken of them. It was usually easy to find them again: poor people are going to be there when you go back, or people who know them are. If I was leaving the next day, I could often find someone in the area who could write and give me addresses. People were visibly delighted when I returned with the photos; they would treasure photos they could not afford of their parents, children, grandparents. I ended up taking fewer pictures of buildings and landscapes and more and more pictures of people met at random. I came to experience taking photos as essentially giving of gifts.

I never took slides. I disliked the idea of seating people in my house and projecting slides of my trip for them, determining how long they would have to look at each image. I mounted the best pictures in albums; friends would take down whatever they liked and view the images as they liked. Something to give them pleasure, to give them access to far-away places, to give them the trust and tact of people from far away. When I started putting some photographs in the books I published, it was in the same sentiment of offering discreet gifts to people I will never meet or hear from.

**BG & TS:** In terms of photography, do you prefer wide-angle lenses, or do you achieve this strange familiarity and connectedness through an array of telephoto shots? What we mean to express is, there is a great sense of humanity in your photographs, a suspension of judgement, and an exhilaration of intimacy. How do you achieve this level of trust? In many respects, Annie Leibovitz managed to capture this closeness that we feel in your work, as she photographed her dying lover, Susan Sontag.
AL: Trust is taking what is not known as though it were known. Every relationship is based on trust, since we do not see the intentions, feelings, and motivations of another. With someone we have known a long time, or investigated his past, we take a number of past behaviors as indication of his future and present intentions. But the chance that he or she may say or do something different is what makes our encounters with others fascinating.

There is nothing more exhilarating than trusting someone of whom one has no past acquaintance, no social contract, no language in common.

When you walk alone in foreign lands, people who glance at you are tempted to trust. Because of the intrinsic fascination and exhilaration of trust.

Of course walking alone is to go disarmed and disarming. Trust elicits trust. The trust that is visible when they stop and look at you in the face elicits trust in you. And responding without wariness or reserve elicits trust in them.

To really respond to the other involves tact. Tact is the light touch that does not seize hold or manipulate or possess. It is letting the other be and act in his or her space. It is also sensitivity; it is to let the other affect one, with his or her curiosity, affection, probings and reserve. In tact one senses something of the other’s desires and pleasures.

Trust is not a matter of photographic techniques. It begins by asking permission.