



CONTAINER CORPORATION OF AMERICA

38 SOUTH DEARBORN STREET

CHICAGO 3

October 22, 1951

Miss Laura Gilpin  
Box 1173  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Dear Miss Gilpin:

Mrs. Steele is out of the city, and has asked  
that I send to you the enclosed copy of Miss Abbott's talk  
given at Aspen on October 6.

Very truly yours,

(Miss) Betty M. Davis  
Asst. to Mrs. Steele

ASPEN INSTITUTE CONFERENCE ON PHOTOGRAPHY

Copy of Paper Presented by Berenice Abbott  
on October 6, 1951

Subject - "Objectives for Photography"

All of us can agree that the organizers of this conference are to be applauded for their vision and for their efforts to promote, not only living photography, but other cultural interests as well. This is the kind of courage that spells the finest of American aspirations. I only wish there were more such pioneers. I hope that we, in turn, can give appropriate tribute to Franz Berko, Constance Steele, and Mr. Paepcke. It is healthy to get photography out in the open and to turn it around and look at it from all sides, especially in the center of the country rather than at the two Coasts. In the struggle to arrive at clearer objectives, it seems inevitable that there should be clashes of opinion but, none the less, all opinions should be aired. A gathering of this kind forces us to clarify our thoughts which seem to me inescapably scrambled, due, not only to the confusion of our time, but to the confusion in regard to photography in particular.

I have listened with interest to the stimulating ideas presented here this week and have gained greater understanding of the individual whys of many of you. All of you know of my different viewpoint, or some of the points on which some of us differ, and today I should feel it a lack of courtesy to the Aspen Institute if I did not present my true beliefs and try to substantiate why I have these opinions, so that you can understand me better. The points I wish to consider are roughly four, namely :

1. The influence of pictorialism on photography as a whole.
2. The amateur movement and its effect on photography.
3. The interdependence of the allied fields.
4. A few suggestions or just feelers toward objectives for photography.

Concerning point one, I propose that this medium of photography is so young that it is not fully understood by experts or photographers, myself included. The greatest influence obscuring the entire field has, in my opinion, been pictorialism. At this point it may be appropriate to define pictorialism. (Mr. Newhall) My definition would be something like this: That pictorialism means chiefly the making of pleasant, pretty, artificial pictures in the superficial spirit of certain minor painters. What is more, the imitators of painting imitate the superficial qualities of painting, are not themselves aware of the true values for which painting strives. The only relationship is that of a two-dimensional image on a flat surface within a given area, but the nature of those two images are worlds apart. Photography can never stand on its own two feet and grow up if it imitates primarily some other medium. It has to walk alone; it has to be itself.

If a medium is representational by nature, of the realistic image formed by a lens, I see no reason why we should stand on our heads to distort that function. On the contrary, we should take hold of that very quality, make use of it, and explore it to the fullest. It is possible that the subject matter best suited to that characteristic quality be the one dictated by it.



After the early pioneer days of photography, which we <sup>re</sup>very creative and healthy, a wave of rank pictorialism set in and flourished. This type of work was usually very sentimental. The settings were staged; the system was to flatter everything. These were the imitations of painting, the horrors of certain Victorian standards, the type of chromo that most of us are familiar with. The man most responsible for the entire movement was Henry Peach Robinson, an Englishman who was very successful financially, and imported to this country the disease which was gobbled up by the Americans. (Newhall) Most of us are familiar with these trite subjects represented by titles like "Fading Away", "Here Comes Father", "Kiss of Dew", "Fingers of Morning", etc. If I mistake not, the very word "salon" descended from Robinson - the salon and the salon print which are still rampant in American camera clubs.

But there are always two sides to the question and perhaps there always will be. In those days there was, fortunately, another side of the picture. Men like Matthew Brady and William H. Jackson, Sullivan, and Gardner, and others were making magnificent realistic pictures of their world and of their time under the greatest handicaps.

At the beginning of the century serious photographers were rightfully disdainful of the product and disciples of Henry Peach Robinson. They graduated to a more "refined" or elevated grade like the painters who rebelled against Bougereau. They became the fellow travelers of the more modern painters. They were interested in proving that photography was an art, an art with a big "A", and they were quite touchy about it. Their work was spiked with mystical and subjective overtones. Terms like "equivalents", "hand of God", etc., were used to bewilder the layman. Art was by the few, for the few, and cultural America was represented by the back end of a horse to people who did not know they were being insulted. They expressed their feelings with a reverence for glorified technique. They raised the craft, as such, to a higher level. In a technically-minded America, they created greater respect for the craft, as such. The United States as a nation was wedded to technology and was particularly favorable to a technological art. They gave to photography an increased respectability. In the case of Stieglitz, who was an institution within himself, and a character who was "God" to many, but to many others not at all, he did make, when he ventured outside himself, a few great pictures. In Stieglitz's time, what was unquestionably an advance in pictorialism is not an advance in 1950. These later-day pictorialists did not know they were pictorialists. They were what I can only call, for want of a better word, the advanced or super-pictorial school. The tendency here was to be very precious, very exclusive, very jealous of authority, to exclude all others who would enter the sanctified portals of art. The individual picture, like a painting, was the thing - above all, the perfect print. Subjectivity predominated.

About this same period another man was working quietly - unknown, unappreciated, quiet, lonely, but with a profound love of life, with concentrated energy and mature discernment, a man who came to photography in the second half of his life. He gave to the world hundreds of great photographs. His name was Eugene Atget. He was very busy and excited in discovering photography and what it meant. He didn't talk much - he was too busy discovering this new instrumentation by which he was able to <sup>penetrate</sup> and record his immediate and wonderful world. As he went along, his eye became increasingly charged with this new vision. His work is purely and entirely photographic and is still comparatively little known today.



While not of the same stature or range, another photographer on this side of the ocean showed remarkable photographic acumen in the early half of this century. I believe that the true photographer is a curiously odd-type species, a kind of Cyclops not yet easy to define. His sixth sense or singularly photographic gift is a highly charged and trained vision - something like an electrically charged object. This is imposed by the nature of the medium and by the nature of the subject - on the here and now. Realist par excellence, inescapably contemporary, Lewis Hine had this unique photographic gift whatever that may be. Whatever world he happened to live in, he would have responded to, armed with a camera and his penetrating, eagle-like, agile, but disciplined, eye. Stieglitz and his disciples looked down their noses at Lewis Hine and fell in line, as far as I can tell, with the coterie of Kathryn Drier's gallery. I think it is about that time (1918) that the abstractions of cracked paint began.

At the risk of sounding outrageously doctrinaire, but for the sake of over-simplification, I propose that there is a third but final fling of pictorialism - the abstract school - the imitators of abstract painting, the pure design, the cracked window pane or the cracked paint. I think this represents the end. Now they would like to be like the great painter Mondrian. I have even seen would-be Jackson Pollocks. But instead of spattering paint at a canvas in desperation they might resort yet to ripping the emulsion off the paper or spattering a print with type - anything goes - all this with gelatin emulsion, Eastman Kodak papers, (no reference to Mr. Newhall or Mr. Williams), Baby X Cameras, shaky, dust-catching enlargers.

Why do I concern myself with these problems? Personally I don't care what kind of photographs people make, if it makes them happy. It is obviously their own business. But it does affect me, and other photographers, if, due to a preponderant amount of this type of work, it holds back sorely needed, wide improvements of the instruments we need to work with. This is why I must take issue with the pictorialists. They are the ones who choose the subjects which are easily expressed within the primitive limitations of present-day, backward equipment.

This brings the problem to the relation of the vast amateur field, and finally to the serious photographer.

Briefly, photography is very young. Writing is very old. Everybody writes but they know they are not writers. Everybody photographs but they don't realize that they are not photographers. On the positive side the amateur market presents the best possible basis for a great democratic medium. Photography is by the many and for the many. The amateur market also presents one source of potential photographers. This vast potential is a rich, uncultivated soil. But rich soil can be dissipated if not fed nourishing food. It can also regress into soil erosion if fed trite Pollyannaish unrealities. On the negative side, the amateurs imitate the pictorialists because this is the line of least resistance. The vast amateur market shrieks mass production on the quick turn-over basis, the market which is the only one of interest to the manufacturers of equipment and supplies today. This results in a mass production type of photography! Too much similarity and limited, hackneyed subject matter, usually made under only favorable conditions are inevitable. Amateurs are wonderful victims of the racket. Their faith is coy and blissful. When one shutter sticks they rob grandmother, if necessary, and buy a new one, and if the camera is usually in the repair shop they raise no questions. Manufacturers can do no wrong. This is one of the reasons amateurs and pictorialists flood the camera clubs - that great market for



every little gadget and for backward, shoddy, clumsy cameras.

But the serious photographer is a forgotten man. He is sorely in need of far-reaching improvements in all directions and over the entire field. He simply cannot step too far afield in his need to express the dynamic world of our time and place. The model T stage of present camera design and the slow film speeds supplied him will not permit this.

Photography does not stand by itself in a vacuum. It is linked on the one side to manufacturers of materials and on the other side to the distributors of the product, that is, to publishers, editors, business leaders, to museum directors, to photo engravers and to the public. Unless they do their share of growing up and actually contribute an equal responsibility, the photographer can languish or take up knitting.

The medium of still photography is almost as complex as that of the movie industry. What we need of equipment is this: Let it possess as good a structure as the real-life content which surrounds us. We need more simplifications to free us for seeing. We don't want more complex and heavy and costly equipment.

We need of publishers and editors that they live up to their part in this chain-reaction, to try to understand photography in the first place, and in the second place, to bear responsibility toward the public by raising the general cultural level of our country which we, who love America, believe in for its great potential. There is no dilemma when one has little to say. What we find is either work of a high degree of technical perfection that sometimes tends toward the static or the other extreme of spontaneous work that is crude technically because there is no means at its disposal to be otherwise. We need rather to fuse the two; to combine a disciplined technique with the freedom of the sensitive and sensitized eye.

I have read gems by writers who seem to speak for photography as much as for the written word. For instance, Goethe was talking with Eckermann before photography was invented - "There are, however, few men who have imagination for the truth of reality. Most prefer strange countries and circumstances of which they know nothing and by which their imagination may be cultivated wondrously." Does this not remind us of the hordes of people who snap, snap, snap in Mexico, in Canada, in fact, far from now, but there beyond, where the grass is always greener and where all people are supposed to smile?

I should like to give just one more quotation from Goethe who was discussing a poet who was very talented at improvisation. Said Goethe, "He was a decided talent, without doubt, but he has the general sickness of the present day - subjectivity - and of that I would fain heal him. I gave him a task to try him; 'Describe to me', said I, 'your return to Hamburg'. He was ready at once, and began immediately to speak in melodious verses. I could not but admire him, yet I could not praise him. It was not a return to Hamburg he described, but merely the emotions on the return of his son to his parents, relations and friends; and his poem would have served just as well for a return to Merseburg or Jena, as for a return to Hamburg. Yet what a remarkable, peculiar city is Hamburg, and what a rich field was offered him for the most minute description, if he had known or ventured to take hold of the subject properly! If he breaks through to the objective, he is saved - the stuff is in him; only he must make up his mind at once and strive to grasp it."



Does not the very word creative mean to build, to initiate, to give out, to act - rather than to be acted upon, to be subjective. We know that all arts are related in varying degrees. I believe that the affinity of photography for writing is quite strong. In our country we have a glorious tradition of unsurpassed realist writers. A photographer could easily have worked hand in hand with the beloved Mark Twain, with Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, with Walt Whitman or Hart Crane. Jack London in his powerful novel, Martin Eden, pleads not only for realism but for impassioned realism, shot through with human aspirations and faith, life as it is, real characters in a real world, real conditions. Is this not exactly what photography is meant to do with the sharp, realistic, image-forming lens?

The photographer explores and discovers and reacts to the world he lives in. His selectivity is the key, but the choice is one of discernment. The subject matter has no limitation. He can show the works and product of man, as well as man himself. He can show equally the work of nature, from the skies to the ocean depths. The whole world is his oyster!

When I was in Paris in the twenties I realize now more than I did then, that there was a surprising amount of insight into the nature of photography. Before 1929 Pierre Macorlan had written, "The art of photography is the expression of our epoch. For this reason, it is not yet understood by most people who are not able to understand the age itself. Was Atget at the source of this new expression? In another statement in the magazine, L'Art Vivant, Florent Fels wrote that "A good photograph is primarily a good document". This term, "documentary" has been bandied about out of all proportions and shape and meaning. I agree that all good photographs are good documents, but I also know that all documents are certainly not good photographs. Furthermore, a good photographer does not document alone. "He probes the subject, he uncovers it," to quote Dorothea. The term "documentary" is implicit in the nature of photography, therefore I am opposed to the use of this term as indicating a particular category, especially since a foolish cliché dismisses documentary as preoccupied only with the drab, or with the things that many people prefer to close their eyes to. That's what the puritans and aesthetes said about Theodore Dreiser and John Sloan. (Mention John Brown and Andrew Jackson)

Living photography builds up, does not tear down. It proclaims the dignity of man. Living photography does not blink at the fantasies of real life, be they beautiful, or be they disgraceful. Photography cannot afford to ignore this challenge but the realisation of this purpose must be made possible. Living photography is positive in its approach. It sings a song of life - not death.