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Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies

38 South Dearborn Street, Chicago 3, Illinois

December 10, 1951

The end of last September the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies sponsored a ten-day Conference on Photography. All those who participated were quite enthusiastic about the results and toward the end of the Conference a meeting was held in which Mr. Beaumont Newhall was urged to write a report. Happily, he was willing to take on this assignment. A copy is herewith attached for your possible interest.

Plans for another conference to be held in Aspen early next September are under discussion at the present time.

Sincerely,

Walter P. Paepcke

WPP/mb

Beaumont Newhall
900 East Ave.
Rochester 7, N. Y.

October 30, 1951

THE ASPEN PHOTO CONFERENCE

by Beaumont Newhall

(This article will appear with illustrations in a forthcoming number of MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY.)

Aspen is a small town high in the mountains one hundred and eighty miles southwest of Denver. Not so many years ago it was a city, the second largest in Colorado, the center of silver mining. Aspenites will tell you of the days when street cars ran through the wide streets, when there were fifty saloons, well stocked stores, impressive banks. Two landmarks remain: the Hotel Jerome and the Opera House, with its auditorium up two steep flights. Many of the little frame houses of the miners, with delicate gingerbread fancywork, are repainted in gay colors; many are in ruins; most of the buildings have utterly disappeared. Around Aspen rise impressive mountains, some 6,000 feet above the town, which itself is 7,900 feet above sea level. The road leading east will take you over Independence Pass and down into the plains. In the fall of the year the mountains are alive with vivid golden aspen trees and the deep green of firs. It is a place where you can find all kinds of things to photograph, from close details of weathered wood to sweeping landscapes. In the winter skiers come from the world over, for the ski runs of Aspen are famous and international championships are decided on them; their names describe them: "Corkscrew," "Point of No Return," "Niagara Falls."

For the past three years great music has been presented in Aspen by great musicians, and there have been conferences on philosophy, literature, great books, labor problems, design. For ten days last fall, from September 26 to October 6, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies held its first photographic conference. Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Ferenc Berko, Will Connell, Laura Gilpin, Fritz Kaeser II, Dorothea Lange, Wayne Miller, Eliot Porter, Minor White, photographers; John Morris of the Ladies' Home Journal, Paul Vanderbilt of the Library of Congress, and Beaumont Newhall of the George Eastman House formed the panel of speakers. About forty amateur and professional photographers participated in the varied and crowded program.

We talked photography from breakfast until after midnight. We met old friends and made new ones. We looked at photographs and took them. We discussed many of the problems that photographers always discuss when they get together, but we also tackled a lot of new subjects. Although we did not solve anything, we came away stimulated beyond our expectations. As one of the conferees said, "I had to expand or explode!"

All that went on during those busy ten days cannot be chronicled. Every meal in the Hotel Jerome was a symposium. No table was large enough to accommodate all who wanted to sit together; the patient dining room staff crowded us in and did not seem to mind how long we sat over coffee. No matter how early one got up, there was always someone who had already been out photographing. Around the swimming pool, in the bar, on the street corner, little groups continued discussions. Townspeople were amused by our eagerness; when batteries of tripods were set up before some picturesque old building, Aspenites began to look at their own town differently.

It is difficult to say exactly what it was that made the conference so stimulating. Our enthusiasm was nothing new to Walter P. Paepcke, President of the Aspen Institute, for it has long been his belief that if people from various walks of life are brought together in an atmosphere and environment where they can relax, not feel under pressure of time, and get to know one another, they will find nourishment and enrichment. In opening the photo conference he told us that at the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation at Aspen in 1949, philosophers from all over the world not only met one another for the first time, but had the opportunity to get to know each other and discuss in leisure common problems. The success of the Bicentennial led to the founding of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, a non-profit educational foundation which already has sponsored conferences on a variety of subjects. "Cross-fertilization" is a term which Paepcke used frequently in telling of the aims and aspirations of the Institute.

We did not talk much about cameras and exposures and developers. By tacit consent technical matters were avoided, because the opportunity which the Aspen Institute offered us was too great to be wasted in the kind of shop talk which can take place anywhere. Instead we talked about the place of photography, and particularly the photographer, in the world today. We did not ask if photography is an art; instead we tried to determine what kind of art it is, and we even asked ourselves what art is. We searched for a definition of documentary photography. We learned the problems of the advertising and magazine photographer, and we heard from the art director and the magazine editor about their problems. We talked of the history of photography, not academically, but as evidence of what has been done in the past with a medium far less perfect than our own. We learned about the problems of safeguarding the photographic heritage which is daily accumulating, and how to make it available.

There was so much talk about "communication" that at a midnight bull session we decided to excommunicate the next one to use the word. It is significant that the word was used so frequently, for above everything else which was brought out at the conference, the desire to make pictures meaningful seems, in recollection, uppermost. The validity of so-called "experimental" and "abstract" photography was challenged more than once, and there was no rebuttal. If one were to criticize the conference, it would be that there was so little dissension that discussions intended as debates became a series of unchallenged statements by panel members.

For example, Ansel Adams suggested that most of the obscure work which bewilders the spectator is experimentation prematurely offered as a final product. He felt that the artist talks too much; that "the intellectual dome which he creates over the heads of his audience may be a bubble that will burst." Adams asked the artist to initiate projects,

to face the realities of life, and not to ask for special privileges. He made a plea that professional photographers recognize their status as professionals, with full acceptance of the professional's ethic responsibilities and duties. He felt the need of a professional society, with a dignified publication, for the establishment of standards of quality. Finally, he stated that "the most important quality of the artist's approach to people may be described as 'sympathy.' There should be a sense of responsibility on the part of the artist: respect for self, subject and humanity."

With these well-expressed beliefs there was no argument. Nor was it found possible to set up categories of "straight" versus "abstract" photography. Minor White raised the issue, substituting for these words degrees of control over the photographic image, from "the extreme of solarization, double exposure and the cooking, pan frying and broiling of the negative" to the more purely photographic variables. The photographic approach as opposed to the painterly is characterized, White felt, by the totality of the image, its tether to reality, its immediacy, and its lack of the mark of the hand. Berenice Abbott spoke out strongly against abstraction in photography as imitation of painting and "the final fling of pictorialism." Eliot Porter considered it a waste of time to draw a line between abstract and straight photography and then discuss their relative merits. The important thing, he felt, is to recognize the personal message of the artist. These views were seconded by the audience.

The question of the artist's personal message was explored further in an evening of discussion on "Photography and Painting," led by Frederick Sommer, who both paints and photographs. He held that the photographer is the originator of imaginative reality; that he adds something to the experiences of the spectator. This "something" was shown to be a balance between self-expression and communication. But, it was protested, neither of these can be sufficient in itself. A work of art must have the power to evoke or create experience by its formal qualities. That explains why much that is not created with esthetic intent is found beautiful. The power of certain purely scientific photographs, in which self-expression plays no part, is due to a combination of challenging form with awesome subject matter.

It was useful, on the night following this esthetic discussion, to review with Ralph Evans of the Eastman Kodak Company (not, unfortunately, present) some of the factors by which we judge color photographs. His paper, illustrated with over a hundred color slides, was read aloud. Evans showed graphically that we do not see things "as they are," but as we think they are. We cannot hope to imitate nature, and must learn to use our medium to create a response which will coincide with what the spectator thinks he should feel. Line, color, perspective are means by which we convince the spectator and move him to esthetic appreciation.

Perhaps the vaguest word in the photographic vocabulary is "documentary." The conference welcomed Dorothea Lange, whose pioneer work for government agencies, particularly the Farm Security Administration, has made her a leader in the documentary field. She at once pointed out the insufficiency of the word and asked for a substitute. None was found. When asked to define documentary, she said that it was closely related to time and change. During one of the evening discussions she elaborated by telling how she would handle an hypothetical assignment: to tell in a series of ten pictures the story of Aspen and the photo conference. What should be photographed?

First: where. This could be shown by a photograph of Aspen from a mountain, an aerial view, with the roads leading in and out of the town. The time of the year would be indicated by the autumn foliage. Second: when. Perhaps this could be a picture of one of the battered jeeps that abound in Aspen, taken near an old building. That would at once place the time after the war. A third photograph might be of the beautiful brass clock in the lobby of the Hotel Jerome. We were sorry that Dorothea Lange did not complete this unusual shooting script, which showed that the documentary photographer does not merely record. Before he uses his camera he seeks the most characteristic and informative subject matter. Addressing amateurs and non-photographers, she made a plea for the more regular use of the box camera, for with it everyone can record his own life. A housewife, with a box camera on a shelf over the kitchen sink, could make pictures of her children which would be more meaningful than most photographs taken by experts.

The picture drawn of the present state of advertising photography by a panel headed by Will Connell was a most pessimistic one. The photographer, we learned, is seldom given an opportunity to initiate creative work, but is required to follow explicitly a layout which has already been made. The middle man is the account executive of the advertising agency; the client is presented with a "comprehensive" (a carefully worked up sketch of the proposed advertisement) and once his approval is secured, the layout cannot be altered. Photographs must be made to fit. Egbert Jacobsen, Director of Design of the Container Corporation of America, and for years an art director in some of the leading agencies, described this chain of command as tyranny. It was felt that the only way a creative photographer could use his full talents in advertising was to sell his work to the top executive of an industry.

John Morris explained, in a symposium on "The Picture Language of Magazines," that magazine photography is the opposite of advertising photography. If the stories are bad, it is the fault of the photographer. When asked how such a magazine as the Ladies' Home Journal chooses subjects to be photographed, Morris said that it was determined by mass surveys of what the readers want. Walter Paepcke wondered why the public could not be given what it should have rather than what it wants? Wayne Miller, speaking as a magazine photographer, said that often the photographer had a chance to photograph situations as he feels they ought to be photographed. Then he submits what he has taken, but the editor may not select the ones the photographer considers the best. Herbert Bayer, designer and painter, was asked if he submitted a dozen finished paintings to the editor for a magazine cover. "No," he replied. "One. The best. But this must be made with full realization of the limitations." He found limitations a help, rather than a hindrance, and quoted Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect and painter, who said that architecture was easier than painting because you had so much thinking already done for you by the client! Many voiced the opinion that photographers should stand on their dignity and not accept insults from those magazine photographers who demand an excessive amount of pictures from which to choose.

Wayne Miller told us about his experiences covering news. The photographer cannot plan in advance, but he has a great scope while photographing. At a crash of an airplane Miller submitted one photograph to Life - showing a postoffice official picking up letters blown far from the plane. He stressed the importance of the photographer initiating ideas and not blindly following the editor's preconceived ideas.

"Objectives in Photography" were discussed by Berenice Abbott. She emphasized what she had said earlier about the harmful influence of painting upon photography, and stressed the importance of recognizing that photography is not an automatic picture-taking technique. The relation of photography to writing is close: Jack London's "impassioned reality" can be applied to much camera work. Documentary photography does not record alone, it probes and explores the subject. It is not limited to the negative aspects of life; living photography proclaims the dignity of man. She stressed the importance of Lewis Hine and Atget. A discussion about the problems of preserving the Atget negatives, which she saved after the famous French photographer's death, led to the suggestion that a committee be formed to work out ways and means of depositing them in a public institution.

Earlier we heard from Paul Vanderbilt about preserving and making accessible the millions of photographs which have accumulated in the Library of Congress for years. Up to the present this vast treasure of pictorial history has been neglected. By handling the photographs not as individual items, but as surveys, Vanderbilt has been able to bring quantities of them to light, and he showed us lantern slides of forgotten work of many photographers: Indians by Grabill and by Curtis; records of pioneer families by Butcher, showing them standing in front of their sod houses holding prized possessions, "lined up for a long, lasting look;" the coming of the railroad to Kansas, documented by Alexander Gardner (whose interest in sociological problems has been eclipsed by his fame as a Civil War photographer); sharp, detailed pictures of American cities and small towns taken by William H. Jackson, best known for his photographs of the West; portraits by Arnold Genthe which, in their candid approach, were ahead of their day; a series of pictures of Cox's Army by Ray Stanley Baker, outstanding even by today's standards of news reporting. The greatest survey of all, Vanderbilt told us, was that conducted by the Farm Security Administration; he presented pictures which demonstrated that the documentation was by no means limited to the misery of the depression. At another meeting Vanderbilt talked about the organization of photographic resources. As Consultant in Iconography to the Library of Congress, it is his job to work out plans for making the best use of photographs. He explained that just as bibliography is the science of supplying information on the content of books, so iconography is the supplying of information about pictures. But whereas an author can expect his books to be catalogued in libraries all over the world, the photographer has no assurance that his work will ever be listed in such a way that others can find it when they need it. He felt that the most effective way of accomplishing this is to use the methodology already worked out for books, and to group photographs by subject, thus making them units which can be catalogued and handled like books. He plans a directory of picture sources, a bibliography of picture books in the broadest sense, and at the moment he is working on a list of collections of pictures of Iran, as a sample of the kind of iconographic service which the Library of Congress might supply to the public.

Beaumont Newhall described the George Eastman House and told about the work which is being done by this new museum of photography. He also presented an illustrated lecture on American daguerreotypes, stressing the variety and the quality of work done by pioneer photographers with their difficult technique, which was not limited to portraiture, but included architecture and even such news events as gold mining in California in the eighteen-fifties.

Not all of the conference was discussion. Field trips were held almost daily. Ansel Adams explained his Zone System of exposure control by actual example. Minor White led a group through Aspen, pointing out the various approaches which might be taken in photographing the town. It would, for example, be possible to photograph every single building. This would be wasteful. Typical buildings might be chosen to represent the character of the place. Or an entirely different use might be made of the material: rather than making an interpretation of the town, the photographer might choose to use the rich textures of weathered wood, of delicate gingerbread architectural detail, for more personal messages, quite unrelated to time and place. Excursions were made to the nearby ghost-town of Ashcroft, and to Marble, named for the great quarries, now abandoned, which supplied the marble for the Lincoln Memorial. Some intrepid conferees visited a mine, others took the three-mile chairlift to the top of the mountain. Perhaps the most unusual "field trip" was a session with Berenice Abbott photographing the interior of the Hotel Jerome, now restored to the full flavor of the Victorian style.

One evening we looked at moving pictures, selected by Ferenc Berko. The program included Herbert Matter's "The Works of Calder," Ian Hugo's "Ay-Ye", Norman McLaren's "The Loon's Necklace" and his delightful abstract fantasy, "Fiddle-De-Dee;" and Helen Levitt and Janice Loeb's "The Street." We all went to a fine concert, given for the benefit of the Institute, by Vitya Vronsky and Victor Babin, who played Bach, Schumann and Rachmaninoff on two pianos. We were delighted that they stayed in Aspen several days to attend the conference.

Work by the participating photographers was on display during the conference in a gallery made from a vacant store. The last program of the conference was a talk by Beaumont Newhall about the pictures on display. They ranged from sweeping landscapes by Ansel Adams to closely observed, intimate studies of people by Wayne Miller, from scientific illustrations by Berenice Abbott to Frederick Sommer's explorations in the mysterious world of cast-off things; from Eliot Porter's brilliant color photographs of birds and woods to Ferenc Berko's delicate semi-abstractions. The variety of these pictures was remarkable, and it was easy to point out the differences and to trace the antecedents of the several ways of seeing which could be distinguished. But even more striking was the similarity of the work. For in all of the photographs there was sincerity, humility before the subject, excellent technique and respect for the medium of photography. The differences were as insignificant as the differences of opinion voiced during the discussions. There was brought into focus at Aspen a common denominator: the realization that photography can be a medium so powerful and so beautiful, so potentially informative and persuasive that it demands responsibility and commands dignity.

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PROGRAM NOTES FOR CONFERENCE ON PHOTOGRAPHY
ASPEN INSTITUTE OF HUMANISTIC STUDIES

- September 26 GREAT PHOTOGRAPHIC SURVEYS OF AMERICA (Lecture with slides)
Paul Vanderbilt, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- September 27 MOTION PICTURES
- September 28 PICTURE LANGUAGE OF MAGAZINES
Discussion Leader
John Morris, Ladies Home Journal, Curtis Publishing Co.
- Panel Members
Paul Berg, St. Louis Post-Dispatch Pictures staff
Walker Evans, Photographer, Fortune
Wayne Miller, Free lance reportage; part-time Life photographer
- September 29 EVOLUTION OF A NEW PHOTOGRAPHIC VISION
Discussion Leader
Minor White, Teacher, Photography Department, San Francisco School of Fine Arts
- Panel Members
Berenice Abbott, Documentary Photographer, Teacher, Lecturer and Author
Walker Evans, Photographer, Fortune
Paul Vanderbilt, Consultant in Iconography, The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.
- September 30 THE CHALLENGE OF PHOTOGRAPHY (Lecture with exhibit material)
Beaumont Newhall, Historian; Curator of George Eastman House
- October 1 PHOTOGRAPHY AND CIVILIZATION
Discussion Leader
Ansel Adams, Photographer, Teacher and Author
- Panel Members
Dorothea Lange, Documentary Photographer
Beaumont Newhall, Historian; Curator of George Eastman House
- October 2 PHOTOGRAPHY IN ADVERTISING AND PROMOTION
Discussion Leader
Will Connell, Commercial and Illustrative Photography; Author
- Panel Members
Fritz Henle, Fashion, Travel, and Commercial Photography; Author
Torcel Korling, Industrial Photography and Reportage
T. J. Maloney, Publisher of U. S. Camera Magazine
- October 3 PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING
Discussion Leader
Frederick Sommer, Photographer, Prescott, Arizona
- Panel Members
Ansel Adams, Photographer, Teacher and Author
Perene Berko, Photographer
Minor White, Teacher, Photography Department, San Francisco School of Fine Arts
- October 4 PROBLEMS IN COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY
Discussion Leader
Ansel Adams, Photographer, Teacher and Author
- Panel Members
Herbert Bayer, Architect, Designer, Painter
Paul Berg, St. Louis Post-Dispatch Pictures Staff
Egbert Jacobson, Director of Design, Container Corporation of America
- October 5 DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY
Discussion Leader
Berenice Abbott
- Panel Members (To be announced later)
- October 6 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY