THE ARTIST AND NATURE

Dr. Lee, Dr. Mercer, ladies and gentlemen,

I have just undergone what is for me a very unusual experience, which is to hear my own writing quoted. At first I did not recognize the words as mine, and when finally I did my thought was that I could not possibly have written them. A written language is quite a different matter from a spoken language, for in the former, as Thoreau said, every sentence should stand a long period of probation. This is very admirable advice. However, when one talks there is no probation at all, and his words and sentences must be chosen extemporaneously. What follows is a written version of my extemporaneous remarks.

In this conference on "Man in Nature and the Nature of Man" the second part is, I think what intrigues people especially. Dr. Hall has just spoken on one aspect of the Nature of Man, and the last lecture by Dr. Hennessy, which unfortunately I shall not be able to hear, will also be on the Nature of Man. I am going to take the liberty of encroaching for a moment on his subject to make a few comments on the Nature of Man because it is connected in some ways with my subject the Artist and Nature. What we mean by the nature of man can be approached from various directions. Dr. Hall spoke of it on a psychological level; I shall treat the subject more descriptively. But even on this level there are different ways in which one may proceed. Man might be discussed as a complicated equilibrium - a machine of some kind - a physico-chemical system as distinct from a psycho-physical system in which, unlike all other animals, he is held to possess what is called a soul. Or he could be considered from the point of view of his natural characteristics, that is, in other words, his traits that are consistent with those regarded as characteristics of all living things: the characteristics that define as well as man all other life.

The artist must reject the mechanistic interpretation of man because he is concerned with awareness, and consciousness does not fit well into a physico-chemical construct of man - not yet even according to the most deterministic views. The artist is obsessed with nature. It is from nature that all his inspiration comes, unless he claims to be divinely inspired, which is uncommon today, and even then the distinction between divinity and nature is scarcely more than one of definition. And so the artist accepts man as a natural phenomenon, with traits in common with other forms of life. He cannot abandon his belief that appreciation, which originates in perception, is not an attribute of a machine, because appreciation involves judgement and seems to involve choice. However natural the artist may consider man he is not precluded from regarding him as an exceptional being who stands above all others in certain notable respects.

There are two ways of looking at man's relationship to nature. He can be considered part of nature, in which case everything he does is perfectly natural. These include not alone all his scientific progress, engineering projects, cities, agriculture, and works of art, but in addition the devastations he causes and the destruction he deals out. This outlook offers little comfort if you happen to be interested in your own future or that of your children. But if you are able to adopt a very detached, long-term point of view there may be some solace from the realization that in a million years or more all the physical changes wrought by man which cause you distress will be obliterated. Forests of some kind will replace those destroyed, vegetation will regenerate. The Colorado River will grind its way through Glen Canyon Dam as well as any other that may be built in the near future. New land will be formed and other mountain ranges will be thrust up. All this will take place because the oceans will not dry up, nor the rains cease to fall and so the forces of weather and

erosion will continue. From a geological outlook, man's fleeting appearance on the earth has been dramatically represented by compressing the total age of the earth of ten billion years into the span of one day. Starting the history of the earth at midnight, the Archeozoic Era and the Pre-Cambrian period began at 9:36 p.m., after nine billion years of lifeless earth. Man appeared one million years ago which on the compressed scale was at 8.6 seconds before the end of the day. All civilization, which began eight thousand years ago, occupies the last one thousanth of a second. The usefulness of such a presentation is not to offer much comfort for the misuse of our planet but to put man and his works in a new perspective. And it does help to appreciate that what we do here will not endure for even a very small fraction of forever.

The other way of looking at man is in a position apart from nature. For the conservationist this is helpful because he is engaged in a continuing effort to preserve and protect nature against the reckless profligacy of his fellow men, and hence is conditioned to thinking in terms of the human race arrayed on one side with an embattled nature on the other. Before the advent of the recent phenomenon of men acting to protect nature from themselves the current belief was that man must conquer nature. Nature was the personification of all man's primitive fears of the unknown. Nature was not a complex of inter-relationships to understand, it was a dangerous force to domesticate and tame. That man is apart from nature is a point of view deeply imbedded in the traditions of our Christian culture. It finds expression in Genesis in the Old Testament when God created the whole world and everything in it before He created Man. Man was a special act of creation, the climax of His efforts, to receive and enjoy all that had been produced before. But as we know, things got out of hand. Later, after the Flood, by His directives to Noah He once more gave everything to men to use as they

pleased, and He hasn't yet seen fit to take it all back again. This Biblical record has generally been accepted by the Christian world to justify for the past 2500 years anything people chose to do to wilderness and to wild life. There have been some restrictions in the common interest, and they are becoming more numerous, but the pre-eminence of man's caprice was the over-riding principle and nothing else really mattered. In a sense people were right; not until the interest of someone who could make a value judgement was involved did it matter, if mattering is a purely human concern. Nevertheless, whether one believes in conserving or exploiting, preserving or using up, the view that man and nature are unrelated catagories seems to be the more useful.

Man's position in the world is so recognizably predominant that what he does to his environment can, in his own interest, no longer be ignored. He is being forced, although somewhat unwillingly, to face the consequences of his ~~environment~~ actions. He has brought about great changes in the course of his history, but most of them have been adventitious and not salutary. When he attempts to improve his condition by moulding nature to his purpose his successes are distinctly limited, and even casual consideration will reveal that the reason for this state of affairs is short-sightedness. His greatest successes are with his immediate environment, his living space, which he is able to heat, cool, and illuminate to his taste, but when it comes to larger units the improvement over past cultures is not very striking. His cities are still subject to the calamities caused by storm, flood, and earthquake that long plagued less industrialized societies. These prevailing disasters are in part owing to the shortsighted persistance with which he builds his cities in the wrong places and with the wrong materials.

In addition to his inability to control the natural forces which contribute in great measure to his discomforts, he is progressively increasing

them unintentionally by his technology, which he proclaims to be the only means for their amelioration. Thus, he is inconvenienced by the failure of the power on which the livability of his cities depends, and by the clogging of his streets and highways with the mechanical conveyances that contributed in the first place to the growth of the cities. There are many wide-spread effects of man's technology which are altering his environment far beyond the limits of his communities. The great majority of these are destructive to life and soil and are unquestionably disadvantageous to his interest. Few are improvements and none fall in the catagory of controls. The worst effects are those from pollution, which is destroying the ecology and usefullness and very meaning as inspiration to man of natural features such as streams, rivers, and lakes; which is rendering the atmosphere locally poisonous and over wide areas injurious to health. The ultimate outcome if the trend if not halted will be a major human disaster. Pollution also occurs as a result of advertent distribution of chemicals on the landscape, without foreknowledge or investigation of the consequences of the application. The spraying of chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides and some of the herbicides are examples of this kind of abuse of the environment. The list of man's mistreatment of his surroundings is long; one would be severely challenged to find one example of environmental control which promised a long term benefit to man's welfare. His boast that he stands on the threshold of a new era when he will be able to modify his environment to suit his desires is idle. He knows not yet what measures to take; he knows not the long term consequences, nor even the short term effects of the methods he could apply. He knows still less the kind of environment he wants for himself or for his children. His ignorance is an index of the stranger he is to himself.

The artist is very much concerned with what is happening to the world, to the cities as well as to the country-side. To his concern, which is a manifestation of his obsession with nature, the subject matter of his art gives expression. Probably the explanation for the number of photographers who are making records of the urban human condition rests on their preoccupation with the nature of man in the cities where most of the photographers live. They are daily involved with the tension and ferment and discontent that infect and drive present day city dwellers, especially those that live in the slums and ghettos. It is in these poorer districts that photographers find most of their subject matter, or if not there then where people gather in the largest crowds. Painters express their involvement in city life less objectively, and by entirely different imaginative means, as for instance by the techniques of collage. Some modern sculpture is intensely realistic, human figures being portrayed in ordinary everyday activities, or in repulsive situations for their shock value. Even abstract expressionism and hard edged paintings are not uninfluenced by the nature and condition of man. They are either a negative response to insoluble problems by withdrawal into subjectivity, or are much more subtle manifestations of concern by an equally subjective perception, which expresses a parallel between the dissatisfaction of society and a groping art. If this interpretation is correct it clearly indicated the connection between non-objective art and man as part of nature, but even if rejected the connection itself is not disproved for it is impossible to conceive of anything that the artist does that could be inspired entirely from within himself. No one lives inside of a black vacuum; we all are in constant contact and communication with the world outside ourselves. Pure abstract art is impossible because as Picasso has said one has to begin with something. That something

may only be a thought, but the thought was generated by some outside experience.

The artist who lives in the country is equally inspired by nature, but much more by the nature from which so many men feel themselves apart. And he is concerned, as is the city man, by the changes taking place around him, which he may accept, or he may not, depending on his orientation. If he is conservation minded and a photographer too he may feel compelled to use his art to record the existing present state of nature in all its complexity and diversity just as the city photographer did with human subjects. He may focus on the big or the small, but part at least of his purpose will be to preserve in images those objects and relationships which by touching in his innermost being a cord of empathy with nature moved him most deeply. And in preserving these images he not only sublimates his emotion but states his conviction. His creations are a gift of himself to the world. He may also have the ulterior purpose to persuade others to accept his values. (It is artificial, I concede, to divide artists catagorically between city and country; they do not remain in such a rigid grouping but move about from one to the other. I used this device for the sake of the discourse.)

The painter's intention is to put on canvas not merely a literal rendering of the subject which inspired him - and in a quite different sense from the discussion above on the meaning of the abstract he abstracts the subject by separation and isolation from exterior reality - but his intention is also to convey with his image as strong an interpretation as possible of the emotions that the subject aroused in him in the first place. He is free to do this by many means inherent to his style of painting and very little controlled by literal representation. A free reign for spontaneous reactions working on an uninhibited imagination fosters the greatest originality and

most penetrating insight, which is to say more simply artistic sensitivity. The resulting interpretation may bear little relationship to the subject which inspired the creation.

The Photographer's approach is essentially opposite. Faced with an unbounded subject, he must select a piece of it which when isolated from the rest carries the full force of the emotions he experiences at the moment his attention was attracted by the scene. This fragment of nature if sensitively chosen should not only be an expression of his emotional involvement, it should intensify that involvement by concentrating and narrowing the elements of the subject into a denser complex. An inseparable part of this selecting process is the recording of the fragment in all its subtle intricacy. This is not to say that every subject must be full of fine detail; it is to say, however, that what is there should be made the most of. Part of this process of intensification results from leaving out the extraneous material. If everything were included the photograph would be too explicit, and, by leaving nothing to the imagination of the viewer, would tend to bore him. What is not included is implied by the context of the selection; and the boundaries of the picture act as a restraining force to concentrate the attention of the viewer.

The purpose of the artist, the painter or photographer, is to communicate. They speak to their audience. The photographer's attention is directed not merely to making from a scene a selection which he himself feels combines all the excitement and emotion he experienced at the moment he became cognizant of it, but to making this transfer so powerfully that those who view the result will at the very most share his first sensations on discovering the subject, or at least the sensations later aroused vicariously by the photograph. Because all people differ in their perceptions and tastes, such exact

correspondence of feeling is unlikely, but if the photograph elicits enough of a reaction in a viewer to hold his attention and perhaps to cause him to return for another look communication has taken place, and this is about as much as the artist should expect. Even assuming identity of feeling, no means of testing it exists for the reason that subjectivities have no common factors.

The major problem confronting the photographer in making his selection from a scene is to make sure that every part of the image contributes significantly to the whole. Everything included in the photograph must count, must add to its unity and integrity, no false notes must be permitted. If this is not always possible, the probable reason is that the scene does not give itself to this kind of selective division. The same problem applies to the painter, but he is free to arrange the elements of the subject to suit his taste not being bound by the rigidity of an optical image.

The criterion of beauty in judging the merit of a photograph is not a useful one. It carries a connotation of soft subjectivity. The most important attribute of a work of art, whatever the medium, is appeal. It must attract and hold attention. The subject matter is of minor importance. Some might call a subject beautiful, others ugly, but it could have a strong appeal for them both. A situation like this might arise in photographs of rubbish, of decayed vegetation, or of dead animals, and yet whether repellant or not they might each convey a powerful message. The implications in the content could be so thought provoking that no one would fail to be affected. Implied here is another attribute of art: besides being appealing it must say something; it must have a purpose. One of the common purposes of photography is to show nature in all its ramifications and complexity and attractiveness, in order to establish the case for its importance to men, in order

to stimulate an awareness of the psychological dependence of us all on uncorrupted nature. But this is not all that is required of the art of photography; it must carry the conviction of veracity otherwise all else will fail, the appeal will be compromised by doubts of authenticity, and the purpose will be suspect. Whatever devices are adopted to bring off the finished work, which the artist presents to his viewer, they must be candidly manifest in it. A photograph should elicit no feeling of indirection or deception because if it does its meaning and intent will be destroyed. Maximum advantage should be taken by the photographer of the equipment he uses; its capability should be squeezed to the limit. Thus, the optical image, the qualities of which no other medium can imitate, should be presented always in a way to feature its unique attributes. An intricate subject must of necessity, to contribute any significant meaning, be reproduced in all its fineness and complexity of detail. These are the imperatives of the photographic process.

The artist photographer, devoted to the portrayal of the natural scene, stands unequivocally committed to the proposition that the welfare of man is inextricably bound to a perpetuation of the multiplicity of his living environment.