

A Review of Ansel Adams « *Letters 1916-1984* »

My first contact with Ansel Adams was in 1981 when I first read his book on photography "The Negative". I was a 14 year old boy fascinated by photo darkroom techniques. In fact, this reading was one of the first to articulate the basic principles of photography to me.

A few years later, when I moved to California in 2002, I decided to honor Adams' memory. I studied some of his major photographs of the valley, I interviewed his relative who is still in charge of the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite village, and finally I took some large format photographs from the same point of views. Eventually, my photographs were published in the leading French hobbyist photo-magazine with a text I wrote about Yosemite Valley, encouraging tourists to walk in Adams' footsteps. It was my own way to walk in his footsteps, not only physically, but also showing the public how this region - that has been protected thanks to early environmentalists like Adams and John Muir - has changed over the last 50 years.

This oral history assignment gave me an additional opportunity to know Adams. He was prolific not only in term of photographic work, he also wrote thousand of letters sent all over the country to his friends, his family as well as his business partners. The book "Ansel Adams Letters 1916-1984" is a compilation of these letters, edited by Mary Street Alinder and Andrea Gray Stillman. Reviewing this excerpts, I found evidence that Adams not only embraced but preceded some of the concepts and ideologies we studied this semester.

Adams and Education.

The young Adams did not really fit in the classic American educational system even if there were many early proofs of his genuine brightness. For him, the first revelation was the San Francisco Panama-Pacific Exposition organized in 1915. Visiting the exhibit almost everyday, he was fascinated by the power of science and the magnificence of global diversity. The years following, he chose to dedicate a majority of his time to music until he discovered a competing passion, photography.

Adams did not attempt college and was mainly educated at home by private tutors and his parents. According to our lecture on education, it was quite unusual for the time especially for an upper class young man living in a city like San Francisco. The American college system was then well established. In fact, his father played a key role in Adams' education, giving guidance that built gradually his confidence. The excerpt below is a great example of his father's support.

"Ansel, there is one thing I want to speak of at this point, and that is: many is the young man who lives a straight, upright life during all his younger years; whose actual experience with the wrongs of life is nil. Suddenly, after all his young years following the straight and narrow path of rectitude, he meets with some character or, under some extraordinary circumstance, he falls from grace and great is the fall thereof. Had he been one who had not lived so carefully all his younger life, he would not have suffered so great a shock perhaps, for he would have been more or less hardened. It seems strange, but this happens in many cases and I am giving you a strong warning now, old man. Never deviate from the path you have blazed out for yourself at this time. It is a noble path and if you follow it strictly, you cannot make any mistake. Your life is successful, happy life; no matter what hardships you may have to endure." Letter from Charles Adams, father of Ansel, written from San Francisco July 5, 1922. (16)

Self-fulfillment.

With the uncommon but efficient education he received, Adams early on embraced the idea that self-fulfillment and self-improvement was the only way - for him -

to live a happy life. During their first years together, he discussed this particular subject with his wife, Virginia.

“I feel so much more the duty of life, and the necessity of improving myself and my Art to the last peak of my ability” Letter from Ansel Adams to his wife Virginia, written from San Francisco September 1925. (25)

In addition, he urged Virginia to follow the same path of personal fulfillment, insisting on his ideas in several other letters.

“Living for me is creative action; I am unsatisfied with simply existing. I can’t help it – it is part of my make-up. I want to know every moment how I can refine and intensify my relation with the world, and every moment make some definite contribution-some crystallization of a perception-some actual golden experience. That’s my idea; I don’t want you to copy it, or reflect me, but I do want you to be yourself- I mean truly YOURself. Letter from Ansel Adams to his wife Virginia, written from Sierra Club Outing Canada July 1928. (40)

In 1925, this particular vision of women in American society was really innovative for the time. In fact, the idea that all individuals - without any exception of sex or race - must take the opportunity to fulfill their needs to elevate themselves became common and well accepted only after the World War two. This idea was continuously developed by the writings of Elizabeth Stanton, and other feminist figures as well as sociologist like Margaret Mead.

In addition to his modern vision about women’s freedom, it is also possible to see in Adams’ ideology the influence of existentialism. This movement imported from Albert Camus’ early ideas, defines an authentic life was the one you choose to have for yourself. Authenticity became a key symbol of a modern live. Clearly, Adams embraced this individualistic approach, dedicating every minute of his life to his true passion, photography.

Art and American Society.

Even if Adams was already a great pianist as well as a talented photographer, he discovered the meaning of these activities a few years later. His definition of art explains his full dedication all along his life. By publishing his photographs, Adams gave multiple gifts to present and future generations.

“For the first time I know what love is; what friends are; what art should be. Love is a seeking for a way of live; the way that cannot be followed alone; the resonance of all spiritual and physical things. Children are not only of flesh and blood- children may be ideas, thoughts and the emotions that are within you, and flashing another king of light from within. Nor words or deeds may encompass it. Friendship is another form of love-more passive perhaps, but full of the transmitting and acceptances of things like thunderclouds and grass and the clean reality of granite. Art is both love and friendship, and understanding; the desire to give.” Letter from Ansel Adams to his friend Cedric Wright, written from Yosemite National Park June 10, 1937. (98)

Adams’ obsession for archival quality prints reflects his dedication to offer a vision that was going to last for generations. In addition, Adams has a great sense to not compromise his own path by accepting a commercial job that did not fit his ideals. For years, waiting for success while struggling economically, he questioned the role of Art – in particular the role of photography - in the upcoming modern American society.

“Would an enlightened proletariat bring art into its own? Or does it require a super-cultured and wealthy aristocracy to support the phosphorescent glows of surface-civilization?” Letter from Ansel Adams to his friend Alfred Stieglitz, written from San Francisco October 23, 1933. (97)

Effect of Crisis.

Adams was a witness of the situation of the great depression. As many other artists at that time he participated in government programs to help the reconstruction effort.

“The PWAP work here is fair – that in Los Angeles in much better. But all through it one can smell a self-conscious striving to be “contemporary”... Half of my friends here have gone frantic red and the other half have gone frantic NRA. The

artist occupies a sort of No-Man's Land." Letter from Ansel Adams to his friend Alfred Stieglitz, written from San Francisco May 20, 1934. (70)
PWAP: Government Public Works of Art Project provided employment to artists during Depression.
NRA: National Recovery Administration instituted by Congress and President Roosevelt.

He acknowledged the socialist trend of this era, without changing his strong initial trust in democracy. In 1925, he was writing to his wife that the Edward Carpenter's book "Towards Democracy" inspired his societal vision. Later, this political ideology drove his photographic work, preventing him to follow the "social photography" trend of the time. Despite the Great Depression and the trend to photograph the social struggle in America, Adams kept his focus on landscape photography.

"I still believe there is a real social significance in a rock – a more important significance therein than in a line of unemployed. For that opinion I am charged with inhumanity, unawareness- I am dead, through, finished, a social liability, one will be 'liquidated' when the 'great day' comes. Letter from Ansel Adams to his friend Edward Weston, written from San Francisco November 29, 1934. (70)

Adams was a strong believer in America, politically speaking as well as physically: he really loved California and the West landscapes. He was convinced of the supremacy of the American model even in the middle of the strongest trouble years of America.

"I repeat, America is a land of joy – more than any other land. With all the misery, all the economic troubles, and the crack-pot politicians, we are still the most liberal, the best off, and the most beautiful country in the world. I am very far from being 'Patriotic,' but I do resent untruths, exaggeration, false color in relation to the land in which I work and live. Let us show everything that is false and inhuman, sordid and without hope, without alleviation of the larger fact and our infection can only widen and deepen and eventually consume us.

This strong argument supporting America is largely comparable to the one published by Anna Arendt a few years later. These times of difficulties were also a great opportunity for Americans to value the origins of their country, freedom and democracy.

War and Adams' work.

Looking forward to help during the war effort (WW2), Adams found a great and new subject in denouncing segregation and racism. He did not photograph the worker lines during the depression, but he visited the Manzanar Relocation Center to capture the distress of hundreds of Japanese American citizens isolated by law from the rest of the society. Before the Civil Rights movement, Adams' views about freedom of individual forced him to move for a while from his landscape to portrait photography.

"But, the most important job I have done this year is politically 'hot' and therefore 'confidential'. Dorothea Lange and Dorothy Norman know about it because I have just written them for some advice, and I am anxious that you know about it too. I was asked to do some pictures at the Manzanar Relocation Center...In effect these pictures imply a test of true Americanism, and suggest an approach to treatments of other minority groups. I may be wrong but I feel I have material of tremendous value. I have tried unsuccessfully to get into some work relating to the war effort...We will undoubtedly win a complete military victory soon but then what? Big business seems crouched and ready to spring as soon as the guns stop booming. I refuse to think that the fruits of this terrible war will be plastic bobbypins, streamlined bathrooms, aluminum summer houses, the ability to get nowhere faster than ever before, and televised soap operas... Letter from Ansel Adams to his friend Nancy Newhall, written from Yosemite 1943. (146)

This particular work of Adams is not the most popular today. However, it demonstrates his views on the ideologies that were to shape modern America.

In 1981, in a letter published in the San Jose Mercury News against Mr. Watt acts, Adams writes, "I do not intend, at the age of 79, to now back and observe the destruction of our environment... We can work together with clarity, truth and dignity to protect our irreplaceable heritage". Until the very end of his life, Adams was a man fully dedicated to his ideals, democracy, equality, art and ecology.

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