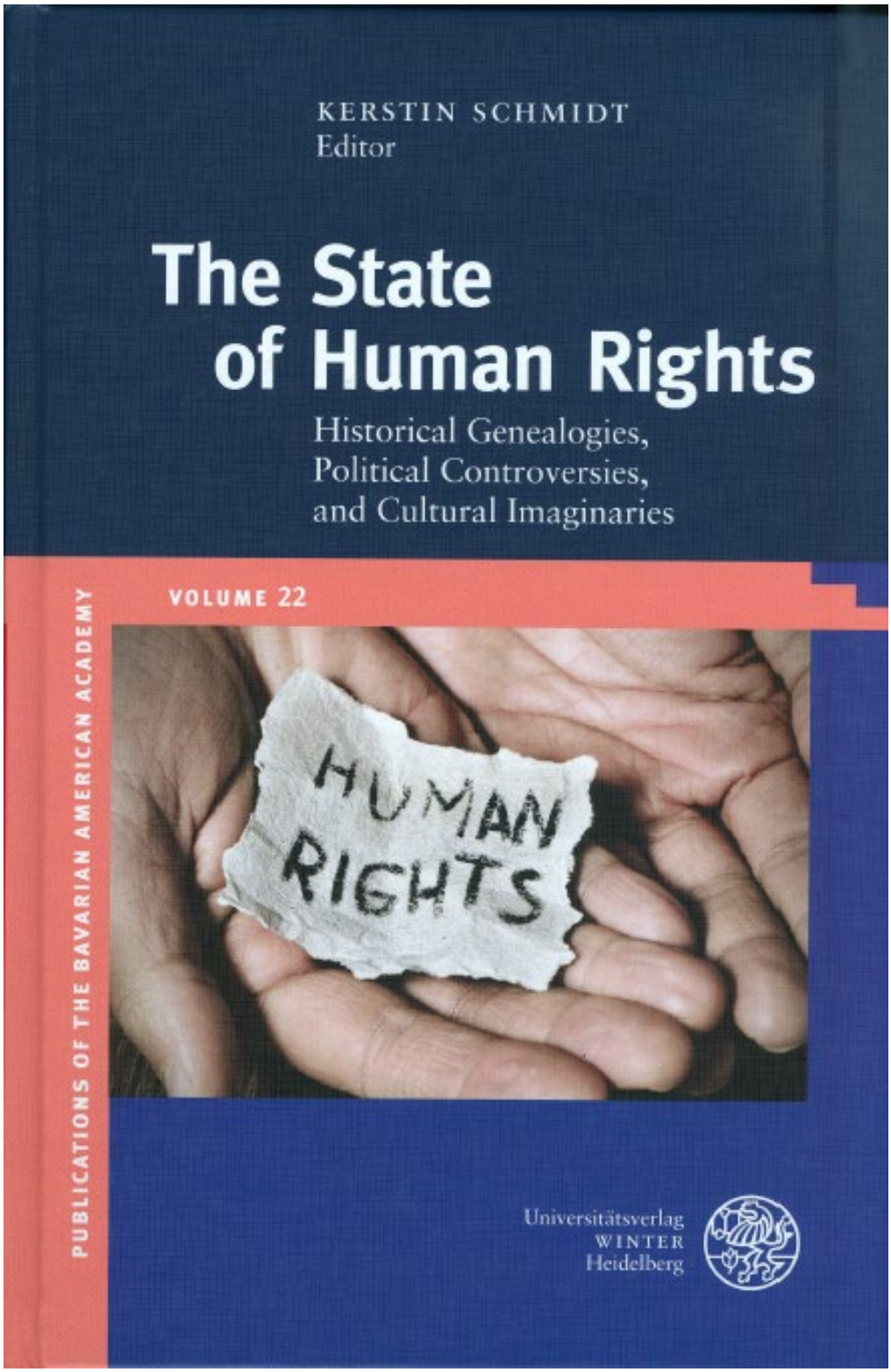

Hurm, Gerd. "'The Family of Man' (1848/1955): Feminist Foremothers, Women's Rights, and Human Rights."

The State of Human Rights: Historical Genealogies, Political Controversies, and Cultural Imaginaries. Ed. Kerstin Schmidt. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020. 209-234.

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The Family of Man (1848/1955): Feminist Foremothers, Women's Rights, and Human Rights

Gerd Hurm

> Today, amid an ever-growing abundance of images depicting the violation of human rights across the globe, I suggest returning to this landmark exhibition [*The Family of Man*], viewed by millions of spectators worldwide, as a seminal event in the history of the relationship between photography and human rights, and reading it as an archive containing the visual proxy of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
>
> Ariella Azoulay (2013)

> When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal.
>
> Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1848)

> My mother began the exhibition.
>
> Edward Steichen (1965)[1]

I.

Recent scholarship on Edward Steichen's 1955 epochal photo-text installation *The Family of Man*, simultaneously one of the most influential and contested modernist works of art, has reestablished its close and intricate relationship with the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Ariella Azoulay even suggested that *The Family of Man* should itself be treated as a "visual universal declaration of human rights" (2013: 48). Evidently, the inspirational and political origins for the installation can be found in Edward Steichen's extended involvement in 1930s liberal and civil rights issues and his subsequent invitation in

[1] The quotes are taken from Azoulay 2013: 20; Campbell 34; and Steichen 1965. I would like to thank Steven E. Alford, Ann Marie Fallon, Suzanne Ferriss, Romain Girtgen, Hedwig Hinzmann, Anke Reitz, and Danielle Vey Weider for their help in preparing this essay.

1950 to participate in a UNESCO committee which was "to study the problem of how the Visual Arts can contribute to the dissemination of information on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Pohl 103). At that point, Steichen could look back at a close political affiliation with Eleanor Roosevelt, the former first lady and human rights advocate, who had been chosen to head the UN Charter draft committee after the end of World War II. When, in 1955, Roosevelt visited the opening event of *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she publicly noted her pleasure at seeing the conspicuous location of "the photograph of the United Nations General Assembly with the words of the Charter" (Roosevelt 219). Steichen had magnified Maria Bordy's photo of the General Assembly to figure as one of the largest prints of all in *The Family of Man* and had placed it prominently toward the installation's climactic end (see Fig. 1). The accompanying quote from the UN Charter stressed Steichen's particular women's rights focus by highlighting the importance of the "equal rights of men and women."

Fig. 1: *The Family of Man* installation at Clervaux Castle.
Photo: Maria Bordy ©CNA/Romain Girtgen, 2019.[2]

Despite the installation's manifest emphasis on women's human rights issues, as for example in the exposure given to a series of photos depicting French, Turkish,

[2] I would like to thank the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel (CNA) in Luxembourg and in particular Romain Girtgen, Paul Lesch, and Anke Reitz for providing the pictures and the permission to reproduce the installation photographs from *The Family of Man* collection at Clervaux Castle.

Japanese, and Chinese women casting ballots for the first time in their lives (see Fig. 3), thus far little scholarly attention has been paid to the suffragist contexts of its title phrase "the family of man." While the potential patriarchal, imperial, and heteronormative connotations of the term have been amply discussed, its relationship to the proto-feminist 1848 Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments" has not been explored in depth.[3] In the context of the socialist politics in the turn-of-the century Steichen household, the 1848 transnational link between suffragism and abolitionism, between women's rights and civil rights was crucial. Edward Steichen's mother Mary Kemp Steichen and his sister Lilian Steichen were engaged activists who kept alive the politics of their "feminist foremothers" (Hewitt 134), in particular Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Seneca Falls claim that "the family of man" guaranteed that "all men and women" were created equal. The suffragist stance in the Steichen home was deeply ingrained in Edward Steichen. In the early phases of his career, he would be known among his female colleagues as being "unusually enlightened in his opinions about women's rights" (Niven 297).

One predominant reason why this historical link between women's rights language and *The Family of Man* has been overlooked in discussions about the installation's politics is Roland Barthes's influential and tone-setting 1956 essay "The Great Family of Man." Since Barthes claimed that "the family of man" was a "phrase belonging to zoology" (275), his essay directed the attention away from the 1848 Seneca Falls discourse and instead evoked natural science connotations of neutrality and ahistoricity. In effect, Barthes naturalized and depoliticized a decidedly historical term, performing the same universalizing maneuver which he explicitly criticized in Steichen's installation.[4] In David Damrosch's telling words, Barthes simply did "not see what was before his eyes" (59).[5] As a consequence,

[3] Several critics have argued a patriarchal bias in *The Family of Man* that was "only too evident in the exhibition's title" (Tallack qtd. in Hurm 2018: 466). Allan Sekula, for instance, blamed the installation for universalizing "the bourgeois nuclear family." For him, the family served as a metaphor that cemented a repressive "system of international discipline and harmony" (89). For Blake Stimson, "the family concept developed by the exhibition" served a "new imperial function" (68). As Siep Stuurman argued, however, it would be too one-sided to claim that Steichen's world was simply "a patriarchal one" (522).

[4] Barthes claimed: "Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices.' [...] This myth of the human 'condition' rests on a very old mystification, which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History. Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins […] one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature" (275).

[5] Damrosch emphasized the human rights dimension of the exhibition: "Barthes had […] missed the real drama of the exhibit […]. From the middle of the volume onward, page after page juxtaposes scenes in America with scenes in South Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia, endorsing literacy, voting rights, and human rights generally. Far from accepting a repressive status quo in the name of universal values, the exhibit was actually doing the opposite:

recent contributions to Steichen scholarship have challenged and refuted Barthes's flawed account.[6] For Ariella Azoulay, for instance, "it is not a lack of interest in history that we encounter in *The Family of Man*, but rather a different understanding of history based on a different set of assumptions" (2016: 118).[7]

The present essay will discuss and redefine the complex contexts and relationships which connect the issues of human rights, women's rights, and civil rights with the open, modernist aesthetics of *The Family of Man.* Undoubtedly, a historically differentiated view of the installation's innovative foregrounding of intercultural communication, emancipation, and pacifism is as vital today as it was when it was presented in the aftermath of McCarthyist hysteria and in the midst of the threat of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War. It is also pertinent since the former traveling installation can now be viewed again in its original design. Since 1994, it has been permanently displayed in the Museum Castle Clervaux in Steichen's native Luxembourg. Ultimately, an examination of the complex connotations evoked by the women's rights title phrase is overdue given Steichen's specific reception aesthetics which stressed the substantial impact of verbal and visual contexts in viewing pictures.

A critical look at the human rights implications of the term "the family of man" may thus help to initiate a differentiated understanding of this much debated work of modernism with all its historical strengths, weaknesses, surprises, and contradictions. In Max Horkheimer's opening address for *The Family of Man* in Frankfurt 1958, a central document recently rediscovered in Steichen scholarship, the founder of critical theory pointedly emphasized the installation's progressive egalitarian potential:

> This exhibition [...] is a symbol of common bonds among human beings that are shared in spite of many political differences; it is a symbol of their essential identity despite differences in their individual and national character [...]. The very great success the exhibition has had everywhere seems to me not least of all to be due to its particular philosophical outlook [...]. It is representative of all the forces that are now counteracting the severe cultural shocks and regressive movements that have occurred in Europe in recent years. In this context it is eminently constructive. (49)

With its central positioning of the UN charter, human rights politics in Steichen's *The Family of Man* were indeed eminently progressive and constructive in 1955.

promoting an activist agenda of social change, aimed squarely against forces of political and economic oppression around the world" (58).

6 See, for instance, the contributions by Sandeen; Guittard; Damrosch; Azoulay; Marchessault; Turner; Hurm 2015; and the essays in Hurm et al.

7 In contradistinction to the present approach, Azoulay is not interested in spelling out "Steichen's vision." She examines *The Family of Man* as an expression of a "public archive" (2016: 118).

II.

> We, the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small [...].
>
> UN Charter (1945)

> Seeking equality of opportunity for Negroes with all Americans, the Urban League works for the benefit of all peoples, building toward the creation of a true "Family of Man." Edward Steichen's exhibition narrates the Urban League credo with an eloquence seldom before seen or heard.
>
> Urban League of New York (1955)[8]

The 1848 Seneca Falls convention, which introduced the phrase of "the family of man" to American national discourse, originated from a confluence of two powerful transnational movements: abolitionism and suffragism. The story of events which triggered the first American women's rights convention is well known: in 1840 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott wanted to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London with their husbands. When they were excluded from the event based on their sex, they decided to organize a women's rights conference in the United States. In 1848, some three hundred people thus convened in Seneca Falls in upstate New York to proclaim the equality of women and men. In a highly symbolic move, Elizabeth Cady Stanton used the title of the 1833 abolitionist "Declaration of Sentiments" as the heading for the Seneca Falls declaration. It visibly documented that the two movements were closely connected by narratives of oppression and enslavement. As the overall blueprint for her women's rights declaration, Stanton selected the national slave narrative of the 1776 "Declaration of Independence." However, she also suggestively altered two key phrases in its preamble. First, she rejected the patriarchal bias of the 18th-century document to encompass "all men and women." More important, she replaced the nationalist focus on "one people" with a transnational emphasis on "the family of man." As Brian Norman has argued, adding these gendered factions to the document opened the national narrative for other underprivileged groups:

> The re-vision also draws on familial discourse in order to provide women an entry point into state language and to include the whole family of the citizenry. Whereas the original Declaration imagines a universal model of Peoples that can "dissolve the political bands" between them when necessary, the re-vision draws on the language of humanity as 'the family of man,'" which includes

[8] The quotes are taken from Steichen 1955:184 and Moutoussamy-Ashe 110.

> gendered factions. [...] The Declaration of Sentiment's insertion of a particular group into a universalist founding document opens the possibility for other excluded factions to follow suit [...]. (48)

Stanton's inclusion of the phrase "the family of man" implied for her a fundamental readjustment of gender relations. In an address delivered in the context of the Seneca Falls convention, Stanton elaborated on her feminist rhetorical strategy. She clarified that conceiving the national body politic as a transnational "human family" empowered her to imagine the public role of women in distinct terms. Stanton connected the global with the local and the public with the private in arguing that "the beautiful earth" is at once "her home as it is his" (Campbell 43). By equating the domestic sphere with the "earth," she attempted to empower women both in the private realm of the home and in the global public spaces outside the home to get involved in political issues that pertained to the "whole human family" (42). For the Seneca Falls "feminist foremothers," the phrase of "the family of man" evidently implied a potentially radical redefinition of gender relations. It did not, as it did for a long time in the mainstream mode of interpretations of *The Family of Man* in the last quarter of the 20th century, signal restrictively an oppressive "patriarchal power" and the biased view of a white American bourgeois family (Mélon 77).

In Edward Steichen's installation, which nine million women and men saw all across the "beautiful earth" between 1955 and 1962, this confluence of suffragist and abolitionist discourses is visually embodied in Consuelo Kanaga's 1951 photo of an African-American mother with her children (see Fig. 2). As Steichen revealed after completing the selection process for the installation, Kanaga's portrait was his "favorite photograph in the entire exhibition" (Millstein and Lowe 45). For Steichen, it embodied a complex expression of his open and progressive conceptions of familial discourse. As a consequence of this high esteem, Kanaga's portrait was positioned prominently in the installation's crucial opening section, towering over a host of contrary family configurations. As Shamoon Zamir has shown in a close reading of this particular sequence, the iconic image of Kanaga's African-American mother is of paramount importance to a critical reassessment of *The Family of Man* (141-47).[9] Ultimately, the conspicuous position given to Kanaga's photo is also Steichen's tribute to the powerful women and female artists whose company and contributions he valued highly. His liberal stance and unflinching support were recognized at the time by his female colleagues. As Kanaga made public herself, Steichen was more than a supportive museum director who had courageously showcased her art when she was as yet a little-known leftist photographer: "I hardly knew him [Edward Steichen] but he

[9] The composition was "influenced by the work of Sargent Johnson, a black sculptor she [Kanaga] knew in San Francisco whom she greatly admired" (Millstein and Lowe 45).

was the best friend (to my whole self that includes my work) I've ever had" (Millstein and Lowe 211).

Fig. 2: *The Family of Man* installation at Clervaux Castle.
Photo: Consuelo Kanaga ©CNA/ Romain Girtgen, 2019.

III.

My mother had a millinery store on Third Street, and I came home from school when I was about seven or eight years old and as I closed the door of the store I yelled out to a boy in the street, "You dirty kike!" My mother called me over to her – she was waiting on a customer – and asked me what I had said. I freely repeated it; and so she excused herself from her customer, locked the door of the store, and took me upstairs to our apartment. [...] She told me that all the people in the world were alike regardless of race, creed or color. She even quoted the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to me [...]. It was a stupid thing, all prejudice – and that was nothing but prejudice, she said – all prejudices are bad. And I have come to the conclusion that she was right about that. And that lesson I think was the groundwork for "The Family of Man." My mother began the exhibition.

Edward Steichen (1965)

> I contend that in a period of open state censorship and aggressive anti-left realpoliticking, Steichen's humanism cannot be reduced in any simplistic fashion to pro-imperialist propaganda. [...] In a period when the representation of black peoples in the illustrated magazines as other than victims and 'primitives' was politically non-existent, Steichen includes a number of non-stereotypical images of black Americans at work and play.
>
> John Roberts (1998)[10]

The anecdote of Mary Kemp Steichen's human rights lesson, given to her son Edward in the multicultural and socialist Milwaukee of the late 1880s, provides a telling instance of the advanced politics of *The Family of Man.* For almost half a century, this American domestic jeremiad on tolerance, anti-Semitism, and anti-racism was completely ignored in critical interpretations. One reason for this neglect was that the former avant-garde rebel Edward Steichen had been turned into a "compromised" figure in the course of the 20th century (Rasula 191). More often than not, he was cast in the paternalistic role of a "functionary of conservative cultural forces" (Bezner 128).[11] Mary Kemp Steichen, too, was assigned the role of a cliched "saintly mother" in criticism.[12] However, as the advice given to her son clearly indicates, she was a driving force behind the political and artistic radicalization of her children. Her daughter Lilian would take on the role of a "wild socialist girl" (Sandburg 1978: 147), committed to progressive politics and women's rights activism, whereas Edward became the rebel photographer and "*enfant terrible*" of a socialist-inspired transnational art scene (Niven 100). Since critics have not explored the specifics of suffragist discourses in the Milwaukee household, this crucial political context has been largely omitted from interpretations of *The Family of Man.*[13]

In particular, the role of Lilian Steichen deserves a closer look in the women's rights context of the present essay. It was Lilian, after all, who radicalized the Steichen home: "One thing I have done for my brother. I've helped make a socialist of him – just as I helped make one of mother" (Sandburg 1987: 12). Socialist politics and human rights causes were at this point in history, as

[10] The quotes are taken from Steichen 1965 and Roberts 124.

[11] The gallery owner and photography critic Helen Gee even spoke of a "Steichen-bashing phenomenon" (Bezner 171).

[12] Louis Kaplan was the first critic to integrate the episode in a critical reading of *The Family of Man.* For him, the passage signaled a conservative "tribute to his [Steichen's] saintly mother and the universality of motherly love" (68).

[13] Steichen's 1963 autobiography *A Life in Photography*, written and published after two strokes at the age of 84, did not help to fill the gap – it is completely silent, for instance, on his early Luxembourg and socialist experiences. As Ronald J. Gedrim has pointed out some time ago, it may be more revealing to examine what Steichen's account excludes than what it includes (4). For a distinct account of Edward Steichen's early years, see my short biography.

Micheline Ishay has noted, closely allied.[14] Lilian established herself early on as an outspoken intellectual and suffrage activist in the Steichen family: she studied in Chicago with Thorstein Veblen, translated socialist pamphlets from German into English, read Karl Marx, and became an engaged member of the Social Democratic Party of America. In 1907 in Milwaukee she dated and subsequently married the then little-known party organizer and socialist poet Carl Sandburg. Lilian was also responsible for the Steichen home becoming a meeting place for critical minds, counting some of the nation's most significant socialists among the Steichen family friends.[15] In 1910, the Milwaukee Social Democratic Party managed to vote Emil Seidel into office as the first socialist mayor of any major American city. When in office, Lilian's husband Carl became Seidel's first secretary. On hearing about the Milwaukee election success, Edward congratulated his sister on their victory. For him, with his political allies in power, the world was again, after all, a "great place." As he told his sister, just a few years prior socialists had been treated as if they were "half-criminal" (Steichen qtd. in Niven 213).

With Edward's success as an artist and curator in Europe, Lilian hoped that her brother would launch art that could "help the movement" (Sandburg 1987: 12). She explicitly urged him early on to create "art for the masses" (10). Even though Edward saw himself primarily as a vanguard artist and not as a rebel in the political field, he committed himself to various liberal and socialist causes at different points throughout his career. In 1907, for instance, he attended the first International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany, and photographed leading figures, among them August Bebel, George Bernard Shaw, Jean Jaurès, and Karl Liebknecht. In the following year, he had his photos included in Robert Hunter's 1908 key publication *Socialists at Work*.

Steichen's belief that collective endeavors in the art world could improve conditions for all may certainly be related to Lilian's socialist interventions. In 1916, for instance, in a letter to Lilian, he expressed his hope that other artists would join him to stop the mass murder of World War I. He explicitly referenced Karl Marx and rewrote his "call" in demanding, "Artists of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your penury egotistic self [sic]."[16] His 1955 efforts in *The Family of Man* seem foreshadowed in this appeal to his sister in 1916. He voiced similarly strong pacifist sentiments and argued for a collective artistic attempt at addressing warfare atrocities. The UN Charter passage which Steichen attached in

[14] For a detailed account of the vital relationship between the international orientation of socialist politics and the spread of the idea of universal human rights, see Ishay 118-72.

[15] Melinda Boyd Parsons noted: "Among the socialist friends of the Steichens were Winfield Gaylord, a state senator on the Social-Democratic Party (S.D.P.) ticket; Elizabeth Thomas, the S.D.P. secretary in Milwaukee; Carl Thompson, the S.D.P. state organizer; Victor Berger, a leading S.D.P. member; Emil Seidel, Milwaukee's first socialist mayor; and Charles Whitnall, the city treasurer under Seidel" (85).

[16] Steichen's letter has been quoted in parts in Niven (439), but the passage in which he explicitly evokes Karl Marx was not reprinted. The original manuscript is in the Carl Sandburg Collection in the University of Illinois Library at Urbana, Illinois.

The Family of Man to Maria Bordy's photo of the General Assembly echoed precisely such political beliefs. It reaffirms the "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small" to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Fig. 3: *The Family of Man* installation at Clervaux Castle.
Photos: Herman Kreider, John Florea, Dmitri Kessel ©CNA/Romain Girtgen, 2019.

Steichen's intermittent work for NGOs in the 1920s and 1930s, his early commitment in his portrait "The Matriarch" (1935) to fighting an emergent anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, and his engagement in championing New Deal documentary photography are tributes to his earlier political socialization.[17] His subsequent support for Consuelo Kanaga, a leftist photographer and Photo League member, is in line with his 1930s civil rights and women's rights activities. His championing of her art reflects his general cooperation with and assistance of female colleagues. Throughout his career, Steichen helped women photographers to start or to boost their careers. For example, he was a key figure in having Lee Miller pick up photography in the late 1920s. He also was a major force in discovering and launching Dorothea Lange's art. She was an obscure regional portrait photographer when he promoted her pre-New Deal image "White Angel Breadline" (1932) in the first edition of the prestigious *U.S. Camera Annual 1935*. He was centrally involved, a year later, in presenting Lange's signature photograph, her "Migrant Mother" (1936), to a national art audience in *U.S. Camera Annual 1936*. He then featured Lange's work conspicuously in his photo essay in the *U.S. Camera Annual 1939*, one of the most innovative and politically persuasive presentations of New Deal documentary photography at the time.[18] In

[17] *The New York Times* selected his portrait "The Matriarch," made for the Federation of Jewish Charities, as "the most striking individual photo" in an exhibition at Ehrich-Newhouse Galleries in 1935 (Zorzi 217).

[18] John Raeburn summarized its significance: "Steichen's most palpable contribution to affirming documentary's stature was an appreciation of the FSA project in the 1939 [U.S. Camera] annual. His endorsement would have carried special weight under any circumstances,

1949, in his new function as the director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art, Steichen almost immediately curated the first group exhibition of women photographers ever at the museum. Given this record, it need not come as a "surprise" that *The Family of Man* included an impressively high number of female photographers "more than one finds nowadays in most large group exhibitions" (Solomon-Godeau 35). Or that he chose the human rights activist Dorothy Norman to select the text passages which accompanied the pictures in the installation.

It is in this 1930s socialist and liberal political context that the phrase "the family of man" resurfaces in Steichen's work. To be precise, the term reenters the Steichen family discourse through Carl Sandburg's biographical writings on Abraham Lincoln (Sandeen 43, 177). While the exact source has not yet been established, it is crucial to know that the reputation of Lincoln, in the Steichen household and in other socialist homes, was that of a "pioneer suffragist" (Schwartz 133). In her feminist talks to Milwaukee women's groups, Lilian presented "Lincoln as an example of the true spirit of socialism" (Niven 215), following Karl Marx who had addressed Lincoln as the "single-minded son of the working class" (Kulikoff 105). Likewise, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was seen by socialists as one of "their own" (Buhle 140). In the 1930s, with "the family of man" on his mind and his image/text essay on FSA documentary photography in print, Steichen seems to have revived his 1916 idea of a collective art effort. He imagined an ambitious exhibition of photography organized around a central theme. Wayne Miller recalled that Steichen "hoped to use the Grand Central Station […] where all the people going back and forth from work could see it, in the heart of Manhattan" (Phillips 16). However, World War II annulled these plans for a huge public art installation.

Only after the war did Steichen become crucially involved with Consuelo Kanaga's 1930s political art. In 1948, he saw her powerful portrait of the militant union sharecropper Annie Mae Merriweather (1935), the political victim of a much-discussed incident of racist violence, and purchased it for his private collection. At the Museum of Modern Art, Steichen championed Kanaga's Merriweather portrait and included it in an outstanding 1948 MoMA exhibition, "50 Photographs by 50 Photographers." The show was to present "an abbreviated

but the lily was gilded with another piece in the same number reprising his own long and distinguished career. Moreover, his was the first synoptic assessment of the three-year-old FSA project. He aimed to erase any doubts that documentary deserved to be included in the republic of photography and to install the FSA photographers as its most important adepts. He entirely succeeded, not least in Washington. Roy Stryker, head of the FSA's Historical Section, jubilantly reported to Lange that Steichen's endorsement had 'done no end of good here' and that he was 'astounded [...] at the number of people who have been impressed by this job,' including especially his superiors in the federal agency" (102-03). For a detailed account of the larger background issues, see my essays on "Faking and the F.S.A." and on "Barack Obama and Edward Steichen."

history of photography" (Millstein and Lowe 44).[19] In his comments, Steichen emphasized the portrait's political and civil rights dimension: "Look at the face. All the turmoil and suffering of oppression is captured in that one picture and yet it's a most simple subject" (Millstein and Lowe 39).

Steichen's advocacy on behalf of Kanaga and Merriweather was not an isolated instance, but a continuation of his earlier human and civil rights commitment to African-American activists, artists, and art in the 1920s and 1930s. Steichen used his prestige as a leading fashion and celebrity photographer to publish the first and only full-page pictures of African-American artists in *Vanity Fair* in this period, paying tribute to the greatness of jazz singer and vaudeville performer Florence Mills (1925), actor Richard B. Harrison (1930), and early civil rights activist and singer-actor Paul Robeson (1933). He also helped Langston Hughes in raising funds for a retrial in the Scottsboro Boys case in 1934 (Karman 300). The careers of African-American photographers Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava were launched directly or with the help of Edward Steichen (Fax 177). In addition, he headed a committee which investigated allegations of discriminations against African-American artists in the photo industry. An outcome of this commission was the African-American photography workshop Kamoinge, founded in New York. In the early 1960s, finally, the National Urban League planned to take his *The Family of Man* as a model for a civil rights-inspired photography installation with the title "America's Many Faces." Steichen was asked to serve as the jury chair for the exhibition which was to dramatize America's multiracial character.[20]

Viewed within these contemporary contexts, Steichen's choice of Kanaga's portrait of an African-American mother with her children as a central photo in *The Family of Man* indicates that his treatment of African-American and female subjects, of civil rights and women's rights issues was much more complex and complicated than previous discussions have suggested. Roland Barthes's claim that the conservative organizers of *The Family of Man* needed to be reminded of the racist murder of Emmett Till and how the Till family would have responded to the exhibition has tended to obliterate Steichen's committed stance. Barthes simply did not recognize other references to racial violence which Steichen included in *The Family of Man.* Near Kanaga's family portrait the installation featured a prominent quote by the American best-selling author Lillian Smith. For 1950s audiences, Smith's name and work would have been immediately associated with her novel *Strange Fruit* which had caused a national scandal in highlighting the issues of racist violence and lynching. In 1955, Smith revived her reputation as an engaged writer by publishing a volume entitled *Now is the Time* in which she advanced the

[19] For a reproduction of Consuelo Kanaga's portrait of Merriweather in this exhibition, see <www.moma.org/collection/works/49580>.

[20] See Taha (236) and Gee (274). Via Roy DeCarava, Steichen initiated the first Kamoinge show in the Danbury Academy of Art in Connecticut in 1964 (Barboza et al. 75).

urgency of civil rights protest (Hurm 2018: 35).[21] The degree to which Barthes misjudged contemporary African-American responses to *The Family of Man* can be pinpointed with the exemplary responses of the New York Urban League which noted that Steichen's exhibition narrated an enlightened African-American credo "with an eloquence seldom before seen or heard" and with the reactions of the civil rights activist Angela Davis. As one of her fellow students recalled, Davis put up a wide selection of photos from *The Family of Man* on the walls of her student housing. Set within the context of 1950s political discourses, Steichen's installation clearly took a progressive and not, as Barthes insinuated, a reactionary humanist stance.[22]

Even more important, a debate about the installation's treatment of civil rights and human rights issues needs to consider its use of photos within a general shift in Steichen's political aesthetics in *The Family of Man.* As has been noted with regard to his pacifist, anti-nuclear stance in the installation, Steichen wanted to explore a critical, yet also distinctly positive approach. He wanted to highlight the "wonderful" things which might be lost in case of a nuclear war:

> Although I had presented war in all its grimness in three exhibitions, I had failed to accomplish my mission. I had not incited people into taking open and united action against war itself. This failure made me take stock of my fundamental idea. What was wrong? I came to the conclusion that I had been working from a negative approach, that what was needed was a positive statement on what a wonderful thing life was, how marvelous people were, and, above all, how alike people were in all parts of the world. (1963: ch. 13, np)

A similar attitude, a shift towards "a positive statement," of "how alike people were in all parts of the world" applies to his presentation of civil rights and women's rights demands in *The Family of Man.* In addition to showing the destructive sides and the cruelties of racism, the photographs highlight the dignity and poise of oppressed subjects (see Fig. 4). The choice of distinctive images by Roy DeCarava, the first African-American artist to obtain, with the assistance of Steichen, a Guggenheim fellowship to photograph 1950s Harlem, is telling. DeCarava's portraits present a shift in focus on the strength, joy, and pride of Harlem citizens. Steichen's plea for a change in aesthetics is backed at this point by his African-American artist colleague Langston Hughes. In January 1955, the month that *The Family of Man* opened in New York, Hughes wrote to his publisher about DeCarava's photos that it was about time to depict in a book the positive sides of the lives of African Americans: "We've had so many books about how bad life is [...] that it would seem to me to do no harm to have one along about *now*

[21] Zamir argues that the "Kanaga photograph of the African American mother and her two children [...] already asks the question about history and difference that Barthes wants to address to the exhibition" (143).

[22] Arthur Ollman, personal communication, Clervaux, Luxembourg, November 4, 2018.

affirming its value" (Rampersad 244).[23] The resulting publication was Roy DeCarava's and Langston Hughes's landmark collaboration *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), a "turning point," Miles Orvell notes, "in African American photography" (119). Significantly, some of DeCarava's affirmative *Sweet Flypaper* photos were selected for *The Family of Man*, expressing the human rights hope for better race relations in the future.[24]

IV.

> [I]f we recognize how much a democratic community depends on the ability of its members to learn a kind of cooperative individualism, then we will no longer be able to ignore the political and moral significance of the family. The psychological prerequisites for nearly all of the attitudes that individuals must have in order to use their individual skills and abilities to participate in the affairs of the greater society, beyond all attachments to particular communities, are all created in intact, trusting and egalitarian families. [...] a democratic community would have to do everything in its power [...] to enable families to realize their independent forms of interaction, which would then ultimately promote attitudes of social cooperation.
>
> Axel Honneth (2011: 174)

> [Home] has been seen as existing outside the flux and change of an authentically modern life. Yet home is not always linked to tradition and opposed to autonomy and self-definition: on the contrary, it has been central to many women's experience of modernity. A feminist theory of everyday life might question the assumption that being modern requires an irrevocable sundering from home, and might simultaneously explicate the modern dimensions of everyday experiences of home.
>
> Rita Felski (2000: 69)

[23] Catherine Blinder argues that DeCarava similarly established Harlem "as an idea of community in familial terms." She sees parallels between DeCarava's approach and "*The Family of Man* project" which proposed "an idea of family as superseding individual tribal and national antagonisms" (202). In his 1963 autobiography, Steichen had explicitly mentioned that he was aware of potential "negative implications" of a conventional human rights take on the subject. "At the time," he notes, "human rights was becoming an international political football" (*Life* ch. 13, np). His open, positive aesthetics, as reflected in DeCarava's Harlem portraits, was to provide a space which protected civil rights and human rights from Cold War entanglements.

[24] Steichen's shift in aesthetic strategy may explain in parts the removal of a lynching photograph from the installation towards the end of the New York exhibition (Bezner 163). For a detailed discussion of this aspect, see a forthcoming publication on *The Family of Man* by Shamoon Zamir.

In providing a conspicuous prominence for Consuelo Kanaga's portrait of family and motherhood, *The Family of Man* poignantly resumed a mid-century debate about the gendered dimension of human rights. Clearly, with his installation Edward Steichen celebrated the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a major step in the political emancipation of women "in his lifetime" (1958: 166). But his montage of photos also continued the discussion about a gender bias within human rights advocacy, as for instance, in the striking absence of the "rights of motherhood" (Lake 268) in the 1948 *Universal Declaration*. Even though human rights were conceived as universal rights, they still reflected and perpetuated a male, individualistic view of life, family, and politics. As Marilyn Lake has argued "those rights were defined with reference to a male standard, addressing a masculine experience of the world, masculine anxieties and hopes. In this conceptual framework, 'equality' rested on the disavowal of sexual difference or its incorporation into a politics of protection" (269). The distinctive rights of women, mothers, and children were thus not recognized adequately by the United Nations. Feminist voices had argued in vain for their inclusion.[25]

The Family of Man commits itself at large to women's rights by providing a distinct "set of assumptions" in its installation (Azoulay 2016: 118). Most importantly, its discursive emphasis on women, family, and community readjusted its focus on human rights.[26] By trying to capture the "universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life," its open, progressive aesthetics contested the primacy of male conceptions of work and life (Steichen 1955: 5). In particular, *The Family of Man* displays in its montage of images distinct assessments of everydayness, home, and domesticity. In her reassessment of gender politics in the postwar period, Judy Giles argues precisely the necessity for such a reconception of modern modes of domesticity:

> [M]odernity for millions of women was about working to create a space called 'home' in which violence, insecurity, disease, discomfort and pain were things of the past. This could provide women with a sense of citizenship and a stake in the future. Most importantly working to create 'better' homes offered many women the opportunity to see themselves as having a central role in achieving, what is believed to be the project of modern social existence, the right to define their own futures and the capacity to be in control of their own lives. In focusing on the home as the space where this might be articulated, women were not only active participants in the modern world but challenge those narrow

[25] The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* does not include sex rights. Article 25 only included that motherhood and childhood should receive "special care and assistance" (Lake 268).

[26] Azoulay notes: "*The Family of Man* is not simply an archive of how people live, act, and look, but a repertoire of the rights they have, rights of which they were deprived or never given – from the right to give birth safely but in a convivial atmosphere to the right to leisure" (2016:131).

> conceptions of modernity that understand the modern only in terms of the undomestic or the avant-garde. (164)

Steichen's emphasis on the "everydayness of life" needs to be reassessed within the context of such a discursive shift**.** As Ariella Azoulay has argued, *The Family of Man* visually contests dominant male notions of the good life by presenting "different temporalities along the lines of cycles, rest, leisure, non-productivity, and more" (2016: 123).

Such a reconsideration of gender politics in Steichen's installation touches on the larger implications of redefining the meaning of everydayness, family, and community. For instance, Barthes's general attack of Steichen's approach to history and politics needs to be revised critically. Barthes applied Bertolt Brecht's estrangement concept and its Marxist view of progress in challenging *The Family of Man* for its depoliticized and naturalized versions of history. However, following Ariella Azoulay, it may be argued that Barthes himself superimposed a male grand narrative of a linear class-struggle teleology on the installation's distinct notions of the "everydayness of life." In Barthes's critique, history continues to be tied closely to masculine conceptions of a universal master-slave relationship. As Tzvetan Todorov has argued, such problematic notions of progress and history, positing an unfounded primacy of fight and struggle, need to be questioned as reductive male narratives of domination. For Todorov, "kinship, not conflict, is the first social relationship" (13). Individualistic definitions of human rights confirm rather than contest such gendered models as they are grounded in biased notions of a male autonomous self.[27] As a consequence of such one-sided concepts, communitarian arguments about the importance of the "rights of motherhood" and other women's rights claims were sidelined or obliterated in post-war UN debates. Consuelo Kanaga's outstanding portrait of African-American motherhood and other similar representations of women, family, and community in *The Family of Man* remind audiences of the conflicting presence of such women's rights issues.

[27] Todorov claims that the idea of the autonomous self is so prominent that it is hardly seen as being problematic: "If we look at definitions of the human in the mainstream of European thought, we are led to a curious conclusion: the social dimension, the fact of living with others, is not generally conceived as being necessary. This 'thesis,' however, is not presented in so many words. Rather, it is a presupposition which remains unformulated and for that very reason, its author has no occasion to build a case. We accept it all the more readily. Moreover, this thesis forms the common denominator of theories which, in other respects, are in opposition. Whatever side we take in such debates, we perforce accept a definition of man as solitary and nonsocial" (1).

Fig. 4: *The Family of Man* installation at Clervaux Castle.
Photo: Roy DeCarava ©CNA/Romain Girtgen, 2019.

In recent years, Axel Honneth has proposed a general philosophical model which may enable criticism to rethink kinship and family representations in *The Family of Man* in distinctly egalitarian and democratic terms. His 2011 study *Freedom's Right* may serve as an ingenious blueprint to reassess gender politics and women's rights issues in Steichen's installation. Honneth argues that modern familial discourse, despite its origins in oppressive patriarchal structures, can be reconceived and reconfigured to unpack and develop its inherent emancipatory potential. For him, the post-patriarchal family, based on a friendship and partnership model of recognition, has the potential to function as a modern core collective which empowers and facilitates intersubjective modes of freedom and practices of cooperative forms of individualism. Clearly, *The Family of Man* does not resolve philosophically or politically the conflicts between masculine and feminine, individual and collective, liberal and communitarian conceptions of history, family, and everydayness as explored by Honneth's theory. However, Steichen's modernist installation enables contrary progressive models to coexist in creative tension. The different positions are juxtaposed in an open montage, empowering the democratic participation of audiences in constituting the meaning of the installation and in explaining new ways of thinking about women's human rights (Turner 181-212).

The innovative conception of *The Family of Man*, based on Steichen's early socialist politics and modernist experience as a curator, is central to its unique

aesthetic stance on human rights. When Steichen explained in 1916, quoting Karl Marx, that a collective effort was needed to face the atrocities of war, he had recently been involved in presenting two of the most prominent modernist exhibitions of the avant-garde gallery 291 in New York. In 1914, he had co-designed a "groundbreaking show" of "African sculpture," placing Kota objects "against geometric displays of brightly colored paper" (Kroiz 81).[28] In 1915, he combined African reliquary figures with cubist works by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, positioning in its middle the distinctive ready-made of a gigantic wasp's nest.[29] His 291 installations were at the forefront of modernist exhibition design. In 1955, then, the juxtaposition of disparate and conflicting facets of a theme or topic in *The Family of Man*, not just of individual human rights and communitarian women's rights, were clearly the product of Steichen's unique applied arts and avant-garde background. Progressive aesthetics and politics, however, had to remain open for Steichen so that they might respond to the "great unforeseen" (1963: np). It was a phrase he had used as early as 1914, in a *Camera Work* contribution, to express his belief in the fundamental open-endedness of history. In referring to the photographic communication in *The Family of Man* as an open, "dynamic process," Steichen upheld the basic tenets of such a modernist agnosticism and its emancipatory power (1955: 5).[30]

V.

> In the cinema and television, the image is revealed at a pace set by the director. In the exhibition gallery, the visitor sets his own pace. He can go forward and then retreat or hurry along according to his own impulse and mood as these are stimulated by the exhibition. In the creation of such an exhibition [*The Family of Man*], resources are brought into play that are not available elsewhere. The contrast in scale of images, the shifting of focal points, the intriguing perspective of long- and short-range visibility with the images to come being glimpsed beyond the images at hand – all these permit the spectator an active participation that no other form of visual communication can give.
>
> Edward Steichen (1963)

[28] According to Alfred Stieglitz, this was "possibly the most important show we ever had" (Kroiz 81).

[29] The exhibition design was documented by Alfred Stieglitz for *Camera Work* in 1916 (Kroiz 84).

[30] Azoulay highlights this openness in *The Family of Man*: "None of the procedures of handling the photos (like cropping and juxtaposing) that Steichen pursues freezes the image forever under one particular aspect" (2016: 119).

> The individual photographs [of *The Family of Man*], claim to be not so much aesthetic objects as discoveries. They show what everyone sees without becoming aware of it. By directing the gaze at the familiar unfamiliar, they help those who look at them to gain a new, subtler relationship with things. For anyone who has once learned to see objects in this way, the senses are no longer simply functional; they are strangely altered and sharpened. In future he will see more vividly, and in a greater variety of ways than before.
>
> Max Horkheimer (1958)[31]

Steichen had made up his mind early that Consuelo Kanaga's portrait of African-American motherhood would play a crucial role in his overall composition of *The Family of Man.* He informed Kanaga in advance that "among the prints that have been *definitely* selected as key material in the various categories of the show is one photograph of yours" (Millstein and Lowe 211). His decision certainly documented his reverence for Kanaga's masterly portrait.[32] But it was also a revealing aesthetic and generic choice in that it reflected Steichen's special relationship with the portrait genre. From his first outstanding photograph, his 1898 self-referential Milwaukee "Portrait Study," to his 1903 portrayal of J. P. Morgan, "a masterpiece if ever there was one in pictorial photography," and his trend-setting artist and celebrity photos, his iconic shot of Greta Garbo in 1928 or his stunning rendition of Paul Robeson in 1933, the portrait was one of the key genres for Steichen (De Zayas, qtd. in Naumann 81).[33] It also explains his great appreciation of Kanaga's "Black Madonna" (Millstein and Lowe 39).

The portrait had a special position in Steichen's aesthetic program. For him, in a sense, all photos were to be interpreted as portraits. He posited at one point that even "a photograph of an object is [...] a portrait" (*Life* ch. 10, np). Underlying his high esteem for the genre was his agnostic conviction that no portrait could ever fully capture the complex reality of the subjects portrayed. The open-ended character of portrait photography can thus be seen to share the essential openness he associated with a progressive conception of aesthetics and history at large: "I believe it is impossible to get to the whole truth and nothing but the truth in any photograph" (Steichen qtd. in Johnston 92). With regards to truth claims, supposedly inherent in the new medium, Steichen developed an idiosyncratic position. While he knew of and believed in the power of the photographic medium, he did not fully subscribe to the grand narrative of 20th-century photography which posited that an inherent photographic truth could be achieved by an "absolute

[31] The quotes are taken from Steichen (1963: ch. 13, np) and Horkheimer (52).

[32] Millstein and Lowe noted: "In a 1962 article for *The New York Times Magazine*, Steichen selected this photograph as one of seven from The Museum of Modern Art's collection of five thousand prints that he considered 'great from among many great works' and proof 'that photography is an art just as painting and sculpture and poetry are'" (164).

[33] His portraits had a huge impact on Kanaga's art. She noted that the "greatest influence" on her was "Steichen" (Millstein and Lowe 57).

fidelity to the medium itself" (Durden 102). As early as 1903 Steichen took a constructionist position and argued in *Camera Work* that "every photograph is a fake from start to finish" (1903: 48). Hélène Valance recently summarized Steichen's complex position which he upheld in its basic form throughout his long career: "There is never anything natural in photography [...] and every shot, every print, is already a manipulation that introduces a gap between the photograph and its supposed truth" (59).

Fig. 5: *The Family of Man* installation at Clervaux Castle:
Photo: Consuelo Kanaga et al. ©CNA/Romain Girtgen, 2019.

In surveys of visual studies or histories of art and photography, Steichen's idiosyncratic aesthetic position on the subject has frequently been marginalized or overlooked as the ideas of an outmoded pictorialist or of a 'compromised' modernist.[34] As a comprehensive edition of his aesthetic writings is as yet missing and as his complex conceptions of photography have not been examined systematically, discussions about Steichen's view of photography in *The Family of Man* have proven to be highly problematic. His use of a reflection metaphor, for instance, in his short introductory essay in the catalogue, with its claim that the installation presented "a mirror" of "the everydayness of life" (1955: 5) has been

[34] Tobia Bezzola highlights Steichen's changed reputation in recent revisionist accounts. He notes: "[...] for many years Steichen's work for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* was regarded as a faux pas, a faintly embarrassing aberration on the part of the artist [...]. It was considered a skilled contribution to the field of commercial photography but not in itself of any artistic interest. This view has changed. Now, in the early 21st century, [...] Steichen is seen in a rather different, positive light: as a pioneer in advertising photography and fashion [...]" (187).

associated with a naive understanding of photographic realism (Bezner 269). This is far from the advanced position Steichen took on the dynamic, narrative quality and open-ended status of photographic images. A photograph, for Steichen, resulted from a complex creative process in which the artist, the medium, and the object were equally involved. Owing to the inherent subjectivity in its representation of reality, any photograph and the communication it triggered could not be but biased, inconclusive, and open for Steichen.[35] Photography may thus be seen to be the perfect medium to grasp the radical open-endedness of human rights discourses: "A declaration of human rights is necessarily an unfinished text, having neither a beginning nor an end; it is a text whose constant rewriting and updating is required by the very fact of living with and among others" (Azoulay 2016: 131-32).

In addition to the generic openness of the individual photograph, Steichen stressed that diverse cultural and political contexts would produce varied, multiple interpretations of pictures. As early as 1926, he had argued explicitly that context played a decisive role in the openness of aesthetic interpretations. He noted, for instance, that an ordinary subject would be turned into an extraordinary one if displayed within the institutional setting of a museum (Steichen qtd. in Brandow and Ewing 2008a: 243).[36] At about the same time, together with Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Marcel Duchamp, Steichen was involved in changing the discursive contexts within which modern art would be assessed at large in the 20th century. He successfully argued in court that the abstract sculpture "Bird in Space," which he had bought from his friend Constantin Brancusi, was to be treated as a piece of art and not taxed, as proposed, as a kitchen utensil. The court's decision cemented a functionalist view of aesthetics. Works of art could no longer be seen as possessing fixed ontological qualities, but were to be assessed by art experts and what they considered to be art at a specific historical moment (Giry). Around this time, Steichen began formulating his own belief in such a vanguard functionalist aesthetic.[37] In 1955, all of these aspects – Steichen's experimental montage aesthetics, his agnostic modernism, and his belief in a democratic communication process – merged to generate the emancipatory power of the human rights discourse presented in *The Family of Man.* When the aspiring German artist Gerhard Richter saw the installation in 1955 in Berlin, he was overwhelmed by it: "This was a real shock for me, this show […] to see these pictures, because I knew only paintings […] they showed so much and they told so

[35] For a more detailed account of the changing relationship between Steichen's aesthetics and politics see my 2019 monograph on Edward Steichen.

[36] Steichen wrote: "There are some works of art in the Louvre that if presented in a peep show would be condemned as pornographic. In the Louvre they are art" (qtd. in Bezzola 187).

[37] In tune with concepts developed by the German Werkbund and the Bauhaus movement, Steichen's view of art challenges traditional notions: "A thing is beautiful if it fulfills its purpose – if it functions. To my mind a modern icebox is a thing of beauty" (Sandburg 1929: 62). In 1929, Steichen served as an American curator for the legendary Werkbund film and photography exhibition *FiFo* in Stuttgart.

much these pictures, these photographs, told so much about modern life, my life. [...] This was really new" (Hurm et al. 20).

Evidently, the modernist aesthetics of Steichen's *The Family of Man* cannot resolve the underlying political conflicts in contrary conceptions of women's rights and human rights in the 1950s or in the 21st century. Yet, its open installation juxtaposes contested positions, stimulates a rich and diverse dialogue, and thus prepares audiences for new ways of looking at complex issues (see Fig. 5). This is what the avant-garde artist, responsive to the unexpected turns of history, to the "great unforeseen," may achieve with his work.[38] As Steichen put it: "Going along a railroad one day I see a thing I have seen many times. But this day I suddenly see. Tisn't [sic] that you see new but things have prepared you for a new vision" (Sandburg 1929: 57). Max Horkheimer took a similar stance in his opening address of the Frankfurt exhibition in 1958. He argued that we are not presented in *The Family of Man* with the solution to our political conflicts. However, with our senses "strangely altered and sharpened" by the installation, we may look at the world in a distinct fashion (52). A differentiated view of the historical contexts of Steichen's art project may thus help us hopefully to reconfigure the complex and complicated relations between civil rights, women's rights, and human rights in *The Family of Man* today. In Steichen's aesthetic and political vision, the emancipatory outcome of this "dynamic process" is a truly open one. In more than one sense, *The Family of Man,* women's rights, and human rights therefore continue to be works in progress.

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[38] Arguing from different premises, Azoulay nevertheless emphasizes the installation's conceptual openness as one of its key qualities: "The temporality of progress and new beginnings with which history was identified under imperialism is replaced by different modes of temporality that resist the linearity of progress, its rules and evaluations. Instead of fixating on the failure of particular images to capture and complete an event or an action (which cannot be completed anyhow, since by definition they are not given to the enterprise of a single homo faber to complete, but rather belong to the realm of the many), we as spectators are invited to view, study, and interact with such sequences, and thus to continue what Steichen and his team started" (2016: 128-29).

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