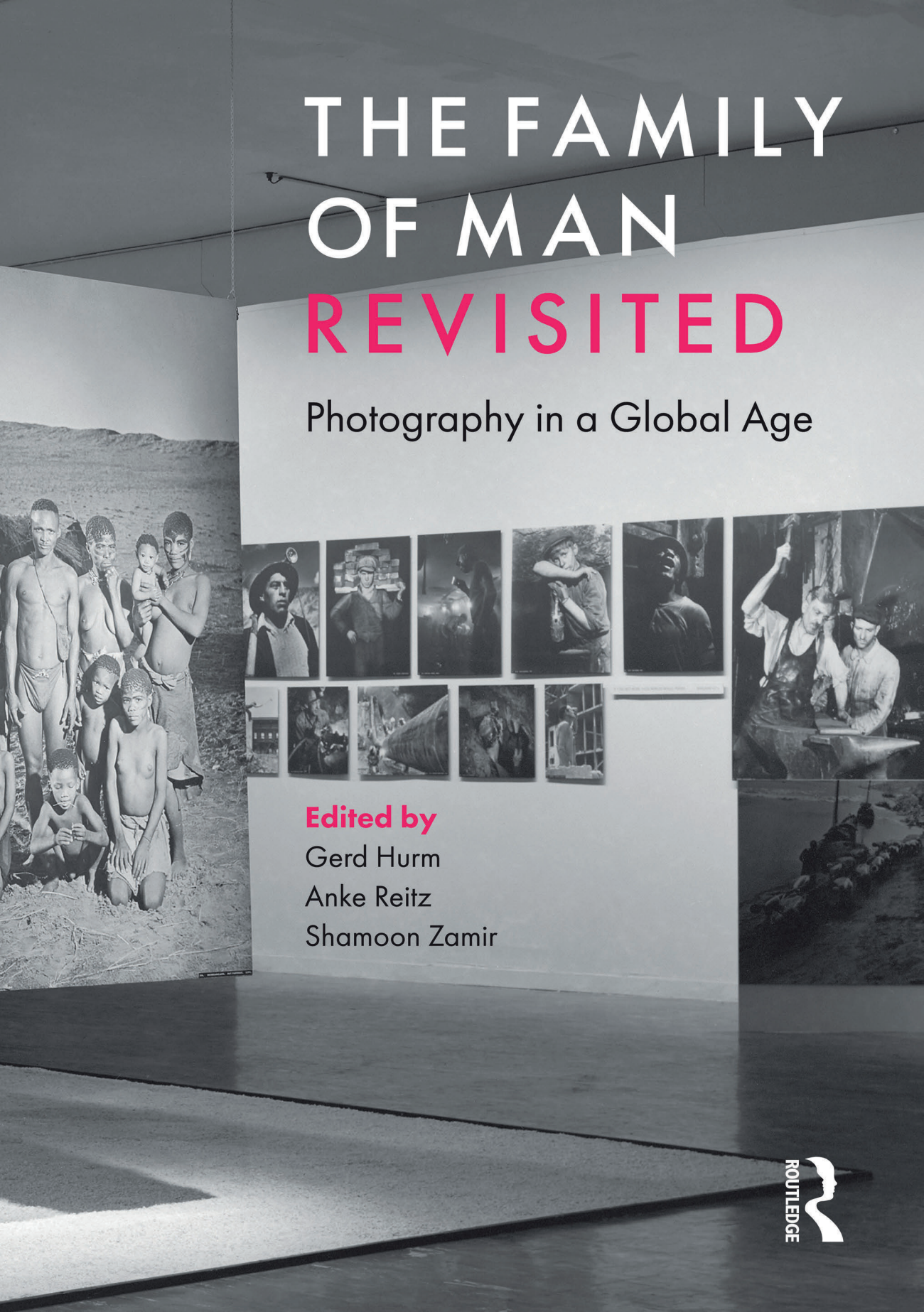

THE FAMILY OF MAN REVISITED

Photography in a Global Age

Edited by
Gerd Hurm
Anke Reitz
Shamoon Zamir

ROUTLEDGE

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'This anthology of contemporary essays and historical sources is an important contribution to the growing field of exhibition history. Through critical reevaluation of *The Family of Man* and analyses of its international reception, the book breaks new ground with varied accounts of the show's place in postwar culture and detailed discussion of its curatorial construction and modes of presentation.'

– **Bruce Altshuler**, Director, Program in Museum Studies, New York University

'Of exhibitions of photography, *The Family of Man* is the one most deserving of renewed critical reflection and assessment. This volume offers exactly that, providing new perspectives and information in an effort to make us think again about what we imagined we already knew. Anyone interested in photography's history and creative possibilities will want to read it.'

– **Geoffrey Batchen**, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Rolf Petersen, installation view of *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1955.

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Dedicated to

Jean Back

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Introduction

The Family of Man Revisited

Shamoon Zamir and Gerd Hurm

The Family of Man (1955) is, by a very long measure, the most widely seen exhibition in the history of photography. The book of the exhibition is also the most commercially successful photobook of all time. Close to 500 images from 68 countries were selected from millions reviewed, and staged as an unfolding thematic sequence through a radically immersive and interactive design (see illustrations 1 and 2). Conceived, curated and designed by Edward Steichen in the early years of the Cold War, the exhibition affirmed a common human identity and fate against the continuing political and cultural divisions that shaped World War II, and that persisted or were reconfigured after it. This commonality was figured in particular as a response to the threat of nuclear annihilation that had transformed all nations into what Wendell Willkie some years earlier had referred to as 'one world'[1]: the photographs showed what Steichen described as 'the gamut of life from birth to death with emphasis on the daily relationships of man to himself, to his family, to the community and to the world we live in'. The images shared a focus, in other words, on 'the everydayness of life' and 'the essential onenesss of mankind throughout the world'. But it was a towering colour transparency of an atomic explosion, the only full colour image in the entire show, that was the photograph that anchored *The Family of Man* most explicitly to its immediate historical context (see illustrations 42 and 43).[2] The exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York on 25 January 1955 and ran until 8 May. Steichen and MoMA had always planned for a version of the exhibition to travel internationally as well as within the United States. However, the unprecedented success of the show attracted the attention of the United States Information Agency (USIA) which incorporated it into its programme of cultural propaganda and helped devise for it a remarkably ambitious international itinerary in addition to its national circulation. By the time its global tour came to an end in 1965, *The Family of Man* had been seen by more than nine million people in 48 countries all over the world.[3] The book of the exhibition was similarly successful: still in print, it has sold several million copies.

1 *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

The popular response to *The Family of Man* indicates that the exhibition did cultural work that people found relevant on an unprecedented scale in the post-war world; it also suggests a near universal acceptance of the show's particular articulation of humanism and a confirmation of its faith in photography as a medium uniquely able to communicate across cultures and time.

In stark contrast, though with some notable exceptions, the critical response has characterized Steichen's project largely as historically, politically and aesthetically naïve, and as emotionally immature. A number of commentators writing in the 1950s offered variations on this assessment but it was Roland Barthes's short 1957essay on the Paris version of the exhibition, 'The Great Family of Man', that most influentially set the terms in which the exhibition has been evaluated consistently ever since.[4] For Barthes, Steichen replaces the claims of politics and difference with a sentimental myth of human sameness, thereby substituting Nature for 'the determining weight of History' – 'determining' because for Barthes it is only history and not nature that gives meaning to human existence. Those critics who have paid greater attention than Barthes to the cultural and historical contexts of *The Family of Man* in the United States have extended the logic of his analysis and argued that the exhibition's bourgeois myth of the human and its middlebrow aesthetics were perfect vehicles for an American ideology geared towards domestic social conservatism and Cold War cultural hegemony. Implicit in Barthes's critique and in those that have followed in his

2 ***The Family of Man*** **at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City.**

footsteps is, of course, a distrust of, and occasionally even open contempt for, both the popular response to the exhibition and the widespread appeal of its aesthetic.

Without being sanguine, the essays collected in the present volume share the conviction that the critiques of *The Family of Man* conducted in the name of history have, in fact, emptied the exhibition, and also the popular response to it, of their own historicity. The essays try to retrieve and to understand anew the sense of cultural and social urgency, what one might call the crisis content, that drove both Steichen's project and the global audience's response to it. They do so by exploring new cultural contexts for the exhibition and by undertaking new and detailed formal and conceptual analyses of it.

These new interpretations include fresh perspectives on the American and the Cold War locations of *The Family of Man*, as well as critical engagements with Barthes that reframe the debate about the exhibition and move us towards more capacious and complex readings. But at the heart of this book is a series of attempts to think about the formal and visual aspects of the exhibition in new ways and in unprecedented detail, and with a focus on Europe and its experience of Steichen's project.

Germany provides a case study of the exhibition's international reception and additional perspectives are drawn from Poland and Luxembourg. A remarkable collection of previously unknown or untranslated archival material is included in this volume and examined for the first time in its contributions: commentaries by philosopher and cultural theorist Max Horkheimer and novelist Wolfgang Koeppen, letters from photographer August Sander expressing a practitioner's sense of Steichen's achievement, as well as a uniquely detailed survey of audience responses to the show in Munich in 1958. The book also presents for the first time in English a translation of *Komentarze do fotografii: The Family of Man* (1962), a sequence of poems based on selected photographs from the exhibition by Polish poet, novelist, critic and translator Witold Wirpsza.[5]

Horkheimer's '*The Family of Man* – Wir Alle' is the text of his address at the opening of *The Family of Man* in Frankfurt on 25 October 1958; it was delivered only a year after Barthes published his critique of the exhibition, but offers a very different assessment to Barthes's. Horkheimer was, of course, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School and, along with Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, one of the leading exponents of critical theory. Given this group's well-known critiques of middlebrow aesthetics, popular culture and bourgeois ideology, Horkheimer's spirited and philosophical defence of the aesthetics and humanism of Steichen's show is both unexpected and a radical counterpoint to Barthes. Horkheimer accepts the exhibition as 'a symbol of common bonds among human beings' but reads it through the tradition of Kantian philosophy and its affinities with the American philosophical tradition, arguing that the exhibition explores above all 'the identity of human beings in their non-identity'. Horkheimer's emphasis is, in other words, on the exhibition's ability to sustain a mutually supportive dialectic of difference and sameness and not on the erasure of difference; his address offers a nuanced and suggestive set of reflections on the relationship between idea and reality, thought and image, and the importance of 'the knowledge of ephemeral things' made available uniquely by photography. For

Horkheimer, Steichen's exhibit offers nothing less than 'a new way of looking at things that we will never forget'.

Unlike his colleagues and friends Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, Horkheimer is not known for any substantial engagement with photography. Yet, only a year and a half after the Frankfurt opening of *The Family of Man* he delivered another address on photography (on the occasion of the centennial of the Adox photochemical factory). Here Horkheimer develops issues touched upon in his reflections on Steichen's exhibition: the interactions between image and concept and between image and reason. Horkheimer's thinking on photography is clearly influenced by the work of his friend Kracauer whose own thoughts on the interplay between photographic image, reality and reason, and whose invocation of *The Family of Man* as an exemplary embodiment of photography's ability to redeem physical reality and to reveal the common world, appeared the same year in his *Theory of Film* (1960).[6] As Janine Marchessault has noted, while there can be little doubt that the USIA used Steichen's exhibition for its own political ends, for Kracauer *The Family of Man* 'foregrounded an emancipatory intercultural communication'.[7] Kracauer argued that the 'photographic media' were best placed 'to record the material aspects of daily common life in many places', and it was this that made them the vehicles for 'rendering visible' the slow emergence of a human commonality across the world. It was *The Family of Man*'s ability to capture this commonality through concrete forms that explained for Kracauer 'the world-wide response to Edward Steichen's exhibition'.[8]

The texts of both of Horkheimer's addresses are presented for the first time in English in this book. Also included is Horkheimer's letter accepting the invitation to open *The Family of Man* in Frankfurt in which he indicates his willingness to temporarily come out of effective retirement because of his enthusiasm for the exhibition. These texts have never before been discussed in relation to *The Family of Man*, nor to Horkheimer's own thought and career. They allow us to grasp the historical meanings of Steichen's exhibition in ways entirely different from the approach established by Barthes and continued by his followers, and they open up and re-energize contemporary considerations of the exhibition as well as of the role of humanist photography. A number of contributions to this volume engage with different aspects of Horkheimer's thoughts on *The Family of Man.* The most detailed examination of Horkheimer's address is offered by Martin Jay, a leading scholar of both the Frankfurt School and of visual culture, who places them in the context of Horkheimer's thought and the work of his German colleagues. Jay emphasizes that Horkheimer's reliance on Kant positions the text as something of an unexpected anomaly within his oeuvre; Horkeimer's bringing together of European and American traditions of philosophical thought also provides an original critical framing of *The Family of Man*.

Wolfgang Koeppen, one of the foremost German novelists of the post-war era, offers an enthusiastic, impressionistic rather than philosophical response to *The Family of Man* in a review of the exhibition for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a Munich newspaper (21 November 1955). Koeppen is best known for his three mid-century novels exploring with an unflinching gaze the recent past and present realities of post-1945 Germany: *Pigeons on the Grass* (1951), *The Hothouse* (1953) and *Death*

3 Bertolt Brecht visiting *The Family of Man* at Hochschule für bildende Künste, Berlin, 1955.

in Rome (1954). These novels form a trilogy that interrogates the historical amnesia, the denial of history, that characterized much of German society after the war, and it is their combination of a committed political stance and a radical aesthetics derived from a wide engagement with modernist literature that made these works inspirations for many of the writers who emerged in Germany in the 1960s, including Günter Grass. Given his commitment to history and to radical form, Koeppen's assessment of *The Family of Man* goes as much against the grain of the broad critical consensus about the exhibition as Horkheimer's. Koeppen characterizes the exhibition as 'a *comédie humaine*, written by the photographic lens […] exactly as it was in Balzac, both drama and tragedy'. Where others have seen only sentimental optimism in the exhibition, Koeppen proposes that 'melancholy' is its defining note, and he aligns Steichen's project with the critical realism of contemporary fiction: 'the photographs in this exhibition […] are irrefutable proof of the truthfulness and the correct direction

of contemporary literature, because a lens that sees only what is there contradicts by what it captures the attacks against the modern novel, as they have recently been made by *Life* magazine and everywhere in Germany, the accusation that fiction represents the world too gloomily and thus is untrue'. Koeppen's review of *The Family of Man* is engaged with a way into the exhibition in this volume in particular by Werner Sollors, among the leading authorities on ethnicity, race and culture in the United States, and also the author of a major recent study of German culture in the aftermath of World War II. Sollors turns to Koeppen in a series of open-ended reflections on *The Family of Man* that help map succinctly a wide range of critical issues that remain relevant to ongoing considerations of the exhibition.

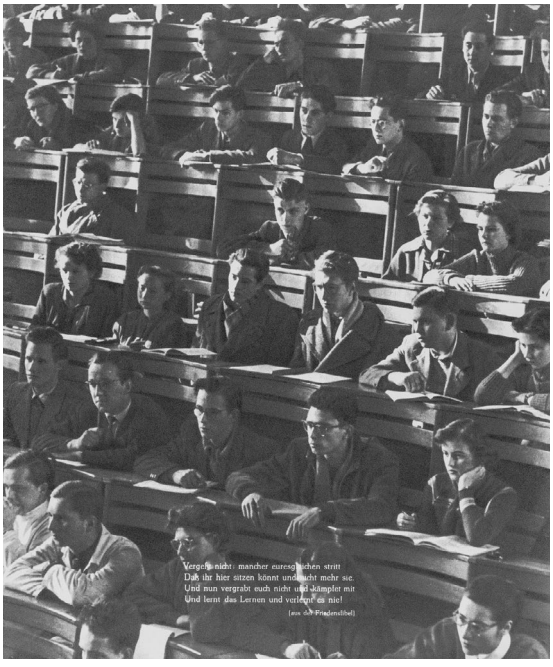
The Family of Man was not exhibited in the German Democratic Republic (the US in fact did not recognize the GDR), but the show toured the Federal Republic of Germany before the wall dividing East and West was built, and at a time when it was still possible for visitors from the East to visit the West. One visitor was Bertolt Brecht. According to an 'Operations Memorandum' sent by the United States Information Service (as the USIA was referred to overseas) from Bonn to the Washington head office (10 January 1956), Brecht, 'famous East-zone pro-communist playwright', was photographed by a 'Berlin student' while visiting the show (see illustration 3).[9] We do not know what Brecht made of the exhibition, but we do know that he kept a catalogue of *The Family of Man* in his library.[10] His own photobook, *Kriegsfibel* (*War Primer*), was published only a few weeks after the visit.[11] In preparation since 1940, the book presented images taken from magazines and newspapers, many of them, as in *The Family of Man*, from *Life* magazine, with each image accompanied by a short, four-line poem, the text providing ironic and biting commentaries on the politics and human experience of war. At first sight there seems to be little in common between Steichen's and Brecht's projects. The sense of history and of political critique in the latter is precisely what is found lacking by so many in the celebration of human commonality in *The Family of Man*. But Steichen himself had lived through two world wars, serving as an aerial photographer in the first and as the head of the photography unit for the Navy in the second, and *The Family of Man* took shape as an idea and an exhibition in large part during the years in which the United States was embroiled in the brutal war in Korea. In the 1940s and early 1950s, Steichen had tried to show the realities of war by curating a series of exhibitions, but felt that these had failed to effectively nurture in the audience a properly critical consciousness about the horrors and consequences of armed conflict:

> Although I had presented war in all its grimness in three exhibitions [wrote Steichen in his autobiography], 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.[12]

The exhibitions were *Road to Victory* (1942), *Power in the Pacific* (1945) and *Korea: The Impact of War in Photographs* (1951).[13] Steichen stated that *The Family of Man* 'had its genesis' in these exhibitions (though elsewhere he also notes other moments of origin). While the first two of the three were very much part of the war effort, intended to boost national morale as much as to show war, the exhibition on Korea was less constrained by a local political agenda. Steichen, inspired in part by David Douglas Duncan's *This is War* (1950), which he considered 'the most forceful indictment of the subject ever put forth by photography', 'had banked particularly' on the Korea exhibit 'to make a thought-provoking impression on the world, for this war had undergone a more realistic photographic interpretation than any other'. But Steichen was disappointed by what he perceived to be the reception of the exhibition: 'People flocked in great numbers to see it. They found some pictures revolting, some deeply moving. There were even tears shed, but that was as far as it went. They left the exhibition and promptly forgot it.'

The first phase of planning for *The Family of Man* began while Steichen was working on the Korea exhibit and while that exhibit was on show at MoMA, and *The Family of Man* was designed clearly as a sort of counterpoint and alternative to the war exhibits, an attempt to engage people by showing them not the horror of war but what is lost in war – what in fact would be irretrievably lost in a third, nuclear world war. And here we find that the distance between Brecht, 'famous East-zone pro-communist playwright', and Steichen, the liberal humanist, may not be quite as great as may be suggested by only a casual comparison of *Kriegsfibel* and *The Family of Man*. The publication of Brecht's book came with an announcement that a companion volume, *Friedensfibel* (*Peace Primer*) was intended for future publication. Brecht, like Steichen, appears then to have wanted to move beyond war, what Steichen referred to as negativity, towards an engagement with alternative, more positive aspects of life. Brecht never completed this project, but the back cover of *Kriegsfibel* carried a preliminary image from it (see illustration 4). In motif and set-up it strongly resembles the photo of first-year medical students, earnest young women and men in a packed, tiered lecture hall, by Alfred Eisenstaedt, taken from a 1948 *Life* magazine story on Charles University in Prague and included in the section devoted to education in *The Family of Man*. Brecht must have been surprised and intrigued to find that an image similar to the one he had chosen for his own project had been used by Steichen (see illustration 5).[14]

This brief comparison with Brecht, as much as the commentaries by Horkheimer and Koeppen, as well as Kracauer, should serve as cautions against too-easy characterizations of *The Family of Man* as only American Cold War propaganda, or as an embodiment of bourgeois ideology. But if German responses to and contexts for Steichen's exhibition enable us to take a fresh look at the cultural and social politics of the show, they can also encourage us similarly to re-examine the exhibition's formal aspects and the impact these had at least on some visitors in the 1950s. Koeppen's review suggests some possible framings in this regard for *The Family of Man*'s image work, but the reaction of another German artist, Gerhard Richter, conveys more immediately the sense of excitement and possibility experienced in the encounter with Steichen's show.



4 Back cover: Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfibel* (1955).

5 Alfred Eisenstaedt, Prague, Czech Republic, 1947.

Richter, like Brecht, saw the show in Berlin in 1955. Unlike Brecht, he was then an artist at the very start of his career, but like Brecht, a visitor from the East. Speaking of how 'terrible' life was in the East, and how restricted personal freedom was, he recalls that there was 'the possibility to go every year at least twice to West Berlin' to see 'movies and exhibitions'. It was on one such trip that he saw *The Family of Man*: '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 much these pictures, these photographs, told so much about modern life, my life.' Richter dates his own interest in photography from this moment when he encountered Steichen's exhibition because it showed him the 'power' of photography and 'what photography can do'. These comments are from a conversation between Richter and Nicholas Serota, the director of the Tate Gallery in the UK, on the occasion of Richter's major exhibition *Panorama* (6 October 2011–8 January 2012). At this point in the conversation Serota says, 'To see *The Family of Man* was to understand how a photograph could capture a moment or a place or an image.' The statement is clearly intended more as a question than as an affirmation of an assessment accepted by Serota himself, and Richter responds, 'Yes. This was really new.'[15] In a more recent personal note to the editors, Richter reiterates that he was 'deeply impressed' by the exhibition and looked at the pictures in amazement.[16]

Richter went on to make extensive and varied use of photography in his own work, including the use of photographs as bases for paintings. His acknowledgement of the role of *The Family of Man* in impelling and shaping this engagement with photography, coming as it does from one of the most innovative and diverse artists of post-war Europe, opens a way of understanding the genealogy of Steichen's exhibition design as something other than the bastardization of American and European highbrow modernism into middlebrow kitsch. Herbert Bayer, a Bauhaus exile in America, helped Steichen design both *Road to Victory* and *Power in the Pacific*; he had actually left MoMA by the time Steichen began work on the layout of *The Family of Man*, but Bayer's ideas about exhibition design and the experience of working with him clearly shaped the final design of *The Family of Man* in very significant ways. But while Bayer's influence has been widely acknowledged in accounts of the exhibition, Steichen's own deep and personal familiarity with the works of Rodin, Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi and other figures of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, as well as his partnership with Alfred Stieglitz in introducing modernist art to America and in developing innovative exhibition techniques at the New York Gallery 291, have been less frequently noted as contexts relevant to an understanding of *The Family of Man*. Gerd Hurm's contribution begins to map out some of these contexts. The conception of *The Family of Man* thus need not be tied exclusively to a 1950s Cold War framework. The possibility of an ambitious exhibition of photography organized around a central theme had in fact been on Steichen's mind since the late 1930s. 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'.[17]

In Richter's recollections of *The Family of Man* from the second decade of the twenty-first century, one can still catch the surprise and sense of invigoration of his

youthful encounter with the exhibition, even though more than 50 years had by then passed since his visit to the show. Those who reviewed *The Family of Man* professionally in newspapers and magazines while the exhibition was on tour in America and in cities around the world have left us with one kind of record of what it meant to see Steichen's show in its various iterations. But the available literature on *The Family of Man* provides us with no account based on first-hand testimony of what 'ordinary visitors' or the 'general public' experienced when they went to the exhibition. Sollors' contribution to this book includes glimpses of his own visit to the exhibition in Frankfurt in 1958 – a unique instance of such testimony in the literature as far as we are aware. But Sollors was only 14 years old when he saw *The Family of Man*, and his memories of the experience are necessarily broad and fleeting. The dearth of such first-hand accounts is regrettable because the audience response to *The Family of Man* is one of the most important and also perhaps the least examined aspects of the phenomenon the exhibition became. We know that millions of individuals went to the see the exhibition all over the world, but what did they think when they saw it and what did they experience as they walked through it – in Kabul, Johannesburg, Djakarta or Caracas? Even if we restrict our attention to the United States and Europe, the force of this question is no less compelling. What would it have meant to visit the exhibition in cities still in ruins after the war and divided across East and West geopolitical blocs, rather than in American cities untouched by the immediate violence of war? Newspaper reports, which are overwhelmingly positive, give us an idea of the exhibition's reception around the world but very often these reports do little more than repeat or elaborate on the press releases prepared by the USIA or MoMA. And in any case the journalistic archive cannot be taken as a faithful record of public opinion and experience. The USIA's own records are not as extensive as one would wish for; they are uneven in their coverage of the many international locations, and press clippings that can be accessed elsewhere make up a significant proportion of these records.

It is not surprising then that only a few scholars have pursued the question of audience response in relation to *The Family of Man*. They have done so by either approaching the issue in broad conceptual terms or by placing the exhibition in the cultural and historical contexts of a particular country in the 1950s. Blake Stimson is the critic who has most clearly and eloquently placed the question of *The Family of Man*'s global reception at the forefront of discussions about the exhibition. Stimson's own answer is very broad, resting as it does on a claim for an international need for affinity and identification in the post-World War II world, and framed as it is within an account of cosmopolitan modernity dating back to the time of Hegel and Goethe.[18] There have been other, brief accounts of *The Family of Man* in Tokyo, Johannesburg, Moscow and Guatemala City that have paid greater attention to the specificities of particular locations; but Eric Sandeen's chapter on the exhibition at the Moscow Fair (in the final chapter of his ground-breaking *Picturing an Exhibition* (1995), still the only book-length study devoted to the exhibition), and Sarah James's more recent chapter on the show in the context of Weimar and post-war Germany are the only sufficiently detailed and thorough examinations of *The Family of Man* outside of its United States contexts. Although elements of audience response are noted by both

Sandeen and James, their analyses rely primarily on cultural and historical contexts for understanding the international meanings of the exhibition.[19]

There is, however, a document that offers a uniquely detailed access to visitors' responses to and experiences of *The Family of Man*. The Office of Public Affairs of the United States Embassy in Germany prepared meticulous and extensive reports on the various exhibitions sponsored by the American government as part of its international cultural programming after the war. When *The Family of Man* came to Munich between 19 November and 18 December 1955, the Office of Public Affairs commissioned DIVO, a respected German opinion survey organization, to prepare a report on the audience response to the exhibition. DIVO conducted 700 interviews: 298 exit interviews and then 472 home interviews a few days later in order to ascertain whether and in what ways their assessment of the exhibition had changed after visitors had time to reflect. The questions asked and the data gathered were extensive. The questions as well as the interviewees' responses, often with direct quotations, are recorded and analysed in a carefully prepared 87-page report. This report is one of only two documents of its kind relating to *The Family of Man* so far discovered (the other is a similar, though less thorough survey of audience responses from Mexico City). These reports have not previously been examined in the literature on the exhibition and the Munich report is presented here for the first time in the form of a critical summary and analysis (see Zamir's chapter on Munich).

The Munich report provides a breakdown of the people interviewed by social class and educational attainment. One of the surprising facts noted in the report is that people with above average and advanced levels of education made up a higher percentage of the visitors than for other cultural events sponsored in Germany by the United States government. Whatever his or her social and educational standing, almost every single visitor reacted with enthusiasm to the exhibition (those who expressed any reservations at all were in a very small minority). The questions asked were framed in such a way that they allowed the visitors to register their responses to *The Family of Man* both as a humanist proposal and as a visual environment, to the role of America and its cultural policies in Europe, even to individual photographs. What emerges from these responses is a remarkable degree of consensus and match between popular understanding and the analyses of intellectuals and artists like Horkheimer, Koeppen, Kracauer and Richter. The new German materials presented in this book can be seen then, when taken together, to challenge the oppositions between high art and low, populist emotion and critical reason, mass psychology and radical politics that underlie, implicitly or explicitly, the critiques of Steichen's work epitomized by Barthes, and that have been a commonplace of discourse about American culture, from Clement Greenberg's 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) and Dwight MacDonald's return to the theme in 'Masscult and Midcult' (1960), up to now.[20]

One of the most noteworthy features of the Munich survey is that it allows us to identify the image groups and the individual photographs which most appealed to, or left the deepest impressions on, the visitors. As a result, the survey can be used to map to some degree at least the flow and structure of the viewers' attention and

engagement as they move through the exhibition. And as the summary presented in this book makes clear, some of the images that most affected the visitors come as surprises.

Witold Wirpsza's *Commentaries on Photographs* also focuses on individual photographs. Where Horkheimer and Koeppen use the exhibition to reflect on the nature and power of photography as a medium, Wirpsza explores the concrete examples of what Horkheimer refers to as the ephemeral dimensions of physical reality. *Commentaries* consists of 13 poems, each taking a particular image as its point of departure, with the series framed by a poetic prologue and epilogue. Wirpsza writes from a very different cultural and political location than his West German contemporaries. Wirpsza, who was also a major translator of German (he translated Mann, Bloch and Schiller among others), emigrated to Germany in 1970. But he lived until then under the communist regime in Poland. His poems on *The Family of Man* were published in 1962 and he must have seen the exhibition when it toured various Polish cities from September 1959 to August 1960. Up to this point, Wirpsza's writing was marked by a leaning towards socialist realism, but he had started to move towards greater lyrical experimentation, and *Commentaries* signals this shift. Wirpsza is interested less in exploring or supporting the larger philosophical and social meanings of *The Family of Man* than in what the exhibition makes evident about the nature of photography. His poetic sequence is an important text of Polish modernism and its publication here for the first time in English and in its entirety in a translation by Benjamin Paloff, who also provides an introduction to the work, is itself a significant literary event.

The kind of close attention Wirpsza brings to bear on particular images is rare in the critical writings on *The Family of Man*. Given how much has been written about the exhibition, this claim may seem improbable, even absurd. But it is nevertheless the case that there are few critical accounts that provide truly sustained engagements with particular images or image sequences, or with the viewer's experience of the complex, three-dimensional visual spaces of the exhibition. This critical lack is compounded by the fact that almost everyone who has written on *The Family of Man*, excepting the early reviewers, has done so without actually having seen the exhibition. The main visual resource for understanding Steichen's project has been the book of the exhibition. The book inflects the meanings and interactions of the photographs in ways quite different from the exhibition, and in a number of cases the book can be said to significantly distort them. Even where it is faithful to the exhibition, the experience of the book is very different to the experience of walking through Steichen's radical exhibition layout.[21] Those who have tried to reimagine this layout and the kinds of impact it might have had on the audience (most compellingly Fred Turner) have had to rely on Sandeen's description of it and on the installation photographs of the MoMA version (richly documented) and of international locations (where the visual documentation is usually sketchy or non-existent).[22] However, a version of *The Family of Man* that comes very close to reproducing one of the original European versions of the exhibit has been on permanent display at Clervaux Castle in Luxembourg, under the auspices of the Centre national de l'audiovisuel, since 1994 (see illustration 6).

6 *The Family of Man* installation at Clervaux Castle. Theme 'Family of Man: central theme pictures'.

The exhibit was listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 2003 and all of the original prints were restored and the exhibition space renovated in 2013. Steichen was born in Luxembourg and, at his request, the US government donated a complete overseas copy of *The Family of Man* to the country after the exhibition had completed its international tour.

If it is surprising that there are few close readings of the images in *The Family of Man*, it is equally surprising that almost no use has been made of the Clervaux installation as a resource for thinking about the exhibition. The permanent display in Luxembourg provides unique access to a gallery experience that comes close to the original experience of Steichen's exhibition, at least in its travelling versions, and as such it is also invaluable for anyone interested in the histories of photography and exhibition design. Nearly all the essays in this book are informed by at least one, sometimes several visits to Clervaux. All the essays, save Martin Jay's commentary on Horkheimer and Paloff's translation, have their origin in a conference on *The Family of Man* held at Clervaux in 2015, and a number of them offer substantial engagements with the visual forms and dynamics of Steichen's exhibition design.[23]

Shamoon Zamir's chapter on the installation of *The Family of Man* at MoMA examines selected image sequences and the webs of interactions they set in motion across various rooms; he reconstructs in this way, and in far greater detail than in previous criticism, the particularities of the exhibition experience, not only to distinguish it from the book but to make clear why the differences matter to our understanding of Steichen's project. It is part of Zamir's argument that the concept of family as it is engaged in the exhibition has been misconstrued as a withdrawal from politics and history into the private realm; he proposes instead that the narrative of the exhibition moves from the private to the public realm, from an idea of the family based on descent to one based on consent and embodied in the global collectivity of the United Nations. Kerstin Schmidt builds upon her previous scholarship on photography and location, and on recent works on the philosophies of place, to develop a conceptual framework for a critical reading of space and place in the exhibition design of *The Family of Man*. Like Zamir, she considers ways in which the exhibition engaged the viewer in active, dynamic and relational modes of perception, experience and thought. Ulrike Gehring constructs an unexpected dialogue between post-World War II American art and Steichen's exhibition design, focusing in particular on what she sees as structural analogies between Steichen's narrative concept and the art of the 1950s. As noted above, most of the contributors to this volume draw upon visits to Clervaux. Anke Reitz, who is responsible for *The Family of Man* at Clervaux, provides an account of the Luxembourg installation that allows us to see the exhibition from a curator's point of view and to understand how the relationship with Steichen's original design is negotiated by the exhibition's contemporary European reconstruction.

Gehring's essay shares with Zamir and Schmidt an effort to examine anew the visual aspects of *The Family of Man*, but it also contributes to a focus on new American contexts for understanding Steichen's exhibition. Miles Orvell examines one image, the hydrogen bomb explosion, in detail, contextualizing it deftly and richly within American culture's coming to terms with the realities of nuclear weaponry after World War II. Orvell too goes against critical consensus and argues that it is precisely history – the advent of the hydrogen bomb in 1945 – that is central to the logic of the exhibition, if not in the same way in the book of the exhibition. Eric Sandeen places Steichen's multi-year effort in assembling the photographs for *The Family of Man* in the context of other efforts to create anthologies that functioned as cultural texts for large American audiences during the second third of the twentieth century. He focuses in particular on the poet Carl Sandburg's interwar career, and on his relationship to Steichen, his brother-in-law. This is an account that further helps locate *The Family of Man* within the history of American cultural thought and practice, and helps us better understand some of the philosophical underpinnings of Steichen's project .

Two essays frame in broad and different ways the issues and debates examined in this collection. Gerd Hurm's essay launches the volume with a sustained critique of Barthes that turns out to be a wide-ranging reorientation of accepted ideological characterizations and historical contextualizations of *The Family of Man*. Hurm's contribution is helpful not only because it effectively clears the critical ground for fresh

approaches, but also because it directs our attention to earlier phases in Steichen's curatorial career as contexts relevant to a proper understanding of his 1955 exhibition. The other essay that undertakes a conceptual reframing of critical approaches to *The Family of Man* is by Winfried Fluck. Fluck examines the visual logic that underlies the exhibition; he proposes an ongoing interactive transfer between picture and spectator, and, more specifically, between picture (*Bild*) and image (*Vorstellung*), arguing that the two are never identical and that the gap between the two acts as an imaginary space for the spectator that is not 'visible' in the photograph itself. Fluck's model of an active spectatorship constructed by *The Family of Man*, and his placing of this spectatorship in the context of mid-century liberalism, links his work to that of Zamir and Schmidt, as well as to other recent contributions to the ongoing study of Steichen's exhibition.

Steichen's project emerges from the new readings presented here not as a redeemed ideal humanism but as a richly contradictory work addressing its own time more complexly than the broad critical consensus about it has acknowledged; it also emerges as a work able to engage with the early twenty-first century and its global concerns in surprisingly relevant ways.

The unprecedented horror of World War II and the divided world that emerged in the years after the war provided the immediate impetus for Steichen's conception of *The Family of Man*. Much of the criticism that have been levelled at Steichen has focused on the apparent naivety of his conception, of its simple-minded response to the intractable political and cultural complexities of the world. It is also the case that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and so the supposed end of the Cold War, many of the historical questions and dilemmas that shaped *The Family of Man* have, for a time at least, seemed less urgent than they did to Steichen and to the worldwide audiences in the 1950s. But we find ourselves today once again in a world in which nationalist self-enclosure and cultural intolerance are on the rise, the future of the experiment that is the European Union is in some doubt, and proliferating wars and economic hardship have set in motion vast flows of refugees and migrants across the globe. It seems, then, appropriate and necessary, and also regrettable, to be reflecting again on the questions that were asked by *The Family of Man* at mid-century.

If the question of humanity's common fate in the face of political (and now environmental) catastrophe has taken on an urgency that Steichen and his immediate audience had hoped would never happen again, there have also been shifts in cultural thinking that encourage a reassessment of *The Family of Man* at the present time. With the waning of excessively ideological and social constructivists readings in the arts, and especially in photography, aesthetics, ethics and the relationships of the two are returning to the fore of discussions in new ways; equally, the claims of humanism and universalism are open to new debates, not only in ethical philosophy, but also in anthropology and biology.

Clearly, most of the contributions to this book are, in different ways and to different degrees, responsive to these cultural and political reorientations. But this is not to suggest that they share any one common critical or ideological ground. It is, however,

the case that we as editors have been motivated by a number of shared cultural and critical perspectives in bringing together all of the new engagements with *The Family of Man* that make up this volume. We find an affinity with Rita Felski's realization that

> there is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old. We know only too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ideas that seemed revelatory thirty years ago – the decentered subject! The social construction of reality! – have dwindled into shopworn slogans; defamiliarizing has lapsed into doxa, no less dogged and often as dogmatic as the certainties it sought to disrupt.[24]

Felski's focus is on literature and literary studies but her reflections are widely applicable to other arts. Susie Linfield has spoken out similarly with force and clarity against the state of photography criticism. Reminding her readers of the intimate and necessary connection between emotion, pleasure, love and critical reason in the best writings on the arts (in Edmund Wilson's writings on literature or Pauline Kael's on film, for instance), she notes that critics of photography

> view emotional responses […] not as something to be experienced and understood but, rather, as an enemy to be vigilantly guarded against. For these writers, criticism is a prophylactic against the virus of sentiment, and pleasure is denounced as self-indulgent […] Rather than enter into what [Alfred] Kazin called a 'community of interest' with their chosen subject, these critics come armed to the teeth against it.[25]

When *The Family of Man* was shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, it was billed as 'the exhibition you see with your heart'.[26] Steichen may or may not have had a hand in this characterization, but there can be no doubt that he would have fully agreed that the emotions have a central role to play in *The Family of Man*. But it is also the case that Steichen's often breezy and folksy articulations of the motivations and meanings of his exhibition ('what a wonderful thing life was, how marvelous people were'), as much as Sandburg's saccharine and inflated prologue to the book of the exhibition ('A camera testament, a drama of the grand canyon of humanity, an epic woven of fun, mystery and holiness'), have got in the way of a properly nuanced and just understanding of these motivations and meanings. Too often critics have been unable to separate Steichen's and Sandburg's promotional statements from the exhibition itself; they read the exhibition through the clouded lens of authorial rhetoric and bluster. We hope that the materials gathered in this book will help redirect attention to the exhibition as an art object with its own agency, and to the work that *The Family of Man* did in the 1950s – and continues to do at Clervaux today.