



Karin Priem
Kerstin te Heesen
(Eds.)

**On Display:
Visual Politics,
Material Culture,
and Education**

Visuelle Kultur.
Studien und Materialien
Band 11

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Visuelle Kultur. Studien und Materialien

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On Display: Visual Politics, Material Culture and Education

“[The Family of Man] was conceived as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life – as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.” – Edward Steichen¹

“For however universal, they [the facts of nature] are the signs of historical writing.” – Roland Barthes²

This book focuses on one of the most successful photography exhibitions in history, *The Family of Man*. It takes as its theme the visual, material, political and commercial aspects of the exhibition as well as its educational power. Today a permanent exhibition in Clervaux, Luxembourg, and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the show was first displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from January 24 to May 8, 1955. After its initial showing, the exhibition toured the world for many years, making stops in thirty-seven countries on six continents. In a decade characterized by the Cold War, the show was meant to express and promote a supposedly universal and timeless humanism, with the photographs selected for the exhibition focusing on aspects allegedly common to all people and cultures around the world. As such, *The Family of Man* was at the time a key weapon of U.S. cultural diplomacy. Its exhibition design combined elements of propaganda, high art, popular culture, and commercialism and deliberately aimed at influencing individual minds and even entire societies: cultural policy was used as a vehicle of political power.

With *The Family of Man* as its reference point, this collection of essays takes a closer look at visual and material objects and examines their relevance for educational issues. We understand these issues in their broadest sense to encompass processes of citizenship and identity formation and the adoption and/or preservation of ethical and political values with effects that range from the micro to the macro, from the national to the international level. The overall hypothesis of this volume is that images, objects and designs were created and employed as performers and performances that interacted with and attracted mass audiences.³ This book not only looks at how the presentational, representational and social

1 Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, 3.

2 Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” 448.

3 See Elisabeth Edwards, “Photographs and the Sound of History.”

power of images, objects and designs was deliberately used by political and cultural stakeholders during the mid-1950s, but also how these technologies of display travelled through time and space and, as historical objects, interacted – and continue to interact – with new contexts and audiences.

The chapters that make up this book originated as contributions to a conference on “Visual Politics, Material Culture and Public Education,” which took place at the University of Luxembourg in 2011. The conference brought together curators and experts from a wide variety of fields including art history, modern history, material culture studies, ethnography, communication studies, and education not only to discuss how political values were promoted through artistic and historical shows, but also to reflect on the political impact of the visual media and material culture. A key aim of the conference was to illustrate the relevance of public exhibition spaces and their materiality for educating the people by means of display and to identify the visual and material strategies used to construct and establish (Western-oriented) values and attitudes.

This collection of essays is divided into three parts addressing different aspects of the topic: “Learning How to See and to Act: Visual Concepts and Material Manifestations” (Part I), “Missions Accessible to All: The Politics of Display and the Shaping of Minds” (Part II), and “Heritage Making and Identity Formation: The Nation on Display” (Part III).

The first two contributions under the heading “Learning How to See and to Act: Visual Concepts and Material Manifestations” provide a theoretical introduction by looking at visual, material and popular culture from the perspective of media history, visual and material studies, and cultural anthropology. *Robert Hariman*, in his essay, focuses on the trajectories of *The Family of Man* through time and space and how important shifts in Western media have influenced the exhibition’s reception and meaning. Today, the deliberately planned, at the time progressive display of images and distinctly modern design that was meant to convey a clear cultural mission and gave *The Family of Man* its iconic status, seem to have lost their effect. According to Hariman, the show has instead become a local historical artifact representing a “meshwork of meanings” as a result of the debates and controversies (r)evolving around it.⁴ In hindsight and especially when seen in light of subsequent political catastrophes, the show may also be said to have testified to a false optimism. In her essay, *Gudrun König* too takes a look at the history and trajectories of modern exhibition design by analyzing three sites of display: the museum, the industrial exhibition, and the department store. Her essay uncovers strong links between the history of museums and the history of consumer culture, since in both cases, very much like in *The Family of Man*, technologies of display are centered around a specific mission to educate the masses.

4 See Tim Ingold, “Bindings Against Boundaries: Entanglements of Life in an Open World” and Françoise Poos, *Hidden Images. The Making of a National Family Album*.

Examining a variety of exhibition designs that emerged around 1900, König critically interrogates the circulation of knowledge and objects between commercial and non-commercial stages or sites of display, all of which established similar relationships and bonds between people and things.

Next, the essay by Karin Priem focuses on the ‘philosophy’ and photographic structure of Edward Steichen’s *First Picture Book* as a circulating object and looks at the connections between art, science, and consumerism within the domain of education. *The First Picture Book*, published in 1930, was an educational tool for the making of a better future. The period was characterized by the discovery of photographic technologies as visual and epistemological strategies to experiment with, to train new ways of seeing, and to implement new ways of presenting and observing. When Steichen was working on *The First Picture Book*, he was actively and successfully involved in photographing consumer objects, and the photographs he took and that were intended to depict presumably important facts for babies explicitly refer to his commercial photography. Jan C. Watzlawik analyzes the material culture of public protest. Using the example of two everyday objects – cooking pots and cobblestones – he elaborates on the links between protest culture and consumption culture. Based on Michel de Certeau’s understanding of consumers as active subjects, Watzlawik describes the transformation of ‘ordinary’ things into material agents of social opposition *and* participation. Watzlawik’s chapter illustrates quite vividly how the research on objects may reveal new insights into the materiality of political and social movements. Eric J. Sandeen reflects on the political-material dimensions of exhibition designs. In his essay, he looks at the metamorphosis of *The Family of Man* from a temporary site-specific installation at the Museum of Modern Art that came with a mid-1950s narrative on universal human values, to a travelling exhibition that testified to the show’s flexibility and adaptability to the United States Information Agency’s cultural diplomacy programs during the Cold War, and, finally, to a ‘historicized’ permanent installation at Château Clervaux, Luxembourg. The essay by Kerstin te Heesen also challenges the supposedly timeless quality of *The Family of Man* while stressing issues of cultural hegemony. The chapter critically interrogates Steichen’s idea of an enduring ‘natural universality’ that he saw best (re) presented in photography. Focusing on one of the main themes of *The Family of Man* – the cycle of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding, and the related intimacy between mother and baby – te Heesen traces this specific visual frame of reference through nearly six hundred years of Western art, demonstrating that visual patterns are subject to social and cultural influences rather than emerging from universal ideas and norms.

The second part of the anthology, “Missions Accessible to All: The Politics of Display and the Shaping of Minds,” deals with the political dimensions of exhibitions and exhibition designs. Kristen Gresh explores *The Family of Man* as an element of the Museum of Modern Art’s war program, while Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir analyzes

the different agendas of Cold War photography. Both contributors engage with questions about the difficult relationship between visual display and propagandistic manipulations. Gresh's critical look at the history of photography exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art contextualizes the ways in which *The Family of Man* contributed to debates on the ethical biases that inevitably emerged when artistic and documentary photography became part of visual propaganda. Similarly, *Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir* explores the ambivalence of photographs in the context of the Marshall Plan. By analyzing the role that photographs played in the propagation of political ideologies, this chapter provides links to *The Family of Man* as an instrument of cultural policy.

"Heritage Making and Identity Formation: The Nation on Display," the third section of this volume, addresses the question of how the nation, nationhood and national identity are represented and shaped by archives and museums. Part of a larger project on the relationship between home movies and nationhood, the essay by *Françoise Poos* focuses on the role of visual archives in building a national identity. It takes as its subject the repository itself, more specifically the Centre national de l'audiovisuel in Luxembourg whose mission is to preserve and promote audiovisual documents related to the Luxembourg past. Poos critically explores the different, sometimes contradictory aims of this institution and its complex functions, which, in the late 1980s, were linked to the new policy of "cultural democracy" and the idea of "documenting Luxembourg."

Moving from Luxembourg to the United States, *Brian I. Daniels'* contribution deals with objects, places and routes and their role in constructing official interpretations of the nation's patrimony. By sketching different dimensions of the United States' cultural heritage and its formalization through different laws and programs, his essay demonstrates not only the connections between material culture and education but also how both are shaped politically.

By interrogating the legend of *The Family of Man* as an important pacemaker of the shift from a rather rigid exhibition design meant to keep viewers at a respectful distance to flexible performances inspired by commerce and aimed at mass audiences, it is our hope that this collection will contribute to ongoing discussions on visual politics, material culture and education.

Karin Priem and Kerstin te Heesen

Luxembourg, May 2016

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I.

**Learning How to See and to Act:
Visual Concepts and Material Manifestations**

Robert Hariman

Icon, Allegory, Catastrophe: Three Modes of Articulation within 21st Century Public Culture

The Family of Man exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1955. Today it is housed in Clervaux, Luxembourg, in a castle dating from the twelfth century. I hope that the irony here can be noted without disrespect. From a world city to a town, from the post-war citadel of modernism to a medieval castle restored as a tourist center, from universal claims to sustainable particularity. The historical, cultural, and geographic trajectory of this exhibition provides one marker of transformations within and around modernism itself. What once was a vital, progressive enactment of the photographic record, now has been consigned to the locality, decay, and amnesia that defines any material archive. Likewise, the exhibition and book have acquired a history of public circulation and commentary that has included global popularity, robust cultural debate, Cold War advocacy, anti-colonial resistance, decline into relative obsolescence and mere didacticism, revival of a sort via several rounds of withering academic critique, and a few attempts at revisionist reconsideration.¹ In short, as the dust settles in the archive, one might ask what has changed outside the castle – and what might stay the same, albeit via restoration.

A lot has changed since 1955, and yet The Family of Man can be more than a museum piece regarding an intense but narrow historical period. The reconstruction offers a vantage for thinking about a basic shift in the public culture that is articulated by the Western media system. In this essay, I hope to suggest how the cultural change underway includes a reconfiguration of three nodes of photographic meaning: thus, the orientation of an image shifts from archive to icon, the master trope shifts from symbol to allegory, and the political horizon shifts from progress to catastrophe. What were largely unspoken but significant conventions of representation still operate much of the time, but they also are being altered, augmented, and displaced by each of these emergent figures. By reflecting on how The Family of Man has become dated, one can both identify these formal features of cultural change and also consider how they might guide reconsideration of the original exhibition, not least because they were there from the beginning.

1 Histories of the critical reception include Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*; Berlier, “The Family of Man”; Bezner, “Subtle Subterfuge”; Back and Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *The Family of Man*; Kaplan, “Photo Globe.” See also Kroes, *Photographic Memories*.

This shift can be described simply as the change from modernism to postmodernism, but I doubt that usage is helpful anymore.² It is important to note, however, that I am not claiming a complete break, but rather a process of gradual displacement. Grand narratives have collapsed, but they do get promoted again; double coding may be ubiquitous, but dangerous simplifications thrive nonetheless. Most important, the changes in photographic meaning are changes in modality: familiar signs, genres, and other conventions no longer have what had seemed to be a fixed relationship to reality. More to the point, an archive need not be limited to custodianship of the past; an icon need not evoke an essential presence; a symbol need not imply a totality; an allegory need not be mere artifice; progress can become a period piece, and catastrophe may become the better alternative.

My argument presumes that the primary context for photography is cultural rather than institutional (although institutions such as the press figure prominently), and that the relevant culture is a distinctively public culture. A modern world is a public world – that is, one in which the relationship between the state and civil society depends on negotiations of recognition and interest in public media; those media are public because they are addressed to an audience of strangers treated as equals, and often enough on behalf of the general welfare. Like the state and the market, the public is a quasi-metaphysical concept defining modern societies, but one that has less organizational power that accrues to governments and corporations (or, in other societies, to clans, patronage, and private armies). In place of material power, the public relies on visibility: including literal instantiation in public spaces and media, and also corresponding norms such as transparency, practices such as spectatorship, habits such as openness to the gaze of others, fetishes such as celebrity, and vices such as shamelessness. In other words, the public sphere operates primarily as a culture – a shared symbolic space created by distinctively coherent media and other social practices to maintain human association – and that culture is complexly visual.

Public cultures are shaped by public arts, which can be more or less visual depending on the historical period, available media technologies, and the like. Public visual arts have included statuary, murals, architecture, urban design, the theatre, and painting, and also illustrations, Wild West shows, movies, graffiti, television, and, of course, photography. I am among those who believe that photography has been the most important visual art for the definition of modern public life. It has been the quintessentially democratic art – available to everyone, creating a common world out of the vernacular life of ordinary people, extending recognition, empathy, identification, and civic consciousness across all borders, and equipping advocates on behalf of inclusion and justice. Equally important, it

2 Postmodernism and photography have been linked at least since Solomon-Godeau, “Photography After Art Photography.” For a recent example of photographers and curators working explicitly against the “clichés” of modernism, see Keenan and Guerra, *Antiphotography*.

more than any other art has created the conditions of visibility that define modern civic association. We have learned to look at each other as if looking at each other's photographs, a condition of virtual engagement that makes actual association less threatening because we already understand others and ourselves as simultaneously given up to a shared space of appearances. As that space is a public space, it is one defined by ideals of democratic citizenship: liberty, equality, justice, and the common good.

Of course, those ideals are merely nominal commitments until they are voiced, embodied, displayed, performed or otherwise shared with and then taken up by spectators. Equally important, the means of representation and norms of interpretation defining any cultural period will be more or less suited to some articulations and some responses than others. Thus, critical study has to involve more than attention to whether specific political ideals are being expressed, for the accessibility and saliency of any ideal also will depend on how its manner of presentation operates as a political aesthetic.³ In short, as innovations in communication technologies and other processes of capitalist globalization continue to reshape public culture, visual citizenship requires more than trusting the press to report the news.

The three pillars of modernist photography that I want to feature are the archive, the symbol, and progress. Other key features are not included: most notably, the principle of documentary realism to report "things as they are." That is less a factor in the transition than one might think, and for all the anxiety organized around references to Photoshop, photographic verisimilitude remains a foundational assumption for almost all image consumption.⁴ But literal reference is easily over-rated, not least when it is also crisscrossed by other rhetorical patterns. During the heyday of post-war modernism, any public presentation of photography, and even of documentary photography, was organized by three such patterns of identification: expanding the archive, connecting the particular to the universal, and doing so on behalf of a progressive history.

The modernist archive of photography was a distinctive cultural achievement from the start, and one that becomes more evident with digital expansion. Unlike the repositories for documents, the continual accumulation of photographs had the sense of a vital, living process. This was an archive in no need of muse-

3 Work on political aesthetics includes such varied approaches as Hariman, *Political Style*; Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics*; Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation*; Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*.

4 Note how pervasive cropping and other artistic manipulations were not frequent matters of public concern in the modernist period, while they loom large in public discourse today. The difference is more than a question of upgrading visual literacy in response to technological change; those such as Errol Morris and others who try to hold the line for verisimilitude are fighting a rear guard action as the culture withdraws from the modality of modernist symbolic representation. See, for example, Morris, *Believing Is Seeing*; and the review by Hariman and Lucaites, "Errol Morris and the Road Not Taken."

ums or libraries; it had none of the dust and nostalgia that defines philosophical or other literary celebrations of the concept. Instead, the photographic archive was evidence of the medium's close and continuing relationship with the world. The photographs poured forth, as if the world itself was flowing outward through the camera. The modernist archive embodied the world as picture: real because it could be seen, astonishing because it could be seen so widely, so continuously, in such detail, with such commitment and ingenuity.⁵ Not surprisingly, it existed everywhere: in newspapers, magazines, and books; in wallets, picture frames, and photo albums; in advertisements, postcards, and Fotomats; and in libraries, museums, and traveling exhibitions.

Thus, the archive undergirded each individual photograph. *Life* featured photos, but they were known to be the pick of a myriad not shown. The photo essay was the emblematic genre, as it was a miniature collection that represented an archive – and one so full that it had to be given narrative form. The photograph was said to be meaningful because it directly recorded reality, but that only worked if one could get from sheer particularity to coherent depiction; genre, captions, and other techniques provided that bridge, but they in turn were grounded in the knowledge (on display across modern media) that any one photograph was already part of a vast process of documentation. This held whether looking at a family snapshot – which was headed for the family album – or a celebrated photograph – which was understood to stand out among many others.

In short, an important difference between photography and other arts is not only mechanical reproduction of the single image, but rather the continuous production that created an enormous repository of related images. The photographic archive was not even necessarily aligned with the past: images could be moved around and displayed without temporal markers. Likewise, it was not an archive of antique customs but rather of the practices of everyday life – hence, its vitality. Unlike other arts, originality became a subsidiary virtue, while the art instead accepted high rates of redundancy as the cost of getting close to things and so to plenitude itself.

That said, modernism was still about control, whether by artist, author, engineer or manager. Thus, the key similarity between photography and the other archives was technocratic administration. Amidst the vast welter of informal, amateur holdings, the media professionals locked down what became the core repository of photographic art. *Life*, AP, Magnum, MoMA, and other organizations maintained tight control over their collections. This editorial control of photographic display was not only consistent with press-public relations at the time, but also meant that management was the crucial factor in photography's claim to cultural status. Anyone could take a photograph, and anything could be photographed,

5 Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture." Ariella Azoulay articulates photography's role in "the conquest of the world as picture," in *The Civil Contract of Photography*.

but the editor supplied the gate-keeping function that defined the media system. (By contrast, consider how today the *Life* archive, including photos not published, is available to anyone at no cost online.) Thus, the material archive acquired a layered structure: the disparate amateur holdings scattered throughout private life, the professional images never seen by the public and largely ensconced in private institutions, and the daily display of images in news and advertising as selected for the public. Nor did either haphazardness or suppression matter, for the public archive already seemed comprehensive.

This continuous correspondence of photography with the world was one reason why criticisms by Susan Sontag and others of the fragmentary nature of the individual photograph rang hollow. The photograph did capture only a tiny piece of reality, but photography was reproducing the world. Had this relationship between photograph and archive been the whole of photographic meaning, a very different – temporal, allegorical – consciousness could have developed (and did, according to Sontag, who charged all photography with “surrealism”⁶). But each photograph also had access to another reservoir of meaning, as it could become a symbol. This dimension was downplayed in the discourse of professional journalism, but there was no doubt that photographs were providing symbolic depictions of poverty, displacement, crime, and urban alienation, and of industrialization, progress, prosperity, and a common life. Thus, the photograph’s particularity was put in service of representing social types. The moral travesties of ethnology, colonialism, and the like were certainly examples of this mode of representation, but the difference was political and ethical, not epistemological.

The expansive capability of the photographic image was not exhausted by the social type. As an image acquired a symbolic aura, it became capable of universal reference.⁷ This is visual humanism in a nutshell: by gazing at one particular human being, you see humanity. And humanity is not simply a higher order type, but rather a reference having universal extension: it will be true at any time and place. Thus, instead of photography becoming an art of particulars, as if a vast curiosity cabinet, it became an art for connecting the particular and the universal. This is a mountain, and the majesty of nature. This is a slice of the starry sky, and a portal to infinity. Furthermore, a symbol is a sign that carries a sense of totali-

6 Sontag, *On Photography*, 51–82.

7 Note how this symbolic extension to universality is the core element targeted in the most withering critiques of *The Family of Man*: for example, Barthes, “The Great Family of Man”; Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs.” Sekula also marks the formal connection between social typing and the more abstract typification of modernism, for example, as it was evident in Parsonian sociology and the conception of photography as a universal language. True enough, although I believe he overstates the alignment with scientism, racism, and other forms of social domination. For different conceptions of how photography can constitute social relations without being dominated by or merely an instrument of exclusionary social ascription, see Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*; Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed* and *The Public Image*; and Stimson, *The Pivot of the World*.