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## *The Family of Man* in Poland: An Exhibition as a Democratic Space?

The monumental photographic exhibition *The Family of Man* (Figs. 1–2) that was presented in 1955 at the New York Museum of Modern Art was a phenomenon that continues to inspire generations of scholars.<sup>1</sup> It is perceived as a caesura and as the subject of a major controversy shaping the discourse of the photographic medium. It is also a significant example in the discussion on the Modernist exhibition models that are being implemented in modern museum spaces. As a visual narrative conveying a classically humanist message, *The Family of Man* is even discussed in paradigmatic terms – it testifies to the belief in a model of art as a universal language.<sup>2</sup> In the decades that followed, the exhibition was critically re-evaluated and interpreted in terms of “frame setting” and the paternalistic function of exhibitions and modern museums.<sup>3</sup> In addition, its contemporary reception features the “father

- 1 The article is a modified and extended version of a section of the PhD thesis entitled *The Family of Man – recepcja wystawy w krytyce i fotografii* [The Family of Man – reception of the exhibition in photography and art criticism] that was presented at the Institute of Art History of John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin in 2014.
- 2 See texts that are representative of this approach to exhibitions: R. Barthes, “The Great Family of Man”, in: *Mythologies*, translated by A. Lavers, New York, 2001, pp. 100–102; S. Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, 1977; A. Sekula, “Traffic in Photographs”, *Art Journal*, spring 1981, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 15–25.
- 3 This is a reference to the issue of the boundary/frame of a painting; see e.g. M. Popczyk, *Estetyczne przestrzenie ekspozycji muzealnej. Artefakty przyrody i dzieła sztuki* [Aesthetic spaces of museum exhibitions; artefacts of nature and works of art], Cracow, 2008, pp. 136–137, as well as a reference to the same issue discussed in terms of gender studies: M. Leśniakowska, “Biopolityczne ciało w environmentach Stanisława Zamecznika” [The biopolitical body in Stanisław Zamecznik’s environments], in: *Wizje nowoczesności. Lata 50. i 60. – wzornictwo, estetyka, styl życia. Materiały z sesji „Lata 50. i 60. w Polsce i na świecie: estetyka, wizje nowoczesności, styl życia”*; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 15 kwietnia 2011 roku [Visions of Modernity. The 1950s and 1960s – design, aesthetics, lifestyle. Materials from the session “The 1950s and 1960s in Poland and abroad;



**Fig. 1.** A view of the exhibition [a reconstruction of the exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955], Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, photo by Romain Girtten, 2013, the archives of Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, Centre National de l'Audiovisuel, Dudelange, Luxembourg

figure”<sup>4</sup> – a motif that is characteristic of Modernism and in this case identified with the creator of the exhibition, Edward Steichen, who was often regarded as the father of American Modernism.

While the origins and contexts of this exhibition have been thoroughly discussed by Western scholars,<sup>5</sup> in Poland these issues have received little

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aesthetics, concepts of modernity, lifestyles”; The National Museum in Warsaw, 15 April 2011], The National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 2012, pp. 37–50.

4 A. Sekula, op. cit, pp. 91–92.

5 Increasingly advanced studies on Modernism conducted in the last 25 years have brought forth new subjects for analysis – more attention has been drawn to the creator’s intentions and to the meaning of his/her idea. See e.g. E. J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: ‘The Family of Man’ and 1950s America*, Albuquerque, 1995; M. Berlier, “‘The Family of Man’: Readings of an Exhibition”, in: *Picturing the Past: Media, History and Photography*, eds. B. Brennen, H. Hardt, Champaign, 1999, pp. 206–241; *The Family of Man 1955–2001. Humanism and Postmodernism: A Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen*, eds. J. Back, V. Schmidt-Linsenhoff, Marburg, 2004; B. Stimson, “Photographic Being and The Family of Man”, in: *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its*



**Fig. 2.** A view of the exhibition [a reconstruction of the exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955], Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, photo by Romain Girtten, 2013, the archives of Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, Centre National de l'Audiovisuel, Dudelange, Luxembourg

attention. No attempt at a more comprehensive analysis of the exhibition's reception has ever been made, either in terms of the history of photography or in terms of the history of museum exhibitions. *The Family of Man* was mentioned in a number of works on the history of Polish photography, yet only as a cursory reference,<sup>6</sup> even though several scholars have expressed the

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*Nation*, Cambridge MA–London, 2006, pp. 59–104; L. Kaplan, “Photo Globe: ‘The Family of Man’ and the Global Rhetoric of Photography”, in: *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*, Minneapolis–London, 2005, pp. 55–80; F. Turner, “‘The Family of Man’ and the Politics of Attention in Cold War America”, *Public Culture*, 2012, no. 1, pp. 55–84; F. Turner, “The Museum of Modern Art Makes the World a Family”, in: *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*, Chicago, 2013, pp. 181–212.

- 6 A. Sobota, “Fotograficzny obraz społeczeństwa PRL-u” [A photographic image of society in the People’s Republic of Poland], in: *Polska fotografia dokumentalna na skrzyżowaniu dyskursów. Materiały z sesji zorganizowanej w dniu 2 IV 2005 z okazji wystawy Leonarda Sempolińskiego* [Polish documentary photography at the crossroads of discourse; materials from the session organised on 2 April 2005 during the exhibition of Leonard

need for a more thorough inquiry into the subject.<sup>7</sup> Even less space has been devoted to this exposition in studies pertaining to Polish gallery exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> The most detailed of the existing analyses were made in literature studies and pertain to a volume of poetry by Witold Wirpsza entitled *Komentarze do fotografii 'The Family of Man'* [Captions to the photographs in 'The Family of Man'] which was published in 1962. The book was, on the one hand, a testimony to the author's deep understanding of the exhibition as an element of the artistic and political reality of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and, on the other hand, a description of his original concept of poetic art.<sup>9</sup> Works written by Western scholars testifying to a critical reception of this exhibition have become a point of reference in all of the above-mentioned disciplines. Apart from authors such as Allan Sekula and Susan Sontag, pride of place should be given to Roland Barthes, whose essay "The Great Family of Man" (published in his work titled *Mythologies*) has been treated as a point of reference by several generations of scholars. In recent years, the corpus of Western academic works on *The Family of Man* and its reception has grown significantly and now also includes works that are polemical to the above "canon" approaches.<sup>10</sup> It may therefore be surmised that, given the incompleteness of knowledge on the subject and the lack of a more thorough analysis of the exhibition in the context of Polish history of art, a work focusing on the reception of *The Family of Man* in Poland is justified and needed. What is more, an examination of this topic requires that the scholar go beyond the history of photography and

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Sempoliński's works], Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 78–79; A. Mazur, *Historie fotografii w Polsce 1839–2009* [Stories of photography in Poland 1839–2009], Cracow, 2009, p. 237.

7 A. Mazur, *ibid.*, p. 237.

8 One example comes from Tomasz Fudala, who offers a general reflection; *Przestrzeń między nami* [The space between us], exhibition catalogue, eds. T. Fudala, M. Zamecznik, The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw, 2011.

9 See J. J. Lipski, "Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania" [A diary from the period of adolescence], *Twórczość*, 1963, no. 6, pp. 68–70; J. Kwiatkowski, "Poezja infernalna" [Infernal poetry], *Życie Literackie*, 1963, no. 16, p. 9; A. Jaworska, "O Komentarzach do fotografii 'The Family of Man' Witolda Wirpszy" [On Witold Wirpsza's Captions to the photographs in "The Family of Man"], *Arkadia*, 2008, no. 23–24, pp. 84–111; T. Kaliściak, "Rodzina ludzka bawi się w zdjęcia, czyli pasożyt na wystawie", *Arkadia*, 2009, no. 25–26, pp. 145–150; G. Jankowicz, "Wirpsza i poetyka spojrzenia" [Wirpsza and the poetics of perception], in: W. Wirpsza, *Komentarze do fotografii 'The Family of Man'* [Captions to the photographs in "The Family of Man"], Mikołów, 2010, pp. 43–58; W. Pietrzak, "Anty-mitologia Witolda Wirpszy. Komentarz do 'Komentarzy do fotografii'" [Wirpsza's anti-mythology. Comments to the "Captions to the photographs"], *Ruch Literacki*, 2014, issue 4–5, pp. 505–515.

10 Examples include A. Azoulay, "'The Family of Man': A Visual Universal Declaration of Human Rights", in: *The Human Snapshot*, eds. T. Keenan, T. Zolghadr, Berlin, 2013, pp. 19–48; F. Turner, *'The Family of Man' and the Politics of Attention...*, op. cit.; S. E. James, "A Post-Fascist 'Family of Man'? Cold War Humanism, Democracy and Photography in Germany", *Oxford Art Journal*, 2012, no. 3, pp. 315–336.



enter the realm of the multifaceted relations between Polish modernity and Western Modernism. A closer look at the spatial arrangement of the exhibition, the origins of this arrangement and the historical and artistic features of its reception in Poland makes it possible to investigate issues that were significant to the artistic circle of photographers in the context of broader artistic and cultural processes.

## An exhibition on an editing table

The exhibition *The Family of Man* (Figs. 3–4), which was composed of more than five hundred photographs grouped into thematic sections corresponding to phases in a person's life (birth, childhood, death), areas of human activity (e.g. work, play), social issues (e.g. famine, human rights), historical events (the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War) or ideas (e.g. love, religion), may certainly be described by means of the category of a “cinematic effect”, as delineated by Mieke Bal,<sup>11</sup> especially in relation to expositions based on the medium of photography. The exposition may be equated with a script or a storyboard which has its narrative climax – the photograph of a nuclear weapon test presented as a reversal film image and displayed in a darkened room.<sup>12</sup> The photographs showcased at the exhibition differed in size and were hung at varying heights. They were arranged in the gallery space according to their subject matter; the form that corresponded to the meaning granted the images a rhetorical function (e.g. a round, metal frame in the sequence depicting children dancing in a circle; a corridor passageway in the section devoted to death; isolated photographs of an atomic explosion, or a fallen soldier, the casualty of the Pacific War).<sup>13</sup> Steichen developed the concept of the exhibition in cooperation with the poet Carl Sandburg by using specific poetic figures such as contrast (the juxtaposition of photographs conveying varying degrees of emotional tension), counterpoint (e.g. problematisation of the status of the oppressor and the oppressed that was observable in the war photographs – the sequence titled *Faces of War*), or reiteration (the motifs of music and childhood recurring in various configurations and combinations).<sup>14</sup> The meaning of the cinematic narrative of *The Family of Man* was therefore designed to span from the simple

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11 M. Bal, “Exhibition as Film”, in: *(Re)Visualizing National History: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium*, ed. R. Ostow, Toronto, 2008, pp. 15–47.

12 This is a reference to the first exhibition in New York; the manner of exhibiting this photograph varied. See E. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: ‘The Family of Man’ and 1950s America*, Albuquerque, 2010.

13 More on the significance of successive sequences in: *ibid.* Detailed data regarding the thematic and spatial arrangement of the exhibition may be obtained at the Centre National de l’Audiovisuel in Dudelange, *Draft for check list ‘The Family of Man’*.

14 Categories quoted after M. Bal, *op. cit.*, p. 21.



**Fig. 3.** A view of the exhibition [a reconstruction of the exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955], Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, photo by Romain Girtten, 2013, the archives of Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, Centre National de l'Audiovisuel, Dudelange, Luxembourg

humanist declaration that “we are all alike”<sup>15</sup> to the complex mixture of symbols and themes rooted in the history of culture and revolving around the problem of the crisis of civilisation (the past tragedy – the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, and the predicted one – the Cold War). It was probably the multi-layered nature of the exposition that prompted Georges Didi-Huberman to call it an elaborate montage in which “images of war and peace are ostentatiously juxtaposed”.<sup>16</sup>

This montage-like cinematic effect may still be experienced by modern audiences through the medium of the popular (and frequently reprinted) catalogue whose layout mirrors the structure of the exhibition (thematic sections, quotations) or through the reconstruction of the original exposition that is presented at the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel at the Clervaux Castle in

15 *Transcript of U.S.I.A. Seminar with Steichen, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1955*, p. 4, Steichen Archives, Museum of Modern Art, New York, quoted after L. Kaplan, op. cit. p. 63.

16 G. Didi-Huberman, *Strategie obrazów. Oko historii 1*, translated into Polish by J. Margański, Warsaw–Cracow, 2011, p. 29; cf. the original, *L'Œil de l'histoire – Tome 1: Quand les images prennent position*, Paris, 2009.



**Fig. 4.** A view of the exhibition [a reconstruction of the exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955], Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, photo by Romain Girtten, 2013, the archives of Musée The Family of Man, Clervaux, Centre National de l'Audiovisuel, Dudelange, Luxembourg

Luxembourg.<sup>17</sup> This being said, neither of these options is able to recreate the visual effect that was observed by gallery-goers in the 1950s; not only because of the decades of visual experience that separate us but also owing to the various technical details and factors associated with the locations in which the exhibition was reassembled. Such local variations of the exposition have been reconstructed only partially, thus making archival photographs, which may at times be difficult to obtain,<sup>18</sup> the primary source of information on

17 One full exhibition set was presented to the Luxembourg authorities by the Museum of Modern Art; it has been on permanent display since 1994 (except for the years 2010–2013, when it was closed due to restoration work).

18 Many photographic archives were lost, destroyed or dispersed. This was also the fate of the archive of the Association of Polish Art Photographers (ZPAF; the archive was of crucial importance since this organisation had been responsible for bringing *The Family of Man* to Poland) and of the press materials which could have provided additional information on the arrangement of the exposition. The corpus of photographic documentation compiled by Adam Kaczkowski is now kept as a deposit at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and comes from the archive of Stanisław Zamecznik, who was

the exhibition's spatial impact. The reconstructed exposition in Luxembourg does, however, offer some idea as to the cinematic effect in Steichen's design which placed audiences within the universe of the narrative, subjecting them not only to rhetoric figures but also to intellectual stimulation under the guidance of the "director", i.e. the narrator (the already-mentioned father figure). The viewers were indubitably drawn into a suggestive visual apparatus which – mainly due to the expert use of the medium of photography – offered them the possibility to fully experience the presented reality, to identify with the depicted world and with other human beings. The exhibition took into account the emotional reactions of the viewers and their own perceptual and intellectual effort. Such an effect could be achieved thanks to the experience that had been brought in by Steichen and Herbert Bayer, whose cooperation influenced the spatial arrangement of the exposition as devised by Paul Rudolph.<sup>19</sup>

In 1942 the Museum of Modern Art housed another project by Steichen and Bayer – a propagandistic photographic exhibition entitled *Road to Victory*. In terms of exposition design it was a prototype for *The Family of Man*. The aim of the exhibition was to convince Americans that the decision to participate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War was justified. As early as in the 1920s, while teaching graphic design and advertising in Bauhaus, Bayer abandoned the traditional manner of displaying works of art, i.e. as a linear composition of exhibits placed at eye level. Adopting ideas developed by the philosophy and psychology of the *Gestalt* movement, Bayer assumed that the viewer ought to, in a way, design the exposition virtually. Thus, in order to stimulate the viewer's own awareness, exhibits were to be arranged casually, not only on walls or plinths but also below the viewers' feet or above their heads in order to help them create an "extended field of vision".<sup>20</sup> For instance, the *Road to Victory* exhibition was arranged in the form of a path; the viewer would follow the route set out by the designers that was surrounded by large-format photographs arranged at differing angles or hung from the ceiling. Thus, *The Family of Man* constituted the result of many years of experience and was even more

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one of the designers of the Warsaw *Family of Man* exposition. Other photographs to which I was able to gain access come from various sources, such as the George Eastman Museum or the Archive of the Academy of Music in Poznań (the photographic legacy of Stefan Poradowski).

19 See e.g. O. Lugon, "Edward Steichen as Exhibition Designer", in: *Edward Steichen. Lives in Photography* [exhibition catalogue], eds. T. Brandow, W. A. Ewing, London, 2007, pp. 267–273.

20 This approach is apparent in the design of the German pavilion at the 1930 *Exposition de la société des artistes décorateurs* in the Grand Palais in Paris. Bayer worked on it in cooperation with Walter Gropius, László Mogoly-Nagy and Marcel Breuer; the design featured enlarged photographs of buildings placed above and below the eye-level of the average viewer. Bayer presented his ideas in an article written in 1937 but published after his arrival in the United States: "Fundamentals of Exhibition Design", *Production Manager*, 1939, no. 2, pp. 17–25.



suggestive in its message, as it pertained to universal subjects and the many aspects of human life throughout the world. The narrative structure of the exhibition, focused on developing awareness and engaging the viewers' perception, implicated the project in less-than-obvious contexts – especially when the exhibition was being shown around the world as a part of the United States Information Agency cultural propaganda programme, in which the Museum of Modern Art had a significant part to play.

Between the years 1955–1962, the exhibition was presented in numerous countries in the West, the Far East and even in the Eastern bloc. As many as eleven of its different variants (including three “American” and three “Japanese” ones) toured the world almost simultaneously. The creators of the exhibition (and the American authorities of the day) desired to show the exposition in such places of geopolitical importance as Berlin, Tokyo, Moscow or in the countries of Latin America. In each case, the dynamic but rhetorically structured arrangement of the exhibition gave rise to a different perspective of reception, a different tone of discourse and different controversies. In Moscow, for instance, where *The Family of Man* was on display in the summer of 1959 as a part of the National American Exhibition, the Soviet authorities protested against showing a photograph of a starving Chinese child taken in 1946 by George Silk. The image was removed, with Steichen's permission. In the same year a Nigerian student tore down several photographs depicting black men and women as an act of protest against portraying these people as being passive and primitive.<sup>21</sup> The case of the Berlin exhibition was also exceptional, since – as may be surmised from Steichen's own comments – the original structure of the narrative pointed to Germans as being responsible for the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War (and for the extermination of millions of Jews) and placed this motif within the framework of the generally critical depiction of humankind and its propensity towards evil.<sup>22</sup> Thus the fact that the exhibition was carefully directed was even more visible in the case of its local variants; such practices were tightly connected with the historical and political reality of that time.

When *The Family of Man* was presented in Poland in the autumn of 1959, first in Warsaw and then in Wrocław, Wałbrzych, Jelenia Góra, Cracow, Poznań and Dąbrowa Górnicza, its official reception was enthusiastic. The authorities, displaying an open, post-thaw attitude, heartily welcomed the exhibition which by then had already been shown in Moscow.<sup>23</sup> The voices of criticism

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21 L. Kaplan, op. cit., pp. 76–77.

22 See S. E. James, op. cit., p. 328.

23 It should be noted that the exhibition was not brought to Poland directly from Moscow. Polish gallery-goers saw a different copy of the exhibition which came from Italy – Florence or Turin (according to *Synthèse et bilan de l'exposition, sa circulation à l'étranger*, ed. K. Gresh, computer printout, unpaginated, available at the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel in Luxembourg). This proves that the Polish photographer milieu had striven to bring the exhibition to Poland even earlier; the fact that *The Family of Man*

that appeared soon after the opening were rather general in nature. An essay by Urszula Czartoryska, for instance, reveals that the exhibition was instantly recognised as significant in the history of photography. Czartoryska was evidently familiar with Barthes's critical opinion and slightly mistrustful of the ideological background of the project.<sup>24</sup> When analysing Steichen's exhibition in the context of its long journey we should perhaps focus on the relation between aesthetics and politics, identified and expressed to a varying degree depending on the place and time in which *The Family of Man* was presented. Thus the phenomenon of the exhibition stems from a multitude of local narratives that differed from the one that was presented in New York.

## An exhibition in the face of a social ideal

*The Family of Man* appears to follow the basic modernist model of an exhibition, both with regard to its origins and to the critics' opinion. The New York Museum of Modern Art may be regarded as typical due to its privileged geopolitical position and the crucial part it played in the cultural policy of the United States. It was a "social instrument" used to create and cultivate modernity.<sup>25</sup> *The Family of Man* ought to be perceived in the same categories. It was particularly suited for that task as it aspired to present a comprehensive view on the social and political reality. The museum context of the exhibition and its role in the history of modernism is sufficient for *The Family of Man* to be perceived as a space in which a political and artistic utopia came to be realised. The already-mentioned cinematic effect served to articulate the utopia in an attractive manner.

What content might fill this utopian model? It had the psychological effect of identifying with a different person that was presented at the exhibition through the medium of photography. This facilitated the process of working through the trauma of a civilisational crisis. What is more, the narrative formula of the exposition was meant to strengthen the ideal of a "democratic personality". As noted by Fred Turner:

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was presented in Moscow might have finally sanctioned its presence in Warsaw. Cf. *Biuletyn Informacyjny ZPAF* [The Newsletter of the Association of Polish Art Photographers], 1956–1959, available at the ZPAF Library in Warsaw; esp. "Sprawozdanie organizacyjne ZPAF w roku 1959" [The organisational report of the Association of Polish Art Photographers for the year 1959], *Biuletyn Informacyjny ZPAF*, 1960, no. 42, pp. 18–19.

24 U. Czartoryska, "Biologia i sentymenty" [Biology and sentiments], *Fotografia*, 1959, no. 11, p. 540; the above-mentioned volume of poetry by Witold Wirpsza was published three years later.

25 D. Preziosi, "Modernity Again: The Museum as Trompe L'Oeil", in: *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. P. Brunette, D. Wills, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 141–150.

what most contemporary critics of *The Family of Man* overlook is that the exhibition asked visitors to practice the perceptual skills on which the development of democratic personalities – and thus the control of democratic societies – depended. In keeping with Bayer's extended field of vision, the makers of *The Family of Man* surrounded their audiences with images. At one level, each image offered a viewer a potential moment of identification. At another, however, the pictures acted as an ensemble, an array of images that visitors needed to rearrange within their own psyches. In the process of aggregating and organizing these images, visitors could, at least in theory, engage in a degree of self-formation not open to citizens of authoritarian regimes.<sup>26</sup>

The issue of a “democratic personality” was widely discussed in the United States in connection with the sociological and psychological roots of Nazism, which was consequently perceived as an anti-utopia that had been realised.<sup>27</sup> Soon the same status started to be associated with another totalitarian system – Communism.<sup>28</sup> The Ford Foundation's annual report of 1950, referring to a letter to Henry Ford that had been written by René d'Harnoncourt (who was then working as the director of the Museum of Modern Art) mentioned an earlier version of the idea that became *The Family of Man*. The project was described as a “demonstration of this basic concept of a free society”, a “dramatic statement of faith in which our beliefs will be told by means of the faces, actions and achievements of free people from all over the world”.<sup>29</sup> The letter itself predicted that the exhibition would have an international impact and would “encourage others to participate in our struggle against thought control and the totalitarian state”.<sup>30</sup> The strictly political declarations skewed Steichen's humanistic rhetoric towards a utopian political vision. The views expressed by Turner, who wanted to perceive the exposition in the context of a democratic ideal being implemented in a dynamic exhibition space, curiously corresponded with the opinions of Ariella Azoulay, who saw the exhibition as an example of a “photographic civil contract” as realised in individual acts of perception, i.e. a “visual declaration of human rights”. This may arise from the distinct dialogue between the viewer and the photographed subject, independently of the officially imposed narrative, whose existence and frame-forming nature are now easy to notice.<sup>31</sup> According to Turner's historical reconstruction, the dynamisation of space in the *Gestalt* spirit was to support political ideals and – declaratively – an individual's progress towards freedom.

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26 F. Turner, “‘The Family of Man’ and the Politics...”, pp. 83–84.

27 Especially in reference to Max Horkheimer's views as expressed in the book *Dämmerung. Notizen in Deutschland* (1934) and to Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).

28 F. Turner, “‘The Family of Man’ and the Politics...”, op. cit., pp. 55–84.

29 Ford Foundation, *Report of the Trustees of the Ford Foundation*, 27 September, 1950, p. 16, quoted after *ibid.*, p. 74.

30 R. d'Harnoncourt, *Letter to Henry Ford*, unpaginated, René d'Harnoncourt Papers, folder 85, Museum of Modern Art Archives, quoted after F. Turner, op. cit., p. 75.

31 A. Azoulay, op. cit., pp. 19–49.

Dynamic perception also has much significance in Azoulay's approach, yet in a different, more individual aspect. Mieke Bal's concept of an exhibition as a film stands in opposition to Modernism. In this framework, temporariness and motion make the viewers realise their own script that determines later parameters on the basis of which the story may be retold for their personal use. The syntax of an exhibition is affective in nature, owing to the medium of photography which has preserved the idea that art belongs to the realm of empathy.<sup>32</sup> The complementary approaches described above may help explain the ambivalence of *The Family of Man*, in which the "disarmament" of political narration could proceed regardless of Steichen's intentions or institutional support. It remained the grounds for ideological annexation; set in an exhibition space, the ideal of individual freedom was realised within the framework of a democratic American utopia; characteristically for Modernist exhibition narratives, it fit into a predetermined model. How, then, did this ambivalent, political-and-non-political exhibition space function in Polish reality?

Reportage photography – and thus the exhibition entitled *The Family of Man* – fit the intellectual and psychological reality of the new stage of "Socialist revolution" that was being implemented in Poland at the time of the political thaw.<sup>33</sup> Although prior to 1959 it was known only through image reprints, the exhibition met the crucial demand posed by the critics of photography: it offered realism – understood both as a visual language and as an attitude towards social reality. What is more, it fulfilled the longing for Western modernity.<sup>34</sup> The true strength of Steichen's project, however, lay in the spatial arrangement of the exhibition; it may therefore be stated that Polish audiences became fully familiar with the exhibition only at the end of 1959 and that the earlier views on the exhibition, based on reviews and photographs, were to some extent revised. Urszula Czartoryska's essay exemplifies the shift in emphasis in the reception of the exhibition, i.e. from discussing the model of reportage photography or the qualities of the medium to the issue of displaying photographs. She wrote: "For several decades photographic exhibitions were sent around – yet nowadays they are often designed; for several decades they were a cluster of better and less good photographs – today they are becoming a consistent whole. [...] The model that thus far remains unrivalled is, naturally, *The Family of Man*, whose significance cannot be overestimated".<sup>35</sup>

32 M. Bal, op. cit., pp. 15–43.

33 P. Juszkiewicz, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do 'Gry w Nic'. Polska krytyka artystyczna czasu odwilży* [From the delights of historiosophy to 'a game of nothing'. Polish art criticism in the period of political thaw], Poznań, 2005, pp. 70–74.

34 See e.g. J. Bogucki, "Uwagi niefachowe" [Non-professional thoughts], *Fotografia*, 1955, no. 7, pp. 6–7; idem, "O fotografii martwej i żywej" [On photography dead and alive], *Życie Literackie*, 1956, no. 236, p. 11.

35 U. Czartoryska, "Polska w fotografii artystycznej" [Poland in fine-art photography], *Fotografia*, 1960, no. 11, pp. 367–368.



The spatial nature of this exhibition proved very attractive as an artistic solution and set a certain direction in presenting photographs and in the perception of how the display's arrangement influences the artistic and informative aspects of an exhibition. However, the fundamental question that needs to be asked is whether Polish critics and artists chose *The Family of Man* as a model for photographic exhibitions only due to Steichen's vision based on his experience with the Bauhaus or whether this decision was influenced by other, more local factors.

It seems justified to start the analysis of this issue by taking a closer look at the Warsaw edition of *The Family of Man*, whose spatial arrangement was created by Stanisław Zamecznik and Wojciech Fangor, two artists who had cooperated before.<sup>36</sup> This is the most thoroughly documented Polish variant of the exhibition, even though no design plans for any of the variants have survived. A section of the exposition's layout was reconstructed from photographs for *Przestrzeń między nami* [The space between us], an exhibition that was devoted to Stanisław Zamecznik and presented at the Warsaw branch of the Association of Polish Architects. The spatial arrangement of *The Family of Man* can therefore be experienced only indirectly, i.e. through photographs. Capturing the spatial effect of the exposition is thus less easy than placing it in a certain intellectual climate, especially since most of the critics wrote about the Warsaw variant.

In order to determine the extent of freedom that was given to Polish designers in arranging the exposition, we need to take a closer look at how the "ready-made" exhibition was actually assembled. *Przekrój* published the following excerpt from an interview with the curator of the exhibition, Adam Kaczkowski:

Sending the exposition over, the Americans wrote [...]: For the exhibition to be set up, ten people should work for ten days. Required materials include two kilos of two-inch nails, two kilos of one-inch nails and two hammers... The exposition weighs 6,500 kg and fits into 28 cabinets. The photographs are large in format and are properly framed. The larger ones weigh 200 kg each!<sup>37</sup>

A large number of exhibits had the form of panels that were referred to as "photo-murals"; these were photographs (single ones or groups) affixed on wooden or aluminium panels that often had metal elements. The size of such exhibits varied from 9 cm×50 cm to 3 m×3 m.<sup>38</sup> The American instructions stated that three people were needed to assemble the exhibition – one

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36 In Wrocław the same task was appointed to Jan Chwałczyk and Alina Rogalska (it could not be discovered who was responsible for the exposition in the remaining cities).

37 Anonymous, "Rodzina człowieka (rozmowa z Adamem Kaczkowskim)" [*The Family of Man* (an interview with Adam Kaczkowski)], *Przekrój*, 18 October 1959, no. 758, p. 8.

38 All of the information comes from materials from the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel in Dudelange, *Draft for check list 'The Family of Man'*.

to supervise the order and arrangement of the components and two physical workers. This suggests that the passage cited above presented a rather exaggerated view of the work required. The elements of the exposition, and the smaller photographs and panels, were designed to form a cohesive set that could be assembled and disassembled relatively quickly. What is more, the system was relatively flexible, thus making it possible to have it adjusted to different spaces:

Architectural planning for installation of each specific showing of *The Family of Man* is open to determination by each exhibitor. General gallery layout will depend upon available gallery space, the natural building layout along with possible construction of special partitions (to augment existing walls) as necessary to accommodate the total of 925 running feet required for display of the panels in their original sequence.<sup>39</sup>

The set included all necessary technical elements; the organisers only had to provide nails of various types, hammers, measuring tapes and levels. If no better solution was available, the panels could also be hung by using nylon ropes, wires or cables. Changes that would influence the order of the panels and photographs could only be introduced to a limited degree – some modification was permitted within the thematic groups (as long as it was necessitated by the specific exhibition environment). It was therefore possible to divide one thematic section in space, for instance with partition walls (this was even advised due to the fact that “uniform” gallery spaces would have a negative effect on the dynamics of the message), as long as this did not disturb the linear sequence and the mutual links between photographs and citations. The ultimate goal was to convey a dramatic cinematic message and a carefully planned rhetorical effect. The people responsible for arranging the exhibition were therefore left with some degree of freedom, but only within a certain ideological framework; this corresponded with the democratic political ideal that was to be actualised in the exhibition space. The Warsaw variant of *The Family of Man* that was prepared by Zamecznik and Fangor bore much resemblance to the original American design (e.g. in its dynamics and diversity of formats and planes of display), yet it was even more innovative at the visual level. The display space was divided more clearly – with the organic-looking, undulating plywood walls that were so distinctive of Zamecznik’s designs. This solution favoured the “exploration of flowing, temporary, unlimited and endless space” and stimulated the viewer’s senses.<sup>40</sup> Zamecznik’s trademark system transformed the exhibition into an autonomous universe, making it independent of the spatial constraints of the Redutowe Rooms in the National Theatre. The Warsaw variant of this exhibition matched the broader artistic programme of the architect, who, given the limited opportunities for imple-

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> M. Leśniakowska, op. cit., p. 42.

menting avant-garde architectural concepts on a larger scale, created experimental structures in an ephemeral form.<sup>41</sup>

In 1959, before the throngs of Polish gallery-goers had the chance to see *The Family of Man* in the Redutowe Rooms of the National Theatre, Oskar Hansen wrote that Open Form “will be a space accordant with our complex and yet unknown psyche. It shall become so because we will exist as organic elements of this art. We will walk within and not around it”.<sup>42</sup> This manifesto-like statement must be confronted with the dominant avant-garde paradigm in the perception of Polish exhibition art and architecture of the post-war period. The reference to the Open Form theory seems apt not only due to its being synchronous, but also given the fact that in the latter half of the 1950s Hansen collaborated with the designers of the arrangement for *The Family of Man*.<sup>43</sup> Zamecznik’s views corresponded to Hansen’s in some aspects, but contrasted in others, as was noted by Marta Leśniakowska in her analysis of the two architects’ approach to ideas propagated by Le Corbusier.<sup>44</sup> Both Hansen and Zamecznik assumed, however, that the new methods of arranging space influenced both moods and emotions; they considered the issue of the psychology of reception, which was also present in Bayer’s framework and was later developed by Steichen.<sup>45</sup> Characteristic features of Polish modernity included “immersing” the viewer in a visually attractive space designed to affect the conscious mind while also enabling the individual’s intellectual and emotional growth. “Zamecznik wanted the recipients of new art [...] to believe that the focal point was shifted from the artist to the viewer, who was no longer cast in the traditional role of a passive observer, but became an active subject of art”, wrote Leśniakowska in reference to the cinematic or theatrical effect created by exhibition spaces that had been designed in accordance with the new set of rules.<sup>46</sup> Obviously, *The Family of Man* – with its predetermined exposition reality – fell on an already familiar ground. However, it became the platform for introducing ideals that were functioning elsewhere into the

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41 Ibid.

42 O. Hansen, “Forma Otwarta” [Open Form], *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1959, no. 5, p. 5.

43 During the Second National Exhibition of Modern Art in 1957, Zamecznik, Fangor and Hansen cooperated to design a so-called “study in integrated space” at the Zachęta Gallery. The project consisted of a composition of curvilinear polychrome panels hung from the gallery ceiling and on ropes in front of the entrance to the building (a single blue module). The underlying thought was for the panels to unify both the interior and exterior; they were to be a “backdrop accentuating the visitors”, a manifestation of art integrated as the background of life. See O. Hansen, *Ku formie otwartej* [Towards the Open Form], ed. J. Gola, Warsaw, 2005.

44 M. Leśniakowska, op. cit., pp. 42–43.

45 The views of Le Corbusier and his followers differed from those of the Bauhaus school yet they had a number of ideologically similar elements. For more detailed information on the subject, cf. S. Buck-Morss, “The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe”, *October*, 1995, no. 73, p. 15.

46 M. Leśniakowska, op. cit., p. 46.

realm of strictly photographic exhibitions, which was an underdeveloped field at that time.<sup>47</sup> The exhibition may therefore be considered as a catalyst of the processes of modernisation in that respect.

The views of Hansen, Zamecznik and Bayer (and Steichen as well), which were similar in terms of assumptions, were based on a certain vision of an ideal society and free, creative individuals functioning within it. From the perspective of time, these views also proved similar with regard to the controversies they caused. They are perceived both as “hyper-democratic” and “totalitarian”. As Andrzej Szczerski observed, the difference between the “ideal of creating a social community” and a “system of social control” is vague and difficult to define. Hansen’s ideas followed the postulate of ideationalism that was characteristic of modernity, but also of post-Socialist thought.<sup>48</sup> Yet exhibition designs, modernist as they were, also appear to have been breaking away from ideological conditioning and becoming critical towards traditional methods of displaying art. Both architects wanted the exposition space to oppose mythologisation and to resist being overtaken by narrative figural concepts, to which *The Family of Man* certainly belonged. At the same time, their project expressed criticism against the political system in Poland; this was more visible in the case of Zamecznik, who disputed it openly.<sup>49</sup> Could they – paradoxically – have supported the narrative ingrained in other political categories? Given the reality of the People’s Republic of Poland, in which Zamecznik’s and Hansen’s views had developed and the “democratic” nature of the space designed by Steichen, we should perhaps consider the statement made by Grzegorz Kowalski, who thus reminisced about Hansen’s achievements:

As a young artist or, more generally, as a young man, I had practically no perspectives here. If I saw a chance for myself, to, so to speak, leave this camp – for I would not call it a ghetto – I saw it in intellectual development and in certain conceptual structures that would allow me to cultivate internal freedom. Open Form was one such possibility.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the above views ought to be regarded in a political context, with an emphasis on the fact that the approaches represented by Zamecznik, Hansen

47 One should not, however, forget Stanisław Zamecznik’s designs for earlier photographic exhibitions, such as *Warszawa oskarża* [Warsaw indicts] (1945) or *Pokój zwycięża* [Peace triumphs] (1950), which will be mentioned in a further section of this article.

48 This concept was crucial in Hansen’s views on architecture. “Such ‘ideationalism’ signified the active participation of architecture in the development of a new, egalitarian society of free people, in which individuals, being aware of their own worth, are able to cooperate with collective structures”; A. Szczerski, “Linearny System Ciągły i awangardowa utopia” [The Linear Continuous System and the avant-garde utopia], in: *Wobec Formy Otwartej Oskara Hansena. Idea – utopia – reinterpretacja* [On Oskar Hansen’s Open Form. Ideal – utopia – reinterpretation], eds. M. Lachowski, M. Linkowska, Z. Sobczuk, Lublin, 2009, pp. 85, 90.

49 M. Leśniakowska, op. cit., p. 46.

50 “Dyskusja” [Discussion], in: *Wobec Formy Otwartej...*, op. cit., p. 161.



and Steichen (as he was the one who adopted Bayer's strategy, analysed and developed it) were often discussed in the ideological context of socialism (Hansen) or liberalism (Steichen), with "systematism" being the common denominator for both.<sup>51</sup> Their ideas – avant-garde visions of a sociological nature – referred to a certain social ideal and focused on people as active individuals. They functioned at the juncture between the needs of the community and the preferences of the authorities ("a democratic society" and "a democratic personality" in Steichen's framework; "an open society" in Hansen's). Hansen openly admitted that the Linear Continuous System – a large-scale implementation of the Open Form theory – would be realised because it "suited the common interests of the society and the authorities".<sup>52</sup> Steichen's idea of a democratic utopia, never stated explicitly, but hidden behind slogans of all people worldwide being similar, was indeed actualised in Poland as an anti-systematic space, especially given Zamecznik's views and the ideologically ambiguous nature of Hansen's theory of Open Form. On the other hand, the hidden mechanism of supervising the audience, which was so distinctive of Modernism (developed by Steichen but also by Zamecznik and Fangor), was still present as a factor.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the Warsaw version of *The Family of Man* should be regarded as a factor that reinforced the supervising nature of this exhibition. Even so, the stimulation potential of such an ideological fusion, which was at variance with the official narratives of the People's Republic of Poland, manifested itself in individual reception of the exhibition. This was confirmed by Ryszard Kapuściński:

Roughly at the time when I took my first steps in exploring the world, a memorable and significant event took place. In 1955 an exhibition entitled *The Family of Man* was opened at the New York Museum of Modern Art. [...] The exhibition and the entire philosophy that gave birth to this idea were groundbreaking in significance. It conveyed the message that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was more than an age of war, barbed wire and camps, destructive totalitarian systems, humiliation and death, but also a century of de-colonisation and democracy, an age which – owing to the effort of millions of people striving towards democracy and the development of global communication – for the first time in history saw the birth of the family of man. I was lucky to witness this period in time and felt the will to become its chronicler.<sup>54</sup>

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51 The issue of Hansen's "belief in the system" was analysed, e.g. in a discussion included in: *ibid.*

52 "*Linearny System Ciągły* [The Linear Continuous System], a discussion with Oskar Hansen, Mieczysław Porębski, Aleksander Wallis and Marek Holzman", *Projekt*, 1968, no. 2, p. 37.

53 M. Leśniakowska, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

54 R. Kapuściński, "Dlaczego piszę?" [Why do I write?], *Gazeta Uniwersytecka*, 1997, no. 5, pp. 12–13. Cf. the statements of photographers such as Jerzy Lewczyński, Zbigniew Łagocki and Ryszard Kapuściński. J. Lewczyński, "Zosia...", in: *Zofia Rydet (1911–1997). Fotografie* [Zofia Rydet (1911–1997). Photographs], exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Łódź, 1999, pp. 13–18; Z. Tomaszczuk, "O wystawach. Rozmowa

The facts that even these individual voices are rooted in a specific moment in time and that political systems openly appropriated *The Family of Man* for their own purposes remain a separate issue.

## “A problem-oriented exhibition”

In her analysis of Steichen’s exhibition, Barbara Morgan coined the term “theme show”, which she defined as a new “photographic genre [...] which fuses science, photography, architecture, layout and writing into a compelling synthesis”.<sup>55</sup> Morgan’s words prove that the exhibition was carefully “directed”, designed for a large space and intended to achieve an almost total visual effect. These aspects situate it among the so-called “teaching machines”, i.e. propaganda exhibitions whose origins stretch back to the Russian avant-garde.<sup>56</sup> As has already been mentioned, due to the element of political involvement (which had much to do with the Museum of Modern Art), the exhibition may be perceived as a project related to the Modernist concept of a museum as a “social instrument” reflecting the relations of power in a given place.<sup>57</sup> The perception of institutional museum exhibitions of photographs in Modernist thought was consolidated by a number of crucial texts of art criticism, most of which were written in the 1980s.<sup>58</sup> According to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *The Family of Man* was the last in the series of propagandistic Modernist exhibitions that started in the late 1920s with avant-garde exposition projects by El Lissitzky. In the inter-war period, i.e. the golden age of illustrated magazines and reportage photography, El Lissitzky established a “new paradigm of a photographic exhibition” that was based primarily on adding an architectural and spatial aspect to the avant-garde strategy of photo-montage. By engaging their perception and imagination, viewers had to combine the fragments

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z prof. Zbigniewem Łagockim” [On exhibitions. A conversation with Prof. Zbigniew Łagocki], *Kwartalnik Fotografia*, 2002, no. 9, pp. 68–70.

55 B. Morgan, “‘The Theme Show’. A Contemporary Exhibition Technique”, *Aperture*, 1955, no. 2, p. 24.

56 Cf. J. Świdziński, “Kategorie wystawiennicze” [Exhibition categories], *Projekt*, 1971, no. 1, p. 46.

57 M. Popczyk, “Sztuka w ryzach ekspozycji” [Art in the restraints of exposition], in: *Przestrzeń sztuki. Obrazy – słowa – komentarze* [The space of art. Images – words – comments], Katowice, 2005, p. 216; D. Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth’s Body: Museums & the Fabrication of Modernity*, Minneapolis–London, 1999; D. Preziosi, “Modernity Again: The Museum as Trompe L’Oeil”, in: *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. P. Brunette, D. Wills, Cambridge, 1994.

58 B. H. D. Buchloh, “From ‘Faktura’ to Factography”, *October*, 1984, no. 30, pp. 82–119; the text was reprinted in the exhibition catalogue *Public Photographic Spaces. Exhibitions of Propaganda from ‘Pressa’ to ‘The Family of Man’, 1928–55*, eds. J. Ribalta, A. Jiménez Jorquera, Museu d’art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2009, pp. 29–61.

scattered around their field of vision into a visually cohesive and meaningful whole. Thus this strategy relied on methods known from *The Family of Man* and Bayer's projects, i.e. magnifying photographs, combining them with spatial divisions and setting unusual angles to view them.

Lissitzky's new paradigm of a photographic exhibition was most readily adopted in totalitarian regimes. As Buchloh put it, "Thus, what in Lissitzky's hands had been a tool of instruction, political education and the raising of consciousness was rapidly transformed into an instrument for prescribing the silence of conformity and obedience".<sup>59</sup> Bayer's contribution to the development of monumental propagandistic expositions was also significant. His ideas brought popularity to exhibitions organised by the Third Reich, starting from *Die Kamera* from 1933, which had been modelled after the one in Stuttgart. Bayer designed the catalogue for it,<sup>60</sup> and its motto was provided by Joseph Goebbels: "[T]he experience of the individual has become the experience of the people, thanks solely to the camera". Analogies found in the already established visual language that was used in projects which differed in terms of ideology prove that in each case the analysis should include the political context and the possible mechanisms of persuasion.

The origins of the exhibition space of *The Family of Man* appear to be very clear; why then did Barbara Morgan find it problematic to define them and felt compelled to introduce a new term – that of "theme show"? One possible explanation comes from Jorge Ribalta, who wrote that after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War this exhibition strategy became so popular that until the 1960s and even 1970s designers referred to it almost subconsciously. The combination of artistic and political factors, which was so characteristic of the avant-garde and defined the nature of these projects, was no longer relevant at that time. What is more, the 1940s and 1950s may be perceived as steeped in humanist discourse which created the illusion of a universal harmony that was free from social tensions and political antagonism.<sup>61</sup> Avant-garde propagandistic exhibition projects were therefore cut off from their constructive features and reduced to visual and spatial solutions in which the element of manipulation was still present but hidden or "internalised".

The same set of phenomena could also be observed in Polish exhibition history. What may be regarded as the equivalent of a "theme show" was the term *wystawa problemowa*, i.e. a "problem-oriented exhibition", which was popularised in Polish photography criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As Zbigniew Łagocki explained, "an exhibition of this type encompasses a set of photographs pertaining to a single issue. The exposition ought to be organised

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 54–55.

<sup>60</sup> J. Ribalta, "Introduction", in: *Public Photographic Spaces...*, op. cit., p. 19. Ribalta notes that this exhibition cannot be labelled avant-garde since it did not include the photo-montage and spatial tricks that are so characteristic of El Lissitzky's designs, but focused on realistic photographs and their monumental scale.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

by one person, appointed by the Artistic Committee and tasked with personally choosing his or her collaborators. The name of this person should be visible in the exhibition space and mentioned in the press materials”.<sup>62</sup> The above definition clearly suggests that what Łagocki understood under this term was very similar to Steichen’s design, as he acknowledged the significant role of the “director” or “directors” of such an enterprise and the presence of a “supervising” body responsible for the exhibition – in this case the “Artistic Committee”, i.e. a temporarily appointed group of competent individuals. This reveals the “utilitarianism” of problem-oriented exhibitions, the fact that they were subordinate to central planning and, consequently, that the choice of subjects (“issues”) and persons regarded as the most competent for the task was predetermined. Within this framework it is possible to notice the above-mentioned shift that made exhibition models with avant-garde provenance very susceptible to simple persuasive messages.

However, dismissing this phenomenon as a manifestation of propaganda servitude would be an oversimplification, especially given its complex origins. The critics emphasised the apparently modern or even groundbreaking features of such exhibitions (e.g.: “One may get the impression that, at the present moment, only problem-oriented and individual exhibitions with a uniform concept deserve the label of ‘contemporary forms of expression’ in modern photography”<sup>63</sup>). Such progressive design solutions were expected at exhibitions of avant-garde photography, but also of reportage photography. The former group included many successful Polish projects (arguably the best example was *Pokaz zamknięty* [The closed show] by Zdzisław Beksiński, Jerzy Lewczyński and Bronisław Schlabs that was shown in 1959).<sup>64</sup> The emergence of problem-oriented exhibitions was the result of the need to reformulate the concept of photographic expositions and to change the understanding of photography as such, i.e. to include the aspect of how this type of art influences the viewer; an avant-garde premise which states that photography not only records but also offers explanations. As has been put by Łagocki:

In the light of the changes taking place in contemporary society, both in terms of culture and civilisation, it is obvious that one has to have something to say with one’s photographs. Authors will be judged for the message they want to convey and not for whether the photograph is rich in half-tones. It appears to me that this is what we have forgotten, lost in the dead-ends of superficial aesthetic thoughts pressed under the glass on photographic images.<sup>65</sup>

The exposition design of *The Family of Man* was political in its origin, but it was also perceived as apolitical and relied on monumental photo-montages

62 Z. Łagocki, “Nowoczesność – problem stale aktualny (uwagi o wystawach)” [Modernity – a constantly relevant problem (remarks on exhibitions)], *Fotografia*, 1960, no. 3, p. 76.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.



– a solution that was original to this formula. It became a phenomenon that complemented the Modernist vision of the medium in the Polish photography milieu.

The trust in the progressive nature of photography and its ability to keep up with civilisational changes, coupled with the belief in the Socialist system (which was reinforced by official rhetoric), were distinctive features of the ideological background of many Modernist projects in Poland. It is therefore not surprising that Łagocki, who had started as a photojournalist but, as a long-time member of the Association of Polish Art Photographers, was counted among the photographer artists of the post-war period, expressed a certain degree of longing for both avant-garde solutions (exposition design, mentioning formal methods used by avant-garde photographers; their photographic “sets”) and realistic reportage photography, also understood as a civil task. Łagocki was interested in avant-garde practices and, by perceiving photography as an art, he fits the paradigm of humanist photography which involves not only a number of characteristic formal solutions but also the belief that the medium can become an instrument of community-oriented social changes. One significant element in this context is that Łagocki associated this modern formula of arranging photographs into “sets” (which he almost equated with the label of “problem-oriented” exhibition) with both “ordinary” and “fine-art” photographers, i.e. with various approaches and methods. Thus the model was portrayed as a recipe for progress in photography as a whole, regardless of individual formulas. Such a perception of the medium may uncover unusual consequences, i.e. if we take into account Łagocki’s contribution to his organising the exhibition *Fotografowie poszukujący* [The seeking photographers] that was presented at the Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw in 1971. The exposition, which Łagocki prepared in cooperation with Zbigniew Dłubak, proved significant to the early development of photographic conceptualism.<sup>66</sup>

A different view on “problem-oriented exhibitions” was expressed by Urszula Czartoryska, who saw *The Family of Man* as the “unrivalled model” for such expositions. She perceived them primarily as being educational and informative in character, although she recognised their connection with the development of exhibition art as such.<sup>67</sup> Czartoryska stated her views in an article that focused on one of the first Polish “problem-oriented exhibitions”, namely *Polska w fotografii artystycznej* [Poland in fine-art photography], which opened in 1960 at the Warsaw University of Technology and was organised by the Association of Polish Art Photographers. The exposition, designed by Henryk Lisowski, presented various aspects of community life in Poland. As with *The Family of Man*, the photographic materials (which mainly fit the genre of reportage) were divided into sections focusing on, for instance, industry, art,

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66 See J. Bogucki, “Fotografowie poszukujący” [The seeking photographers], *Projekt*, 1971, no. 4, p. 47.

67 U. Czartoryska, “Polska w fotografii artystycznej”, op. cit., p. 367.

human life, children or landscapes. Sequences of photographs were arranged spatially into geometrically divided panels, which reinforced the connections between the images. Another interesting aspect is the set of examples to which Czartoryska compared this exhibition. Apart from *The Family of Man* she also listed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bifota exhibition of photography in Berlin (organised under the motto *Socialism triumphs*), the Moscow exhibition entitled *Semiletka v deystvii*, and two Polish projects: *Ochrona przyrody w Polsce* [Nature conservation in Poland] and *Fotografia w służbie nauki i techniki* [Photography serving science and technology].<sup>68</sup> It is therefore difficult to shake off the impression that the context presented by Czartoryska clearly indicates the propagandistic nature of this exhibition formula.

This impression is further reinforced by a cursory look at the subject matter tackled in the official photographic exhibitions and albums at that time. The issue of the achievements of the state and the development of the People's Republic of Poland was addressed cyclically (e.g. on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its proclamation), as were progressive changes in specific cities (especially in Warsaw, which was being rebuilt from its ruins). Very often the exhibitions referred to Buřhak's concept of native photography. One example of the propagandistic aspect of problem-oriented exhibitions may be found in the project entitled *Poland through art photography* that was conducted by the Association of Polish Art Photographers (Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografików, ZPAF) in 1961 and presented in India. The exhibition was largely based on that reviewed by Czartoryska, as evidenced, for example, by the characteristic division into twelve sections arranged in a fixed order: wartime damage, reconstruction, children, culture, historical monuments, agriculture, sport, transport, landscape, folklore, tourism and industry. Each group of images was accompanied by a short description conveying a typical propagandistic message, for instance:

The Polish people stand firm in the defence of world peace. We have suffered the horrors of too many wars and know only too well the heart-breaking efforts of rebuilding our devastated country to do otherwise. We want lasting peace – for ourselves, for all mankind, for the whole world. We are ready to support any concept that promises better mutual understanding, mutual respect and international security. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the Soviet Union and all peace-loving countries.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, the exhibition catalogue featured not only typically Socialist-realist images (such as *Pracownicy budowlani* [Construction workers] by Tadeusz Link), but also ones that were Pictorialist in their aesthetics (such as *Widok Wisły* [View of the Vistula] by Feliks Zwierzchowski), as well as photographs that were representative of “artistic reportage” (images of children by Paweł Mystkowski; a documentary photograph of Gdańsk

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 368.

<sup>69</sup> *Poland through Art Photography*, Warsaw, 1961, p. 14.

in ruins; images of religious processions; crowds gathered on the streets in October 1956). The ambitions and hopes expressed in Czartoryska's review become specific:

The Association of Polish Art Photographers has achieved a significant goal; it has proved that problem-oriented exhibitions ought to be organised, that they fulfil their role. It has also gained valuable experience for the future. Time will tell whether this interesting subject might be taken up again; whether we will live to see our own 'Little Family of Poles'.<sup>70</sup>

Thus the innovative spatial design, both in terms of form and in content testifying to Modernist aspirations, was clearly interwoven with the objectives of the ruling party's propaganda. Czartoryska's text, which should perhaps be read "between the lines", appears to signal this duality, the union of modernity (and the wish to "humanise" and "socialise" the message) and the political reality in which such aspirations arose. This ambivalent situation is further emphasised by the fact that avant-garde exhibition designs had appeared in Poland long before Steichen's project. Innovative designs by Stanisław Zamecznik were presented to the public even in the period of Socialist Realism. These included the well-documented exposition for *Pokój zwycięża*, which was on show at the National Museum in Warsaw in late 1949 and early 1950.<sup>71</sup> Danuta Jackiewicz, who reconstructed the exhibition for research purposes, wrote of a hall filled with "large-sized panels of glass framed in white or red", where "most photographs were hung [...] on transparent screens that seemed suspended in air, while the rest were placed traditionally on the walls".<sup>72</sup> The exposition space also featured state emblems and political symbols, a portrait of Joseph Stalin, red draperies and banners with various slogans (e.g. "Long live Joseph Stalin, the leader of the international faction of defenders of the peace").<sup>73</sup> The exhibition surprised the critics with its avant-garde nature, yet its form, which emphasised the suggestiveness of the message, was uniformly appreciated: "[T]he input our working world brings into the struggle for peace draws a red line across the entire exhibition".<sup>74</sup> The "red line" binding elements of the design together resembles another avant-garde solution, one known, for example, from *Wystawa Mebli, Ceramiki i Tkanin* [An exhibition of furniture,

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<sup>70</sup> U. Czartoryska, "Polska w fotografii artystycznej", op. cit., p. 370.

<sup>71</sup> D. Jackiewicz, "U progu socrealizmu. Wystawa fotografii artystycznej 'Pokój zwycięża' w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie w grudniu 1949 roku" [At the threshold of Socialist Realism. The exhibition of fine-art photography "Peace triumphs" presented at the National Museum in Warsaw in December 1949], in: *Socrealizm. Fabuły – komunikaty – ikony* [Socialist Realism. Narratives – messages – icons], eds. K. Stępnik, M. Piechota, Lublin, 2006, p. 506.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> R. Glinka, "Obiektyw w służbie pokoju" [The camera lens in the service of peace], *Związkowiec*, 1 January 1950, unpaginated.

ceramics and fabrics] in the Redutowe Rooms of the National Theatre (1957), in which a spatial form, usually a cornice ("beam") constitutes the basic constructional element.<sup>75</sup> Significantly, the subject matter presented at the 1950 exhibition, which was divided into three sections with problem-oriented titles (*No more war, Rebuilding from ruins, Peaceful work*), closely resembles the later arrangement of *Poland through art photography*. The latter was more diverse and lacked such blatantly political overtones, but both exhibitions indubitably shared the same scope of issues and had a similar propagandistic objective.

Modern models of exhibition design were used in Poland during a period when the influence of the Communist ideology was at its strongest. However, with each successive project the avant-garde origins of exposition designs – of which the architects were certainly aware – became increasingly less clear to the viewers. The models were perceived not as being strictly avant-garde, but as typical of the modernised language of visual communication, which, in turn, included the element of ideology, especially in reference to the public domain. The progressive form came to be identified with propaganda, but it did not evoke uniformly negative connotations.<sup>76</sup> This fact contributed to the dualistic reception of Steichen's exhibition, which was, on the one hand, perceived in the context of propagandistic projects and, on the other, as a work of art beyond the framework of persuasive messages.

In Poland, the pro-democratic (or anti-totalitarian) stance expressed by the creators of *The Family of Man* was felt, if not analysed in detail (one must not forget the "official" nature of such analyses). Similar concepts realised by Stanisław Zamecznik and Oskar Hansen, who also aspired to a certain social ideal, suggest that the artistic milieu was aware of the democratic aspects of Steichen's model. The combination of "democratising practices" (in the language of photographic images and the strategy of spatial arrangement) as presented in *The Family of Man* determined the Polish reception of the exhibition. This may, in my estimation, explain the popularity that *The Family of Man* enjoyed with Polish audiences and the significance it held for many authors, Ryszard Kapuściński among them. Fleeting post-thaw fads for Western novelties aside, it was now possible to forego official ideological discourse by constructing one's individual, "independent" story – even if this could only be done within the framework of a Modernist, "paternalistic" narration. Seen from the perspective of its reception, especially in countries with a political status similar to Poland's, *The Family of Man* appears to be the space for realising an artistic and social utopia and for stimulating the virtual needs of individuals. Visitors coming to see it at the National Theatre in Warsaw, the Palace of Fine Arts in Cracow or the Miners' House in Wałbrzych entered a space that was alternative to reality, but focused around fundamental issues. On the other hand, this seemingly autonomous reality was subjected to constant attempts

75 O. Hansen, *Ku formie otwartej*, op. cit., p. 189.

76 See J. Świdziński, op. cit., p. 46.



at ideological appropriation (both immanent, resulting from Steichen's "structured" narrative, and external, i.e. in the form of comments made by the authorities, as seen on the example of "problem-oriented" exhibitions). Both mechanisms functioned simultaneously, which suggests that, depending on very diverse contextual and subject-related factors, throughout the decades *The Family of Man* was perceived both in positive terms as a catalyst of the views on reality and in negative terms as an ideological manifesto. The metaphor comparing the exhibition to a film seems very apt in this context, since Steichen was very deliberate in his use of montage – a means that is cinematic, attractive and strictly related to the medium of photography. It is montage that allows the designer to control the narrative, but also makes it possible for viewers to deconstruct it in their individual perceptions and to shape alternative stories. In this sense, the exhibition triggers minor social processes and truly becomes the field of operation of a "photographic social contract".<sup>77</sup> The case of *The Family of Man* proves that one should not be hasty in categorising exhibition phenomena and draws attention to the anthropological aspect of space – which is, in fact, the backdrop of communication.

(Translated by Julita Mastalerz)

## Abstract

The exhibition entitled *The Family of Man*, which was designed by Edward Steichen and presented for the first time in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, belongs to the most famous and most controversial photographic expositions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Usually perceived in the light of the anachronistic, West-centric vision of humanism, i.e. as an embodiment of Modernist views on photography, it constitutes a good example of the museum's influence as a Modernist "social instrument". However, contemporary theories in exhibition studies offer a more complex interpretation. The present work provides insight into this process by referring to the views of Mieke Bal (on the "cinematic effect" of photographic exhibitions, the narrative and relational aspect of expositions), Fred Turner (on the space of an avant-garde exhibition as the realisation of the political and social idea of a "democratic personality") and Ariella Azoulay (on exhibition space as a "visual declaration of human rights" and the field for a "photographic social contract"). The primary aim of the present article is to set *The Family of Man* within the framework of Polish exhibition practices. The complex origins of the American project can be traced back to avant-garde experiments with exhibition space conducted in the Bauhaus movement and in Soviet Constructivism (the psychology of perception, "photo-murals"); the analysis focuses on the political and propagandistic aspects. An analysis of the above issues provides the starting point for considering the significance and probable reception of the exhibition's spatial arrangement in the milieu of Polish architects and designers as well as its Polish variant as prepared by Stanisław Zamecznik and Wojciech Fangor. It was therefore useful to refer to Oskar Hansen and his theory of Open Form, as he cooperated with Zamecznik

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77 A. Azoulay, op. cit., pp. 19–49.

and Fangor at the time. Models of avant-garde and Modernist “utopian thinking” are juxtaposed, thus making it possible to perceive the process of reception in the light of its effectiveness. The article also discusses *The Family of Man* as a model for projects with propaganda undertones, i.e. the so-called “problem-oriented exhibitions”. It mentions attempts at adapting Steichen’s design of exhibition space to the needs of the official narrative in the People’s Republic of Poland. Finally, it uncovers the ambivalent nature of the influence of *The Family of Man* and the dual status of the exhibition as both a propagandistic project and as an anti-systemic space supporting the ideal of a creative, free individual.