

“THE FAMILY OF MAN”:
A VISUAL UNIVERSAL
DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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“The Family of Man,” the exhibition curated by Edward Steichen in 1955, was a landmark event in the history of photography and human rights.¹ It was visited by millions of spectators around the world and was an object of critique—of which Roland Barthes was the leading voice—that has become paradigmatic in the fields of visual culture and critical theory.² A contemporary revision of “The Family of Man” should start with questioning Barthes’s precise and compelling observations and his role as a viewer. He dismissed the photographic material and what he claimed to be mainly invisible ideas—astonishingly so, considering that the hidden ideology he ascribed to the exhibition was similar to Steichen’s explicit

- 1 See the exhibition catalog, Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955).
- 2 Following a first wave of critique of the exhibition, influenced mainly by Barthes’s 1956 essay “The Great Family of Man,” a second wave of writers began to be interested in the exhibition and its role and modes of reception during the ten years of its world tour. See, for example, Eric J. Sandeen, “The Family of Man 1955–2001,” in “*The Family of Man, 1955–2001: Humanism and Postmodernism; A Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen*,” eds. Jean Back and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2005); and Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). These studies make it quite clear that a problematization of the global context of the relationship between photography and human rights, and between human rights and their violation regarding the era from 1945 to 1955 (the decade when most of the pictures included in the exhibition were taken) is only at its beginning.

intention in curating it.³ In lieu of granting Steichen the position of an omnipotent author, as Barthes did, I propose to pay close attention to the exhibition’s potentialities, and instead of reading the photographs as descriptive statements with universal claims, I propose to read them as prescriptive statements claiming universal rights. Today, amid an ever-growing abundance of images depicting the violation of human rights across the globe, I suggest returning to this landmark exhibition, viewed by millions of spectators worldwide,⁴ as a seminal event in the history of the relationship between photography and human rights, and reading it as an archive containing the visual proxy of the United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In his famous 1956 essay dedicated to the exhibition, Barthes wrote, “A big exhibition of photographs, [...] the aim of which was to *show* the universality of human actions in daily life of all the countries of the world: birth, death, work, knowledge, play, always impose the same types of behavior.”⁵

When I look at images from the exhibition, one of the first things to strike my eye is multiplicity; the fact

3 In the 1980s, artists, historians, and curators found new interest in this monumental exhibition and in 1996 it was permanently reinstalled at the Château de Clervaux in Luxembourg. The essays and visual projects from these decades are illuminating in regard to the exhibition as a whole, and they even problematize some aspects of the prevalent critiques of their predecessors, but many were still caught in the paradigmatic framework set up by Barthes.

4 On its reception in South Africa see Daren Newbury, *Defiant Images* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2009); and on its reception in Japan see Eric Sandeen, “‘The Family of Man’ and the Specter of the Bomb” (lecture, “Viewing and Reading the Photographs of ‘The Family of Man’” workshop, Durham Centre for Advanced Photography Studies, University of Durham, June 17, 2011).

5 Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Granada, 1982), 100 (emphasis my own).



EZRA STOLLER, exhibition view of
“The Family of Man” at MoMA, 1955

that in spite of the similarity of described situations in different areas of the exhibition, they do not constitute a unified mode of behavior.

Taking photography seriously as an encounter, I’ll examine the situation of “being photographed” in order to show that Steichen’s categories, such as “Work” or “Family,” cannot erase the heterogeneity of the photographed situations in various geopolitical contexts.

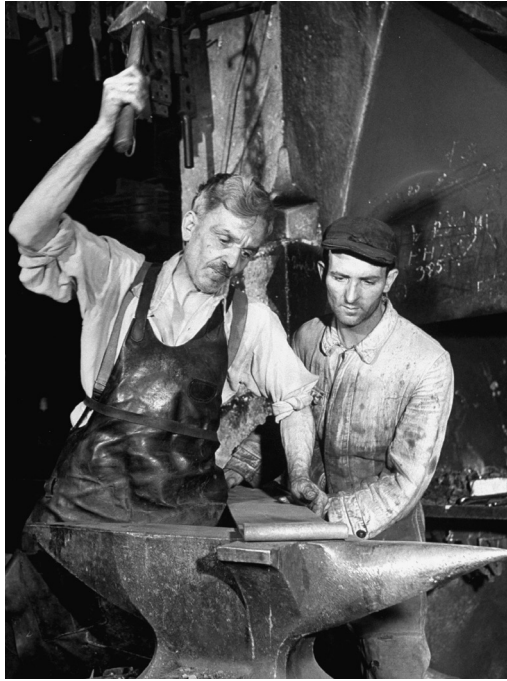
A sequence of photographs is assembled under the category “Work.” A group of men rowing in harmony stands for collective work (photographer: Alfred Eisenstaedt, *The Family of Man*, page 77). Their backs to the camera, they ignore the photographer. Eventually one of them may turn his head and note the camera. At worst it might disturb the orchestration of their work for a second.

In a neighboring photograph, the possibility of turning one’s gaze to the camera seems less plausible. Whatever the concrete circumstances of the photograph taken by Dimitri Kessel (*The Family of Man*, 76) it reminds one of forced labor—*corvée*—and should stand for it.



DMITRI KESSEL, Two rows of Chinese trackers, harnessed and bowed, towing a junk (type of Chinese boat) slowly up the Yangtze River in western China, 1946

In a photograph from Pakistan taken by Abdul Razaq (*The Family of Man*, 70), the work of digging through a mountain seems no less arduous, but the possibility to not be reduced solely to one's labor power is not entirely eliminated. The three workers on the right are intrigued by the camera.

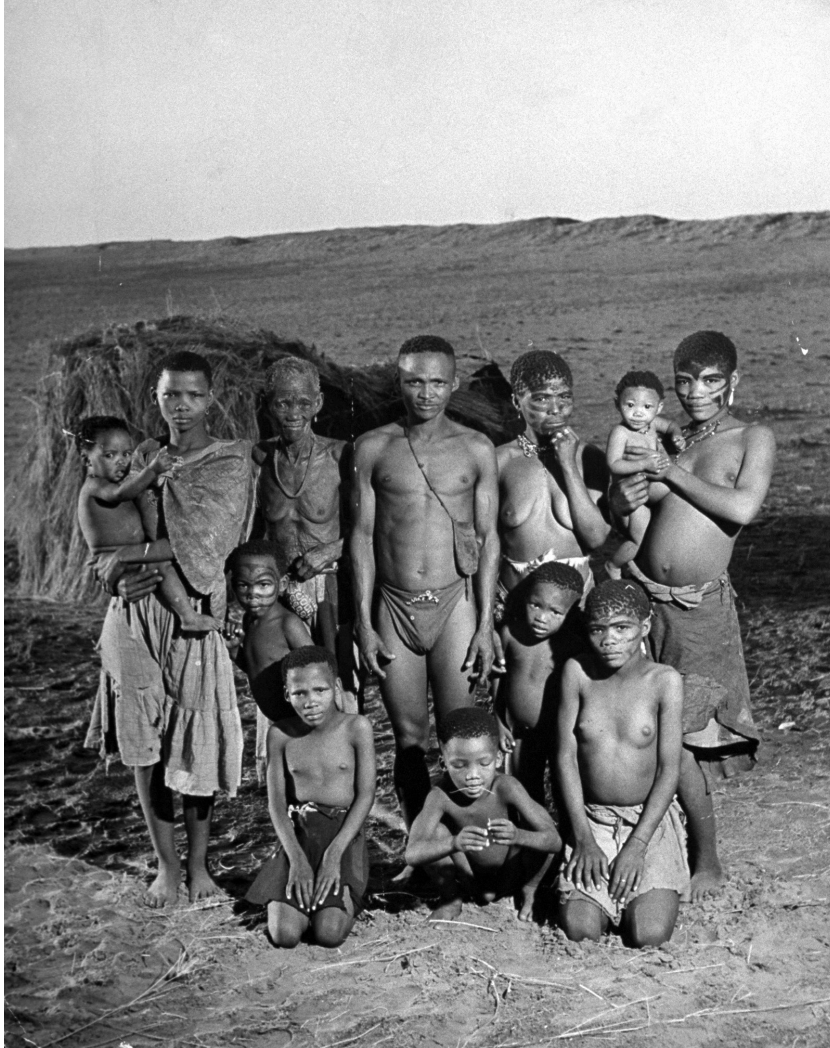


WALTER SANDERS, Portrait of blacksmith and son, 1947

For an image by Walter Sanders (*The Family of Man*, 73), previously published by *Life* magazine, the magazine caption (not included in the exhibition) read, “Portrait of blacksmith Hugo Rutz, with his son Hugo Jr. The senior Rutz chose not to join the Nazi party.” They are not looking at the camera at all, but are performing *for* the camera. This photograph of them as blacksmiths is not a snapshot. The two men are collaborating with the photographer



NINA LEEN, Four generations of Ozark farmers posing in front of portraits of an earlier generation, 1946



NAT FARBMAN, A native bushman standing with his family in the arid Bechuanaland section between Botswana and South Africa, 1947

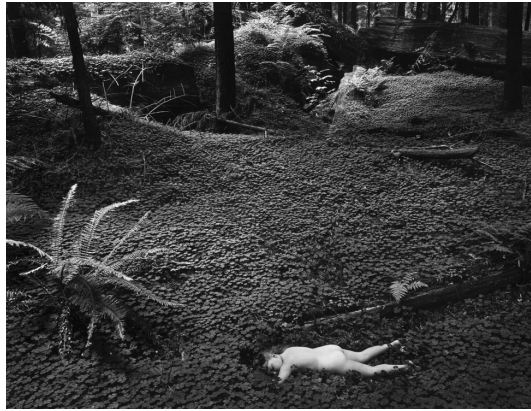
to stage the new-old German identity through the restoration of traditional professions.

The same diversity can be reconstructed from a famous pair of group portraits presented in the “Family” category. Note the ancestors’ portraits behind the American family captured by Nina Leen (*The Family of Man*, 58) and the supposed absence of “cultural” signs in the portrait from Bechuanaland taken by Nat Farbman (*The Family of Man*, 59).⁶ The two photographs are usually read as evidence of the culture/nature opposition underlying the exhibition in general. But is this reading self-evident? Or necessary?

The reading that attributes passivity to the members of the family from Bechuanaland—considering them clay at the hands of the photographer, who staged them to incarnate his own vision of them—can be easily rejected. The members of this family play with the authority of the camera and the implicit hypothetical spectator it incarnates, while obedience to its protocol can more easily be read in the American family portrait. Note how all its members, from the youngest to the oldest, are smiling in response to the call to “say cheese!”—accepting the command to produce an ideal image of their family. Neither culture/nature nor any other opposition is inscribed in these photos and no such opposition can organize the reading of their juxtaposition. Both images give us enough reasons to reflect on power relations in the family and the need to include and protect them within any renewed civil contract.

To sum up these multiple tensions, I suggest viewing the photograph opening the exhibition’s catalog, which

6 On family portraiture in *Life* during the 1940s, see Wendy Kozol, “‘The Kind of People Who Make Good Americans’: Nationalism and *Life*’s Family Ideal,” in *Looking For America: The Visual Production of Nation and People*, ed. Ardis Cameron (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

WYNN BULLOCK, *Child in Forest*, 1951

was dismissed by many mainly because it had been classified as staged—as if a “human snapshot” can ever be fully staged.⁷ A young American girl lies alone on a forest floor. The photo is placed in the opening section of the exhibition, alongside other photos in which the overwhelming power of nature is imprinted—a view of a crag in a rocky valley with a gloomy river snaking through it precedes the emergence of the human body. The gleaming body of a young girl is the first to appear in the catalog. It reflects light from an unknown source, and lies there like a disturbing scar in the wood. Almost none of the numerous critics and reviewers of the exhibition has ever asked why a photo of a young naked girl, her face thrust in leaves wet from dew, is actually the first member of “The Family of Man” to appear to the viewer.

7 Lili Corbus Benzer is the one exception to mention this image, briefly questioning its role in illustrating what Carl Sandburg discusses in the catalog’s prologue, the “notion of ‘one big family hugging close to the ball of Earth for its life and being.’ The child certainly could be interpreted as ‘hugging the Earth,’ but her small, harsh, white form, alone in a sea of vegetation, looks dead, a body overwhelmed by nature.” Benzer, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal into the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 136.

What happened to her? Why is she there, abandoned naked on the ground? Where are her clothes? Was she raped? Abused? Is she there to allegorize rape, to mark the threshold of tolerance toward it? Or is she there just to make the presence of a naked girl in art venues appear natural? No matter what allegory the photographer or the curator meant for her to embody, relating to photography as a practice where the photographed person and the spectators are also participants, one cannot ignore the conditions of producing this image: Wynn Bullock, a male photographer whose project is to photograph his naked wife and daughter. Soon the photographed girl will become a citizen but now she is still subject to the authority of her father and cannot stop the act of being photographed—naked—by him.

The identical format of black-and-white photographs showing humans in allegedly similar situations actually foregrounds to what extent the photographed persons differ from each other—their crafts vary, their gestures are multiple, and every expression or smile hints at a different experiential world that cannot be organized along generalizations of nation, gender, or race.

It could be argued against Barthes that he projects his own thinking onto the exhibition, but reading Steichen's introduction, it becomes clear that Barthes repeats Steichen nearly verbatim. However, what Steichen presents as the *explicit purpose* of the exhibition, what it aspires to produce, is presented by Barthes as a *critical analysis* of what he sees in the exhibition, the ideology of which the exhibition is captive. In the preface, whose traces are easily detectable in Barthes's analysis, Steichen writes, “It was conceived as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life—as a mirror of the essential oneness of man-

kind throughout the world.”⁸ One can hardly keep from wondering about the ease with which Barthes is prepared to adopt the point of view of the curator as an accurate description of the exhibition itself: “Man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way and if there still remains in these actions some ethnic peculiarity, at least one hints that there is underlying each one an identical ‘nature,’ that their diversity is only formal and does not belie the existence of a common mold.”⁹ This appropriation attributes a nearly magical power to Steichen to turn the multiplicity recorded in the photographs into universal unity or empty history and turn images into nature.

Let us take a look at Barthes the spectator. He attends the exhibition, views hundreds of pictures, and sees in them all just one thing: the abstract ideas of “nature,” “universality,” “unity,” and so forth. In Barthes’s own words: “Birth, death? Yes, these are facts of nature, universal facts. But if one removes History from them, there is nothing more to be said about them.”¹⁰

Does Barthes really not know that ideas are invisible? That they do not exist out there as objects to be pointed at? Barthes, so it seems, claims he sees what he cannot see, missing what does appear to his very eyes—not just the fruit of the photographers’ or the curator’s intentions, but also independently or contrary to them. In addition, what he does see, he perceives as entirely external to him, as though he himself has no part in making the photographs abstract, as though someone could really remove history from the objects of his viewing, and as though these exchange relations between him and the persons photographed do not stand for a piece of history.

8 Steichen, *The Family of Man*, 4.

9 Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” 100.

10 Ibid.

Despite these limitations of Barthes’s text, I still propose to dwell on it, as his text, for a long time, shaped the intellectual reception of the exhibition and set the tone for critiques that followed it.¹¹

Although Barthes’s conclusions are hasty and miss the civil potential of photography, his precise conceptual observations should be taken into consideration in any further study of Steichen’s show because they frame precisely what should be avoided. Regardless of critics’ judgment, millions of viewers visited the exhibition and whether they criticized it or liked it, most of them, like Barthes, understood what was at stake in the exhibition—universality.

Multiplicity did not escape Barthes when he dealt with “writing.” However, the insights he offered regarding the inability to reduce writing to a single source (formulated in their entirety in his seminal text “The Death of the Author”) were usually forgotten by him when he faced photographs. Even when he did notice multiplicity in the photographs it was one of forms or morphologies:

This myth functions in two stages: first the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species, the diversity in skins, skulls and customs are made manifest, the image of Babel is complacently projected over that of the world. Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way.¹²

11 See, for example, Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 15–25; and Christopher Philipps, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” *October*, no. 22 (Fall 1982): 27–63.

12 Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” 101.

It was this multiplicity, he argued, that the spectators were unable to see, because Steichen, according to Barthes, had the power to impose on it a single idea—his own. Thus in Barthes's text the curator emerges as an omnipotent author, while the spectator becomes an impotent reader and viewer. Anxious that the viewers might recognize a multiplicity, Barthes calls upon them to acknowledge it as unity. However, even if this is what Steichen wished to show, a photography exhibition cannot be reduced to the voice of the curator. Dominant as he may have been, Steichen's voice is but one possible voice among many others in the exhibition, and even this voice itself is multiple, split, and rife with contradictions, let alone the voices emerging from the photographs themselves.



NAT FARBMAN, Yvonne Chevallier
during her trial for the murder
of her husband, Cabinet Minister
Pierre Chevallier, 1952

Such discrepancies can be reconstructed from a photograph placed in one of the last sections of the exhibition that Steichen called "Justice." A claim is framed in this photograph by Nat Farbman (*The Family of Man*, 172). The woman addresses someone outside the frame. She is at a court, surrounded by two policemen, accused of a crime.

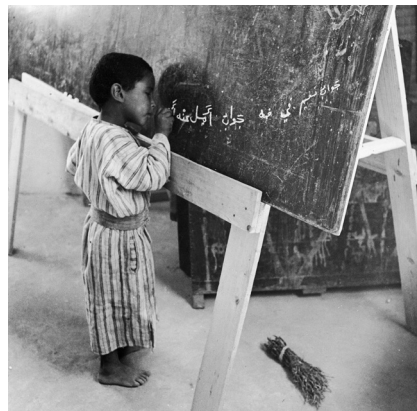
Nevertheless, she is framed here as a claimant. The story was relatively known at the time. The woman had murdered her husband who lied to her about their shared life, hiding his relationship with another woman and this second life he had led without her knowing. Men were usually those acquitted in cases legally defined as “crimes of passion.” This time, it was a woman who was found innocent because her crime was defined as one of passion. As in many other photographs in the exhibition, here too, a new articulation of the rights of the protagonists should be redefined beyond the realm of the family, as part of a renewed civil contract: the husband’s right to choose to share his life with another woman, and the wife’s right not to be compelled to share her life with another woman, even though unaware of her existence. In the context of the exhibition, but also in that of women’s civil status at that time, Steichen’s choice to place the image of a woman accused of murder as a claimant is a courageous one. Considering the oppression of women and their subjugation to the marriage contract, justice requires more than a written law.

Although all the photographs in the catalog and exhibition are unaccompanied by information to help us know more about the concrete photographed situation, they are not stripped of history. Presented this way, these images are more malleable for the curator, and more enigmatic: a Rorschach test of sorts for the viewers, who are invited to make the photographs speak or project onto them their own thoughts and experiences. However, malleable as they may be, they could not be turned into clay in the hand of a single creator. They bear traces of an encounter of multiple participants and they – whether subjects or viewers – cannot be entirely subjected to any single person’s intention.

This lack of information is precisely what turns the exhibition into the utter opposite of the implication made

by the common argument against it and its viewers, that the public likes to be spoon-fed.

The photographs are displayed on the walls in a raw way, and the viewer meets them not only free of any spoon held out to her mouth, but also free from any accessible, direct, or explicit information that would help her decipher each photograph separately. She is thus called upon to make serious interpretative efforts. The captions are restricted to names of photographers and locations.



JOHN PHILLIPS, A child writing
a sentence on the blackboard
at school, 1942

The former is informative, the latter rich in nuance and, in some cases, present or enable the reconstruction of the violence embodied in nation-states, sovereign regimes, or colonialism. Thus, for example, for Korea, the curator chose a photo of an American soldier taken by an American photographer, David Duncan (*The Family of Man*, 178). From the Middle East, the curator chose to present Palestine as one nation among others through a photo by John Phillips, thus challenging the wide recognition of the sovereign State of Israel, founded on the ruins of Palestine (*The Family of Man*, 122).

Instead of preserving the nation-state as a stable, coherent unity and point of reference for comparative viewing that would manifest itself in the great differences of power relations among states, the spectator can intervene differently in what she sees. She can refrain from restoring the contours of nation-states that the exhibition unties from time to time and be attentive to the arbitrariness and reversibility of national delineations; take advantage of the potential of being part of a global citizenry, even in a limited way; seek to transcend national boundaries as the locus of sovereign power; and eventually imagine other forms of sharing the world that are more beneficial to citizens than to nations.

The display of photographs unaccompanied by information typifies the familiar idea that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” However, in the case at hand, it is clear that although a photograph is endowed with a special and favored status over text, it is not presented as sufficient in itself and worth a thousand words. On the contrary, each photograph is presented as closely dependent on several neighboring images—and these are usually multiple, and no form of propinquity is presented as more appropriate than any other.

From the numerous installation shots of the exhibition, one can gather that walking into the space, the spectator views the photographs as part of a structure that is complex and not transparent. The form of organization of this exhibition—the multiplicity of photographs, the various print sizes, the “dynamic” installation from the ceiling in the center of the space, both vertically and horizontally, and the layers created by Perspex plates—does not allow the individual photograph sufficient conditions in itself to become a metonym, a metaphor, an allegory, or a capsule of the whole. On the contrary: each photograph is placed within a continuum of photographs meant to build the specific context from



EZRA STOLLER, exhibition view of "The Family of Man" at MoMA, 1955

which it appears, is shaped, and in which it hangs. Through careful acts of selection, sorting, cropping, cataloging, and editing, the curator and his team tried to emphasize certain aspects and contexts and increase the chances of their being perceived by the viewers. However, other contexts—some of which the curator may have seen but others that escaped him—are created by the viewers, a result of their own editing in the space.

The black-and-white photographs on display are associated almost automatically with the documentary genre. As such, viewing them without being provided any information feels lacking, partial, and faulty. However, the fact that *all* the photographs are presented this way enables us to question whether what we are viewing is not a different genre that activates the photographs in a different manner.¹³ The lack of concrete, circumstantial information is apparent, especially regarding each individual photograph. The systematic lack, however, not preferring nor discriminating any particular photographed person or geographical area, enables their reading as statements threaded together in a text that might articulate something else.

Even if Steichen sought to show “universality” through this composition, it would have been impossible. Universality, as already mentioned, is an idea, deprived of body and form. Therefore it is wrong to ascribe universality to what is described *in* the photographs. Rather, universality can be prescribed through the plurality of the photographed situations and their juxtaposition. The display as a whole can be recapitulated as a series of prescriptive

13 Exceptions to this are the photograph of the fall of the Warsaw Ghetto, which is displayed with the mention, “Exhibit at Nürenberg trial,” and the photograph of the UN, which appears with the first two lines of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

statements through which universal rights are claimed. The general public, artists, curators, and researchers, who all identified the exhibition with universal aspiration, consistently turned this exhibition into a meaningful milestone in the history of photography and of universal discourse, whether by their mere attachment to the exhibition or in the way they handled it. I propose to see in this exhibition a harbinger of an unfamiliar, novel genre, one that has textual precedents but makes its first appearance as a visual being here. It is the genre of a universal declaration.

A declaration is a decree, an order, an edict, or a ruling. It binds—or should bind—those whom it addresses. It is a verdict made public, a pronouncement, a promulgation, from the Latin verb *promulgare*, “exposed to public view”—*pro*, “out, publicly,” and *mulgare*, “cause to come forth,”—and a profession, an assertion, an insistence, a claim, an affirmation, an assurance, a protestation, an objection, a complaint, a disapproval, a challenge, a dissent, an outcry, a remonstrance.

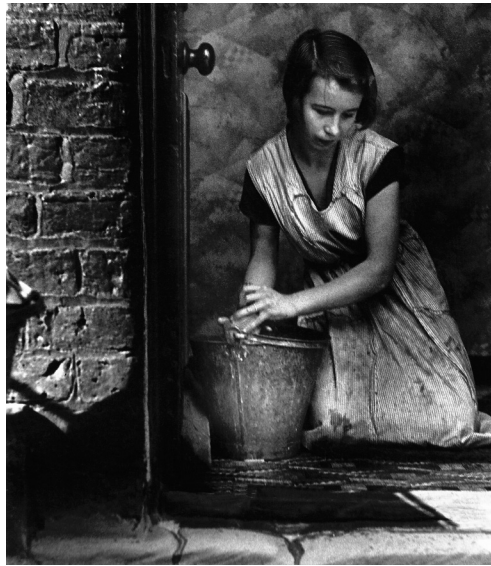
I propose to identify and characterize this distinct genre in order to pave the way for future declarations, as well as to take advantage of an important feature of such a genre—its status as an unfinished text. Being-together requires its rewriting, its updating. This universal declaration took shape after World War II and—no less so—in the face of other catastrophes produced by wars in Kashmir, South Africa, Japan, China, and Palestine. It unfolded in the rift created by the wars and those catastrophes, through disappointment in the existing political regimes, and in search of new horizons for being-together. I shall attempt here to present this new genre and portray some of its characteristics, as well as point to several components of the composition that Steichen created, enabling its emergence from within the exhibition.

In order to begin exploring this genre, one should see what the exhibition *does*. As I already said, it does not tell history. Moreover, history is presented in the exhibition not as “the way things are” but rather contingently, as reversible situations and divisions that, by this contingency, could be imagined and arranged differently. Thus, for example, the photograph of the kneeling woman washing the floor by Barbara Morgan (*The Family of Man*, 80). It is, indeed, a black woman in the United States spending hours on her knees as she scrubs the floor in a narrow, dark apartment.¹⁴ But at her side on the same page in the catalog there is a photograph by Bill Brandt of a white girl, and the image is no less distressing (*The Family of Man*, 80). The work frock she wears hints of suspected, forbidden child employment.

The black woman, alone among all the working women photographed in the exhibition, raises her eyes in reproach or at least dissatisfaction toward whomever stands over her and addresses him or her with some demand or other. Her plaint can be continued by the viewer from the placement of the photographs of these two women, alone in their Sisyphean tedium of housecleaning, alongside a photograph by Emil Obrovsky of a group of women on a riverbank—their camaraderie, the open air, and the cool water sweeten the burden of hand-laundering as the two women kneel (*The Family of Man*, 80). Although we know nothing about any of the women photographed—I might even be wrong in attributing to the black woman a position of arguing her working conditions, or seeing the white girl as employed and not as one engaged in helping her mother—such possible misreadings, important as they might be regarding the

14 Nothing about the photograph discloses whether it takes place in the North or South.

private story of each of them, are dwarfed by another matter at hand: the conditions of women's employment. Not their documentation at a certain concrete place, not their idealization, but rather their scope as a basis for creating a rule. Thus, by merely juxtaposing the far-from-ideal plurality of similar situations the world over, one can begin to wonder about the proper conditions for any one of these situations.



BILL BRANDT, Young housewife, Bethnal Green,
London, 1937

In other words, instead of reading the photographs solely in a commonplace documentary manner, as showing the specific life conditions of each of the photographed women, I propose to read them also as a partial repertoire of states of existence, situations, and abuses in which humans find themselves. Unlike Barthes who, through the heterogeneous whole of the photographs, sees only “eternal lyricism,” I claim that the juxtaposition of several variations on each theme enables us to reconstruct a whole scope of variations—from the

optimal that should be universally claimed for all, to the one that demands intervention, correction, regulation, prevention, or prohibition. Being part of a declaration, the scarcity of information about the photographs enables one to see the link of the situation presented in the photograph as entirely contingent and thus reversible in regard to the concrete historical context. This suspension of factual information, often manipulative and oppressive, appears rich and productive in the context of a visual declaration where universality is framed as a horizon to be targeted and the photographs as degrees of realization and violation. One might insist on saying that the photograph of the Bushmen, in particular, is devoid of cultural attributes, but it is difficult not to notice that this procedure of reducing cultural attributes is applied to different populations and is not a sign used to create hierarchy. In this exhibition, everyone becomes “Bushman.” A few pictures can be pointed out that echo a stereotype or another about populations of women or blacks, or about the representation of the two sides of the Cold War (from the Soviet Union by Robert Capa and from the United States by Loomis Dean). Still, the movement of the different signifiers across varying populations and geographic and cultural locations shows how contingent they are to some while not to others, and thus prevents prescribing essential states to particular populations.

So far I have referred to three procedures used in the exhibition: an *abstraction* from concrete information; the *juxtaposition* of a scope of situations that enables the reconstruction of a relation between optimal states and situations of exploitation and harm; and the *creation* of a contingent link between those situations and a geopolitical location. These allow me to relate to the exhibition as a unique resource with which to compose a visual universal declaration of human rights—*inviolable* rights.

Some of these rights are well known, others new; some by way of the positive, others of the negative. Once the outlines of the historical context of these photos are reconstructed, the right that can be claimed with and through them is less abstract than in its written form. The right to free movement embodied by two boys not of the same color in a photo by Henri Leighton taken in the United States (*The Family of Man*, 136); the right to the public association of young girls creating a hub where they can intimately exchange their experience, discovering common traits they will soon transform into civil claims, which can be imagined from Esther Bubley's photo (*The Family of Man*, 163);



ESTHER BUBLEY, Cheltenham
Ladies' College, Cheltenham,
England, 1954

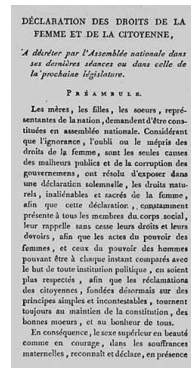
the right of women in South Korea to protest against the partition about to be imposed on their country, as can be claimed from a photo by Michael Rougier (*The Family of Man*, 169); the right to adult education or the right to have access to a foreign language while being a migrant, as can be deduced from a David Seymour photo (*The Family of Man*, 122); the right to remember one's past and make it public, as can be seen in a Margaret Bourke-White photo (*The Family of Man*, 140); the right not to be photographed naked by one's father,

which might be formulated from Wynn Bullock’s photo (*The Family of Man*, 5).

The rights that can be articulated through the exhibition’s photographs are not necessarily the rights of distant Others. The fragility of the human condition is enfolded in each and every photograph. Once the exhibition is perceived as a declaration, no one seems especially protected. Assuming everyone’s frailty and her susceptibility to become a victim, one should also acknowledge the fact that everyone is susceptible of becoming a perpetrator. This susceptibility should be introduced into human rights discourse and articulated in the form of the *right not to be a perpetrator*. A new declaration of human rights, I claim, should be based on the assumption that every time a right is violated, another right is also violated with it—the right not to be a perpetrator. When rights are claimed, the right not to be a perpetrator must be included, or even assumed as a condition for all other rights. Otherwise a slippery slope leads from the rightful citizen to the one who violates the rights of others.



The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789



The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, 1791

A declaration with universal pretension—one that should constitute a point of reference in the regulation of

human lives and that can express their aspirations—can never be a document authored by a single individual.¹⁵ From the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen approved by the French National Assembly in 1789, through the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen written by Olympe de Gouges in 1791, up to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the declaration has taken on the traits of a palimpsest. Not only is it a product of the orchestration and compromising of multiple voices, it needs to be formulated loosely enough so that additional voices can repeat it as is and thus use it for themselves, but there is also need to rewrite it, to make room for new social realities.

To the three aforementioned procedures activated in the exhibition, one more should be added: the systematic distancing of sovereignty. Together they create the conditions for the appearance of multiplicity in this visual declaration. This exhibition is a first visual effort after World War II—and the catastrophes that followed in the late 1940s—to constitute a civil contract not by beheading the sovereign but rather by eliminating his signifiers par excellence. It creates a space in which humans, as survivors of a culture that mobilized them for total war and enslaved them for the private ambitions of various leaders who spoke in their name, imagine the possibility of a different world. What ought to be imagined is neither utopia nor idealization, but the possibility to restore the conditions for

15 On the various voices and versions of the 1789 declaration see Lucien Jaume, ed., *Les déclarations des droits de l'homme: Du débat 1789–1793 au préambule de 1946* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989). On the 1948 declaration see Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001).

being-together in and for a common world in which sovereign nations do not define lines of division that turn our being-with into being-against—against each other and against the world we nevertheless share.

“The Family of Man” is an exhibition devoid of leaders, an exhibition in which the army is not a means for maintaining order, and the soldier appears not as a hero but rather as a survivor—as in Al Chang’s photo—or as a corpse (*The Family of Man*, 149), someone whose mere presence threatens civil order and the world of children, as can be claimed from Robert Jakobsen’s photo (*The Family of Man*, 53). It is an exhibition that wishes to move the weight of nation, religion, and national politics into the background, turning them into components of a civil existence they cannot fully master or organize.



AL CHANG, A grief-stricken American infantryman whose friend was killed in action is comforted by another soldier; a corpsman methodically fills out casualty tags in the background; Haktong-ni area, Korea, 1950

I shall illustrate this by choosing the photograph of the UN that appears toward the end of the exhibition



ROBERT JAKOBSEN, Deployed to Hawaii, 1940



MARIA BORDY, the United Nations, in *The Family of Man* catalog, 184–85

(by Maria Bordy). The UN—the fantasy and its abuse.¹⁶ Buds of the dream of a non-state or supra-state body to serve as the world’s highest tribunal burst forth in the eighteenth century with thinkers like de Gouges, Immanuel Kant, and Jeremy Bentham. Each, in his or her own way, envisioned the disaster lurking within the “natural” borders of the sovereign state and imagined defenses, escape routes, and transcendence of the state’s naked power. Since its invention, photography too was perceived as a potential basis for a civil supra-state framework. Walter Benjamin gave this possibility one of his apt formulations: “Photographs became standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.”¹⁷ But ever since the nineteenth century, powerful sovereign states have used the idea of a supra-state framework, which could have developed as a civil idea, as a way to advance the logic of the sovereign nation-state and assure its expansion the world over.

The UN, like the League of Nations that preceded it, is responsible for planning, prescribing, and legitimizing partitions and deportations that uprooted millions of people in order to maintain, establish and multiply nation-states. At the same time, the same international organization was compelled to take at least partial responsibility and practical steps for mitigating the plight of the uprooted. This might be witnessed, for example, in the disastrous

16 On the conflict inherent to the UN between its commitment to nation-states and humans whose rights it claims to defend, see Wiktor Osiatyński, *Human Rights and Their Limits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

17 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 226.

resolution to partition Palestine and a short time later the foundation of an agency totally dedicated to aiding the refugees created by the implementation of this resolution. Let us, for a slight moment, imagine Steichen as someone who has not given up on the civil, non-state aspect of the supra-state organization, while resisting the logic of sovereignty that that organization amplifies. Let us imagine him browsing through multiple available photographs of the UN in order to select the one in which the marks of nationality and sovereignty, as well as the presence of state leaders, slowly shrivel in order to make room for an image of a general assembly of citizens.

If the possibility of formulating a visual universal declaration of human rights is embodied by this exhibition, Steichen is not—and should not be—its sole author. Steichen was indeed the individual who took the initiative to collect such drafts from various places and organize them in a composition loose enough to enable millions of humans to identify themselves, their aspirations, and their dreams in it, and to remind the viewer of her ability to participate in updating such a document and make it a binding one.