

Historic Landscapes of Two Spaces for the Steichen Collections in Luxembourg¹⁾

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine two photographic exhibition spaces in Luxembourg from view of their historic landscapes. *The Family of Man* is installed at Château de Clervaux, and *The Bitter Years* is installed in a water tower; Waassertuerm+Pomhouse. Both exhibitions were originally organized by Luxembourg-American photographer Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1950's-1960's. *The Family of Man* that celebrated world peace is embedded in the memory of World War II of the old castle which was destructed during the battle of the Ardennes. *The Bitter Years* that documented American farmers who suffered from poverty and natural disasters is linked to the memory of labour and immigration in a water tower of a closed steel plant. Because we share serious issues of war, labour, and immigration still now, the memories of these two places do not withdraw into obscure historic backgrounds, rather they forcefully emerge as historic landscapes.

要旨

本稿の目的はルクセンブルクのふたつの写真展の空間を歴史的風景という観点から検証することである。〈ザ・ファミリー・オブ・マン〉展はシャトー・ド・クレルヴォーに、〈ザ・ビター・イヤーズ〉展はヴァーサートゥエルム+ポムハウスという給水塔に設置されている。どちらの展覧会も元々は、ルクセンブルク系アメリカ人の写真家エドワード・スタイケンが1950年代から1960年代にニューヨーク近代美術館で企画したものである。世界平和を言祝ぐ〈ザ・ファミリー・オブ・マン〉展は「アルデンヌの戦い」で破壊された古城の第二次世界大戦の記憶に埋め込まれている。貧困と自然災害に苦しむアメリカ農民のドキュメントである〈ザ・ビター・イヤーズ〉展は、閉鎖された製鉄工場の給水塔の中で労働と移民の記憶へと繋がっている。戦争、労働、移民という深刻な問題を今なお我々は共有しているため、これら二つの場所の記憶は、薄暗い歴史的背景へと退くのではなく、むしろ歴史的風景として力強く前景化しているのである。

Uncountable artworks depict landscapes. Meanwhile, a space elaborately installed with artworks is able to be appreciated as a landscape. In this paper, my purpose is to examine two permanent photographic exhibition spaces in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, Château de Clervaux and Waassertuerm+Pomhouse, from the view of their historic landscapes.

Château de Clervaux is an old castle built in the 12th century in Clervaux, and displays *The Family of Man* exhibition[Fig.1]. It opened in 1994, and was included in the UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2003. Waassertuerm+Pomhouse was opened in 2012 as the annex to Centre National de L'Audiovisuel (CNA) in Dedulange. As its name means "Water tower and Pumphouse" in Luxembourg, it displays *The Bitter Years* exhibition in two circular galleries on the ground floor of the tower and on the water tank above[Fig.2]. Its unusual architecture is renovated industrial buildings that were part of a huge steel plant closed in the 1980s.

These two photography exhibitions were originally held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) by Edward Steichen who was an established photographer and who also curated 44 exhibitions as the director of the photography department. *The Family of Man* in 1955 was the largest art exhibition at MoMA, and made a record of over nine million visitors by worldwide touring. On the other hand, *The Bitter Years* was Steichen's last exhibition when he retired from MoMA in 1962. The main reason for Luxembourg to conserve and reproduce these exhibitions of a well-known art museum of America is because it is the home country of Steichen, who immigrated to the U.S. in his infancy. Photo panels of the two exhibitions were donated to the government of Luxembourg upon Steichen's special request.²⁾

I intend the words 'historic landscape' in a couple of meanings to indicate the differences between the original exhibitions and the re-exhibitions in Luxembourg. First, where the Steichen Collections are displayed are very 'historic buildings and locations', and they are sharply contrast with the typical white cubes of MoMA. Secondly, investigating the 'historical contexts' of each exhibitions makes clear the change of the ways of reception and the meanings from the originals. I use 'historic landscape' metaphorically as 'historical context', because a landscape represents a relationship between a viewer and his/her objects. Also I would like to gaze on the Steichen Collections from the 'perspective of art exhibition history'.

1. *The Family of Man* in the 1950s

Edward J. Steichen was born to a farmer's family in Luxembourg in 1879, and they immigrated to Chicago shortly after. He studied painting and photography in Paris, and was successful in both artistic and commercial photography. He came to have a great influence in the art world, and also played an important role in society. He organized *The Family of Man* that commemorated the 25th anniversary of MoMA. 503 photographs by 273 photographers from around the world were displayed with continuous themes from birth, play, work, marriage, conflict, death, and so on. The exhibition attempted to present a universal humanism and praised the ideal of world peace

following the cessation of World War II. Following the war photography and mushroom clouds of hydrogen bomb experiments, the climax was adorned with the photographs of the United Nations Congress and the Charter of the U.N.

After the national tour, *The Family of Man* toured 38 countries. It was supported from the United States Information Agency (USIA), and it was part of Public Diplomacy that directly approaches people of other nations through culture. *The Family of Man* was praised around the world and successful with 9 million visitors and 3 million catalogs sold. However, there were some criticisms against it, most prominently by Roland Barthes. After seeing the exhibition in Paris, he pointed out that it involved with two stages of mythicization:

first the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed [...]. Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way; [...] and here is God re-introduced into our Exhibition: the diversity of men proclaims his power, his richness; the unity of their gestures demonstrates his will. ³⁾

He then, criticized that “it will never be fair to confuse in a purely gestural identity the colonial worker and the Western worker”, and “it is this entirely historified work which we should be told about, instead of an eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures”. ⁴⁾ Subsequently, renowned critics continued with harsh criticisms such as *The Family of Man* being a cliché and smugness based on the American middle-class culture, an exploitation of human emotions, and disrespect to photographers. ⁵⁾

The Family of Man fascinated people throughout the world, but at the same time, it received severe criticisms. At this point, the difference between Public Diplomacy and Propaganda Art is obvious, because Propaganda by principle exterminates any criticisms. Therefore, the various interpretations of *The Family of Man* proved its success as a Public Diplomacy during the Cold-War era in the 1950s.

2. *The Family of Man* at Château de Clervaux and the memory of World War II

When *The Family of Man* toured in Europe, Luxembourg could not afford to hold it. Nor were there any facilities to exhibit when its photo panels were bequeathed from MoMA in the 1960s. Via an economic development of Luxembourg, the CNA started to manage them as the Steichen Collections in 1987, and *The Family of Man* was open to the public at the Château de Clervaux in 1994. After a large renovation that started in 2010, it reopened in the summer of 2013. The photographs are displayed at two narrow floors and attic spaces with exposed beams that characterize the architecture of the castle[Fig.3].

It is noteworthy that the nomination proposal by Jean Back, director of CNA, for the UNESCO

Memory of the World Register, stated the following upon considering the criticisms by Barthes mentioned above:

we can even endorse the criticism by Roland Barthes; but we must admire the legendary achievement of this extraordinary American artist for its profound sincerity and the “passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in man” in which it was created. ⁶⁾

The words “passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in man” taken from the foreword written by Steichen in *The Family of Man* catalog sounds so straightforward and simple. However, when one actually visits the Château de Clervaux, one faces a sight that beckons for a re-interpretation of the meaning of this quotation. Climbing up a curvy slope along the wall of the castle and passing through the castle gate, we are faced with a castle building with *The Family of Man* banner. Here, in front of it, there is a U.S. military tank [Fig.4].

What does this installation of an American tank mean? The inscription on a monument standing beside the tank says, “This U.S. Sherman M4A3 [...] is the only known surviving combat vehicle of the Division. Put out of action on December 17, 1944 while defending Clervaux here at the gate to the castle. Dedicated by CEBA in 2003”. During the end of World War II, there were violent battles between the German occupation force and the Allied forces. Especially, a fierce battle remembered as the “Bataille des Ardennes”, during which the Château de Clervaux was destroyed. Luxembourg had a large number of victims, and one third of the buildings in the country were heavily damaged. ⁷⁾ It was invaded by Germany during both World Wars. Though there were supporters of Germany within the country under the occupation during World War II, patriotic spirit increased and led to independence movements. And in December 1944, at the end of a fierce battle between the American and the German armies in the snow, Luxembourg was finally freed.

The Château de Clervaux was rebuilt after the War, with the town hall, a tourist office and the Musée de la Bataille des Ardennes that exhibits wartime documents such as weapons and military uniforms. There are many organizations such as CEBA (Cercle d'Études sur la Bataille des Ardennes) that continue to light the torch of the memory, and are involved with memorial events held every September for the liberation by the U.S. and war victims. ⁸⁾ In 1994, there were large events to commemorate 50 years since the War, and thus, it is likely not a coincidence that *The Family of Man* opened at the Château de Clervaux in the same year. Also the tank was dedicated by CEBA in 2003, the year of the registration of it on the UNESCO's Memory of the World.

Looking back the history of Clervaux, the words “passionate spirit of devoted love and faith in man” in which this re-exhibition created can be interpreted to the relationship between the U.S. as the liberation army and Luxembourg's trust in them. ⁹⁾

3. The Bitter Years at Waassertuerm and the memory of immigration

Steichen's final exhibition at MoMA was *The Bitter Years: Rural America seen by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration*. Farm Security Administration (FSA) is the name of the administrative agency for the New Deal Policy implemented by Franklin Roosevelt in order to rescue rural farmers who suffered from serious poverty and also from natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and sand storms during the Great Depression. In 1935, the FSA started a photography project to research for the farm areas and to keep a record of its activities. The project produced so many masterpieces of documentary photographs. Steichen highly evaluated them as "a series of the most remarkable human documents that were ever rendered in pictures"¹⁰, and repeatedly showed them in his exhibitions.

In spite its high value as fine art and as record of negative aspects of American history, the FSA photography was nearly forgotten in the post-war economic boom. Steichen solely continued to exhibit the FSA photography during the War, and *The Bitter Years* sparked its re-evaluation that began in 1960s. He displayed 208 FSA photographs and which he dedicated to Roy Stryker, the director of the FSA photography project, and his photographers.¹¹

I BELIEVE it is good at this time to be reminded of those "Bitter Years" and to bring them into the consciousness of a new generation which has problems of its own, but is largely unaware of the endurance and fortitude that made the emergence from the Great Depression one of America's victorious hours.¹²

It was the period of social contradictions, which was hidden in the shadow of the prosperity of America, that erupted as civil-rights movement, feminism movement, and anti-Vietnam war movement by the New Left. These movements are likely the problems of a new generation that Steichen meant.

It has been pointed out that there is a fundamental commonality between the humanisms of the FSA photography and *The Family of Man*. However, it also created critical responses as mentioned above. In other words, *The Family of Man* failed to be "a family album of the earth". However, *The Bitter Years* had a different situation. Stryker and the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, who made Stryker start the FSA photography project, were both from a farming family, so they were familiar with the sufferings of farmers. Furthermore, Steichen, who also was born in a farming family, continued growing flowers in his farm alongside his photographic activities. It seems as if their family backgrounds guaranteed that *The Bitter Years* presented the past of American farmers to America. Thus, it could be called "the family album of America".

How about *The Bitter Years* in Dudelange? How do Luxembourgers receive the FSA photography that depicts time, place, and environment quite different from theirs? The photographs are displayed at circular galleries in the water tank[Fig.5]. The black painted and

closed space emphasizes the seriousness that the photographs show. Luxembourg fortunately has not been struck by any major natural disasters, but economic conditions only stabilized in the recent years and life of farmers formerly had been poor. On the other hand, there are a large number of immigrants, which also allowed for people to connect their own immigration history to the figures of migrant farmers captured by the FSA photography.

Looking back to the history of industry in Luxembourg, the steel industry was born after the industrial revolution; however, agricultural reform did not make progress, for that reason a large number of farmers emigrated to the U.S. during the late 19th century just like Steichen's family. Simultaneously there was a large influx of German and Italian immigrants as steel industry workers. The steel company ARBED that led the steel industry of Luxembourg had been founded in Dudelange, and there was a massive steel plant and a slag heap. The Waassertuerm+Pomhouse is its relics. There are a group of small houses that can be viewed from Waassertuerm. Many families of Italian migrant workers working at ARBED used to live there since the early 20th century.¹³⁾ The Waassertuerm+Pomhouse is in the landscape of a historified work which Barthes said that we had to recognize[Fig.6].

After World War II, immigration from Portugal increased rapidly as if to fill the workforce lost by the war, and even in the present time when Luxembourg houses central institutions of the EU congregate, about half of its population is immigrants and permanent foreign residents. Luxembourg is small but a major country of immigration, and its collective memory of work and immigration to work may make viewers feel sympathy with *The Bitter Years*.

Conclusion

Let me summarize the main points that have been clarified above. The reason why these two contrastive exhibitions, *The Family of Man* representing the mightiness of America and *The Bitter Years* of suffering America, are installed and displayed permanently in Luxembourg relates to the idea of Public Diplomacy. It represents U.S. Public Diplomacy to Luxembourg and vice versa.

It is possible to affirm that there was a kind of primary and deep humanitarian point of view that was shared by Steichen and the FSA at the basis of their motives. It may be thanks to this primary and deep humanitarianism that the art exhibitions especially related to historic locations have the function provoking in viewers a certain collective memory and sympathy across the time, location and situation. *The Family of Man* is linked to the memory of World War II in a symbolic location, Château de Clervaux, and *The Bitter Years* installed in the water tower of the steel factory is linked to the memory of work and immigration after the industrial revolution. Because we share serious issues of war, labour, and immigration still today, the histories of two locations for the Steichen Collections do not withdraw into obscure historic backgrounds, but they forcefully emerge as historic landscapes.

Notes

- 1) This paper read at the workshop was a revision of part of my earlier study. For further discussion of the Steichen collection, see Yumi Kim Takenaka, "FSA photography and the Steichen Collections: *The Family of Man* and *The Bitter Years* in Luxembourg", in *Aesthetics*, The Japanese Society for Aesthetics, vol. 20, 2016, pp.62-74.
- 2) Jean Back, "Vintage point: 'The Bitter Years' reconsidered", in Françoise Poos ed., *The Bitter Years: Edward Steichen and The Farm Security Administration Photographs*, d · a · p, 2012, p.8.
- 3) Roland Barthes, "La grande famille des homme," *Mythologies*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957, pp.195-196. (=Annette Lavers, trans., "The Great Family on Man", in *Mythologies*, New York: Noonday Press, 1972, pp.100-101.)
- 4) Ibid., p.197. (=Ibid., p.102.)
- 5) Monique Berlier, "The Family of Man: Readings of an Exhibition", in Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt eds., *Picturing the Past: Media, History & Photography*, Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999, pp.216-225.
- 6) Jean Back, "Memory of the World Register Nomination Proposal" in UNESCO Memory of the World, www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination_forms/Family%20of%20Man%20Nomination%20Form.pdf, accessed on October 20, 2015, p.2.
- 7) Gilbert Trausch, *Histoire de Luxembourg*, Hatire, 1992, p.174.
- 8) Ibid., p.176.
- 9) Luxembourg doesn't have armed forces still now, though it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and participated in an international peacekeeping operation.
- 10) Edward Steichen, "The FSA photographers", in *U.S. Camera Annual 1939*, Williams Marrow, 1938, p.43.
- 11) MoMA held a symposium in connection with *The Bitter Years* in 1962, and Stryker and three FSA photographers including Shahn were invited as speakers.
MoMA, PRESS RELEASE ARCHIVES. 2013.10.30, at www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/3067/releases/MOMA_1962_0126_122.pdf2010, accessed on October 20, 2015.
- 12) Edward Steichen ed., *The Bitter Years, 1935-1941: Rural America as seen by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration*, MoMA, 1962, p.iii.
- 13) It is said that 70% of workers of the steelworks were Italian.
See. Antoinette Lorang, "The Château d'Eau: A Water Tower as Cultural Reservoir" in Poos ed., op.cit., pp.42-47.



Fig.1 Château de Clervaux, Photograph by author on July 28, 2013.



Fig.2 Waassertuerm+Pomhouse, Photograph by author on July 27, 2013.



Fig.3 *The Family of Man* at Château de Clervaux, Photograph by author on July 28, 2013



Fig.4 U.S. military tank at Château de Clervaux, Photograph by author on July 28, 2013.



Fig5. *The Bitter Years* at Waassertuerm, Photograph by author on July 27, 2013



Fig.6 Two water towers seen from the Italian quarter, in Kaell Architecte and Jim Clemes Atlier d'Architecture et de Design ed., *De Wassertuerm zu Diddeléng*, Centre nationale de l'audiovisuel, 2012, p.23.