

2.21

An Era of Photographic Controversy: Edward Steichen at the MoMA

Kristen Gresh

Edward Steichen's tenure as Director of the Photography Department at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) from 1947 to 1962 was a transformative time for photojournalism and photographic exhibitions. As Christopher Phillips wrote, "At a time when most American art museums still considered photography well beyond the pale of the fine arts, a peculiar set of circumstances allowed Steichen effectively to establish MoMA as the ultimate institutional arbiter of the entire range of photographic practice."¹ These years at MoMA merit further attention and analysis because Steichen's controversial use of the medium, as well as his tendency to act as picture editor while curator, revealed opposing forces at the MoMA and in the world of photography. As a result of Steichen's mass-media oriented exhibitions, advocates of "creative" photography, including those who had once been open to news photography in the Museum, openly resisted Steichen's use of photojournalism at the MoMA. The controversy surrounding Steichen's press-inspired exhibition style contributed to defining the polarity between art and news photography, and permanently changed the way news pictures are displayed in a museum setting. The effects of this historical crisis under Steichen reveal significant questions about photography and the art and artifice of print journalism and museum display.

In his acceptance speech as Director of Photography in 1947, Steichen said he wanted to legitimize under-recognized news photographers, and that one of his first exhibitions, "Great News Photographers," would trace the history of press photography.² This first exhibition was "The Exact Instant," and comprised 300 news photographs, displayed in different thematic groups (Fig. 2.21a).³

Some groups were mounted as bold wall size murals, others were in traditional cases, and there were even groups of actual pages from the newspaper tacked onto the walls. Exhibiting (unmounted and unframed) newspaper clippings from the popular press on the exhibition walls of the MoMA was unprecedented and marked a radical departure from Steichen's predecessor Beaumont Newhall's method of display which typically included matted, glass-protected, framed photographs. "The Exact Instant" checklist included the photographer's name, publication, and date. This recognition mirrored the way the photographs were originally viewed in the press. "The Exact Instant" presented news pictures as news pictures, anchored by reference to their original context, a milestone for the presence of press photography in the museum.



Figure 2.21a “The Exact Instant 100 Years of News Photography,” exhibition installation view, 1949. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

In 1951, Steichen mounted a second major press photography exhibition, “Memorable *LIFE* Photographs” simulating magazine pages on the walls of a museum (Fig. 2.21b). The exhibition comprised a selection of photoessays from the fifteen years since the founding of *LIFE* magazine. In the foreword to the exhibition catalog, Steichen wrote:

Photographic journalism is generally accepted as an authoritative visual source of visual information about our times . . . Many of the pictures have an intrinsic value beyond the immediate purpose they have fulfilled. They often manifest new achievements in photography. On occasion they create images that reach into the nebulous and controversial realm of the fine arts.⁴

Influenced by his experience as a working commercial photographer, Steichen expresses his awareness of the tensions between art and press photography, and argues for a shift in the consideration of “photographic journalism” and the photographs traditionally valued in a museum.



Figure 2.21b “Memorable LIFE Photographs,” exhibition installation view, 1951, Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Steichen’s professional trajectory parallels the evolving medium of photography in the twentieth century. Early on in his career, Steichen argued for photography to be considered as fine art, and was later involved in portrait, commercial, advertising, and war photography, straying from his earlier convictions. Steichen’s professional orientation allowed him to understand the medium and its capacities in a way that distinguished his approach from that of his predecessor Beaumont Newhall, whose training was a formal art history education.

MoMA did exhibit news pictures before Steichen’s arrival, such as in Newhall’s ground-breaking exhibition “Photography 1839–1937” or Nancy Newhall’s “Action Photography” (1943). Newhall’s survey of the medium’s history included sections dedicated to press, color, and scientific photographs. However, the overall exhibition promoted the inclusion of “masterpieces” of the nineteenth and twentieth century to “demonstrate the particular characteristics of different techniques, the artistic qualities of each process, and the relation of technical and esthetic developments of photography to the taste and social needs of the time.”⁵ Despite recent scholarship that challenges the view that the Newhalls were seeking to promote largely fine art photography, the conceptual framing of the 1937 exhibition and the idea of “masterpieces” conforms to traditional museum presentation of a unique object of art, and does not explicitly seek to validate news photography as news photography.⁶

In 1940, the year MoMA created the Department of Photography, the Museum's overall exhibition strategy began to shift to reflect contemporary visual culture and politics.⁷ The rise of the picture press in the United States, and particularly the growing popularity of *LIFE* magazine, founded in 1936, had a direct impact on MoMA's exhibition strategy, as did the imminent war in Europe.

In 1941, Steichen was invited to organize the first of several didactic, propaganda photography exhibitions at MoMA. Through his ability to capture the imagination of popular culture through mass media, Steichen met with immediate success with the Museum administration and general public. The "Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War" (1942) exhibition presented a large-scale patriotic collage of the power of the United States, seeking to defend its entry into World War II, while displaying military and press photography at MoMA in a new way.

The news picture, generally destined for the printed page, was still new to the walls of the MoMA or any other museum, where its potential for iconicity and influence increased dramatically.⁸ Not only were the actual photographs being used in a new context, beyond information or news, but the experience of the news photograph was magnified by its larger than life (and *LIFE*) presentation. In Steichen's complete control of the size, format, and placement of the images, as well as their captions throughout the exhibition, he acted as a picture editor, capitalizing on the power of museum display and potential to evoke emotions. Steichen revised the display of news photographs at MoMA through his monumental design and creation of a specific spatial experience for the viewer.

"Road to Victory" was followed by "Airways to Peace: An Exhibition of Geography for the Future" (1943), organized by Monroe Wheeler and Herbert Bayer, and "Power in the Pacific" (1945), organized by Steichen upon his return as Head of the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit (1942–5). This series of propagandistic exhibitions paved the road for Steichen's nomination as Director of Photography and for the monumental Cold War era exhibitions such as "The Family of Man."⁹

These spectacular mass media exhibitions, and photography's new status as a museum object, provoked vibrant discussions within the museum. Among the voices of dissent against this form of exhibition was Ansel Adams who wrote to the Head of the MoMA Trustees, raising questions about the museum setting for war exhibitions. Implying that such "objective and illustrative" photography should not have a place in the museum, Adams suggested Grand Central Station as a more appropriate alternative.¹⁰

These propagandistic exhibitions at MoMA solidified the belief of Adams, Beaumont, and his wife Nancy Newhall that MoMA's mission for photography should be limited to expressive photography and to displaying photographs as art objects. Steichen's nomination and exhibition style pushed them to create a stricter divide between fine art and press photography. Newhall describes the tensions, "While my interests were *increasingly* in photography as a fine art, [Steichen's] were increasingly in the illustrative use of photography, particularly in swaying large masses of people . . . he was a populist in taste."¹¹ Newhall's all-inclusive approach progressively shifted to exhibiting photography uniquely within an art historical framework, undoubtedly as a reaction to Steichen's radical approach to displaying photographs.

Steichen viewed the exhibition as another form of mass distribution for photography, on the same level as a magazine or movie theater, in which the exhibition gallery provided a new platform. In 1963, he wrote:

Photography, including cinema and television as well as the printed page, is a great and forceful medium of mass communication. To this medium the exhibition gallery adds still another dimension. In the creation of [a thematic] exhibition, resources are brought into play that are not available elsewhere.¹²

This great potential described by Steichen exploits all of the intrinsic qualities of the photographic medium, making the exhibition a product of mass media itself.¹³

Key players in the shift of vision for photography inside the museum were Steichen himself, Willard Morgan, and Thomas J. Maloney, all of whom had close ties with the picture press, and Nelson D. Rockefeller.¹⁴ The symbolic nomination of Steichen as Director of the Department of Photography was promising for the future of photojournalism at MoMA and in the museums in general, and it immediately provoked the departure of Beaumont Newhall. The confrontation between Steichen and Newhall's distinct points of view at MoMA resulted in an historic time for photographic exhibitions and for the status and recognition of the news photograph.

Adams wrote in protest to the Head of the Board of Trustees at the time, "To supplant Beaumont Newhall, who has made such a great contribution to the art through his vast knowledge and sympathy for the medium, with a regime which is inevitably favorable to the spectacular and 'popular' is indeed a body blow to the progress of creative photography."¹⁵ Adams was prescient on this score: the change of "regime" succeeded in changing the focus of photography at the museum.

The crisis highlighted a larger divide of those committed to the fine art and creative aspects of the medium versus those affiliated with the illustrated press. One notable instance of the debate about the future of photography was the historic ten-day Photography Conference in Aspen in 1951 which assembled important members of both worlds (Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, Wayne Miller, John G. Morris, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, and Minor White).¹⁶ The meeting itself and its outcome, the founding of the influential publication *Aperture*, were a direct response to the rise of the picture press and the need for a platform to exchange ideas about photography. The conference was also a response to the urgency for discussion about the authority and future of the medium and the changing nature of its display in the press and in exhibitions such as those under Steichen at MoMA.

In Steichen's exhibitions at MoMA, a photograph is not seen as a unique object but rather as a device that has multiple uses, from the printed page ("The Exact Instant") to an exhibition tool ("The Family of Man"). Steichen's method transcends the Museum's discourse of rarity.

Steichen's successor, John Szarkowski described him as an "auteur" of exhibitions, as opposed to a curator.¹⁷ Steichen indeed remained faithful to his artistic and photographic personality, breaking with traditional ideas of a curator as someone who organizes exhibitions of art objects within an art historical context. Steichen was however the first curator of photography to regularly exhibit news pictures, promoting them as news pictures, as well as using them as illustrations, without systematically seeking to emphasize their artistic qualities, which created new narratives at the museum and a new vehicle for news photography.

Steichen's tradition of press photography exhibitions persisted to some extent after his departure. Szarkowski created a few press exhibitions, although he distanced himself from Steichen's close alignment with press photography. The 1965 exhibition "The Photo Essay" displayed forty years of "experiment in a new medium" featuring forty-five picture stories, highlighting the roles of both the news reporter and a publication's art director.¹⁸ The exhibition featured different layouts of the same picture story in different publications. By drawing attention to the array of different contextual possibilities for a photoessay, Szarkowski also highlighted the variety in style of news photographic practice as one of the exhibition's points. This exercise reinforced the idea that press photography is a reproducible medium, destined for the printed page, and not a unique or rare object.

Szarkowski also presented "From the Picture Press," which included 225 press photographs from the previous five decades, highlighting photographs mainly from the New York *Daily News*, and some

photographs from the *New York Times*.¹⁹ Peter Galassi followed as Director of Photography and was more of the Newhall than the Steichen cast of mind. However, he too presented a significant press exhibition “Pictures of the Times: A Century of Photography from *The New York Times*” (1996).

The presence of the news picture at MoMA at mid-century and beyond speaks to the truly contemporary and innovative curatorial practice of the institution. Steichen’s photographic style of exhibitions and revision of the display of press photographs reflected the importance of news photography at the height of the influence of the picture press. The initial battle between Steichen and Newhall, enables us to understand the roots of contemporary debates regarding “creative” photography versus photojournalism. The results of this critical debate helped photojournalism gain its foothold in museums, resulting in capturing the imagination of popular culture and mass media on a different scale than the printed page. MoMA provided a platform for the convergence of photography in print and museum display, still a subject of vibrant debate within museums today, many still upholding Newhall’s ideas of the photographic “masterpiece.” Steichen’s legacy paved the way nevertheless for the role of news pictures as important components of major museum exhibitions that continues as we journey through the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Phillips’ seminal text “The Judgment Seat of Photography” analyzes the status of a photograph evoking its “cult value” versus “exhibition value” under the first three curators of photography at MoMA: Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, and John Szarkowski, in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992): 33. Originally published in *October 22*, (Fall 1982): 27–63.
- 2 “Steichen begins work in Museum: Greatly Expanded Program by Modern Act Director of Photography” 16 July 1947, *The New York Times*. Clipping from MoMA Archives.
- 3 “Today the news picture generally appears as a supplement to the written word. As the quality of reportorial photography develops and its use continues to accelerate, the written word may well become the supplement to the visual image.” “The Exact Instant 100 Years of News Photography,” Press Release, The Museum of Modern Art, 1949.
- 4 Edward Steichen, Foreword, *Memorable LIFE Photographs* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951): 3.
- 5 “Exhibition of Photography: 1839–1937,” Press Release, The Museum of Modern Art, 1937: 1.
- 6 Sophie Hackett examines the presence of the machine aesthetic in the 1930s related to specific objects in Newhall’s survey exhibition in 1937. Sophie Hackett, “Beaumont Newhall, le commissaire et la machine,” *Études photographiques*, 23 mai 2009, [Online], Online since 18 May 2009. <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/2656>. connection on 17 December 2013.
- 7 The creation of this department was largely the result of the efforts of Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, Ansel Adams, and Rockefeller heir and art collector David H. McAlpin.
- 8 For further discussion about the history of the modern photographic exhibition (1920–1970) and mass media, see Olivier Ligon, *Expositions et Médias: Photographie, cinéma, télévision* (Lausanne and Paris: L’Age d’Homme, 2012).
- 9 See John Szarkowski, “The Family of Man,” in *Studies in Modern Art 4: The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad* (New York: Museum of Modern Art: distributed by H. N. Abrams, 1994): 12–38 and Christopher Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” 1992.
- 10 Letter from Ansel Adams to Stephen Clark (President of the Board of Trustees MoMA), 29 April 1946, cited in Beaumont Newhall, *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993): 150.

- 11 Beaumont Newhall, *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993): 148.
- 12 Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1963): Ch. 13 n.p.
- 13 Olivier Lugon, "Steichen as Exhibition Designer," in Todd Brandow and William Ewing, eds, *Edward Steichen: Lives in Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007): 267–73.
- 14 A close colleague of Steichen's, Maloney was best known for his successful *US Camera Annual* (1935–1969), hard-cover volumes that showcased an extensive selections of a range of photography from the previous year including photo essays, portraiture, news photographs, portfolios, innovations in color, and more. Steichen was the head of *US Camera Annual's* jury.
- 15 Ansel Adams in a letter to Stephen Clark, Head of the Board of Trustees of MoMA, 29 April 1946, cited in B. Newhall, *Focus*: 151.
- 16 Flyer advertising Aspen conference, 1951. Chicago businessman Walter Paepcke (1896–1960), chairman of the Container Corporation of America, created the Aspen Institute in 1950. Topics included "The nature of the photographic truth," "Can photographs help achieve social progress," and "Who makes the picture: photographer or subject?" The presence of John G. Morris, then picture editor of *Ladies' Home Journal* and Wayne Miller, then *LIFE* magazine photographer, formerly in Steichen's Navy Aviation Photographic Unit, and Steichen's protégé, represented the collaborative nature of the meeting.
- 17 "In the traditional art exhibition, also, the integrity of the individual work is more important than its role as evidence in service of the idea of the exhibition as a whole. 'The Family of Man' reverses this order of priorities, and sacrifices the part to the whole. Traditionally, this is what artists do, not curators." Szarkowski, "The Family of Man": 30.
- 18 This was done in collaboration with picture editor John G. Morris, *The Photo Essay* [MoMA Exh. #760, 16 March–16 May 1965] The exhibition was displayed in the Edward Steichen Study Center. http://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3450/releases/MOMA_1965_0026_23.pdf?2010 (accessed 2 October 2014).
- 19 *From the Picture Press* [MoMA Exh. #1022, January 30–April 29, 1973], Press release, http://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4948/releases/MOMA_1973_0018_4.pdf?2010 (accessed 2 October 2014).