

Edward Steichen – Lucien Clergue

A transatlantic meeting

In 1961, at the age of 27, Lucien Clergue was invited to his first exhibition in the United States, *Diogenes with a Camera V* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. The exhibition brought together the work of Bill Brandt, Yasuhiro Ishimoto and Lucien. The curator was none other than Edward Steichen. Born in Luxembourg, the famed American photographer was appointed director of MoMA's Department of Photography in 1947. Throughout his career, Steichen had maintained close ties with Europe and followed developments in the arts scene. He forged friendships with some of the greatest creative spirits of the time, including Rodin and Brancusi, and made it his business to foster new talent from both sides of the Atlantic.

Drawn to the raw poetic force of the young Clergue's early photographs, Steichen bought 10 of his prints in 1958. The two had crossed paths that same year in Switzerland, figuratively speaking, when they both had work on show at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich (now called the Museum für Gestaltung, or Design Museum). Clergue's first exhibition in the Kunstgewerbemuseum coincided with the museum's Steichen show, *The Family of Man*. The *Notes on Edward Steichen*, written by Clergue in the 1980s, reveal the impact of the older photographer's recognition: "Encouraged by this first purchase (prints were payed 10 \$ each by the Museum) I asked if it will be any chance to have an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Miss Grace Mayer¹ replied, to say I was too young to have a one man show".²

Clergue would not have a one-man show, but when in 1961 Steichen displayed his work alongside that of Bill Brandt and Yasuhiro Ishimoto, two internationally acclaimed artists, the

¹ Grace Mayer (1901 – 1996) started her career in 1937 at the Museum of the City of New York as Curator of Prints. In 1957, she joined Steichen at MoMA to prepare for the exhibition of photographs of the city, *Seventy Photographers Look at New York*, MoMA, 1958. She subsequently became his assistant. John Szarkowski appointed Mayer Curator of Photography in 1962. She continued to work in MoMA's Edward Steichen Archives as a volunteer after she retired. There were many photographers in her circle of friends, including Lucien Clergue. See: <https://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/EAD/Mayerf> (accessed on 14.10.2017).

² *Notes on Edward Steichen* by Lucien Clergue, as well as all the other letters quoted in this essay were generously provided by the Clergue family. They are reproduced on pages xxx of this catalogue.

young Frenchman instantly became part of the photographic canon. And what a wonderfully clever exhibition it was! A visit to MoMA's digital archives³ reveals three philosophers with cameras, intensely scrutinizing their worlds, all the while seeking simplicity and pure abstraction of form. In a masterstroke, Steichen brought them together. Guided by his unerring eye, the show was hung with brilliance and a lightness of touch in the elegant central auditorium space where their works were seen to reciprocal and complementary advantage. Brandt, round and fluid, Ishimoto geometric and mineral, and Clergue, feral, shy, insatiable.

Clergue travelled to New York to attend the opening with his wife, Yolande. His notes stress that MoMA did not cover his travel expenses. The trip was made possible thanks to a European patron – whose name he does not reveal – and financial help from his friend, Picasso. Finally meeting Steichen in person at the opening, his physical appearance made a deep impression on Clergue. He still remembered his larger-than-life impact in the 1980s: “I was impressed by his size very big, and his head specially, so impressing, bigger than any one I knew”. And further on: “I asked why he finally decide to present my work as I was still young (Mr Brandt was almost 30 years older) the answer was “I did not want to leave this position without introducing you to America”.⁴ I must confess Mr Steichen impressed me so much that I never try to see him again, I was too shy for it. But visiting regularly Miss Mayer, I had the feeling to [b]e still in contact with him”.⁵

For his part, Steichen had expressed his joy at the prospect of meeting Clergue at the opening and introducing him to other American photographers. In a letter dated 19 July 1961, he emphasised that such a meeting would contribute to “advancing modern photography, to the definite mutual benefit of all concerned”.⁶ Here is Steichen, the perennial networker, not only forging ties, but also campaigning for the advancement of his chosen art form, photography.

³ https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3424/installation_images/0

⁴ Steichen left MoMA in 1962.

⁵ Clergue was not the only person Steichen made an impact on. In 1962, the young journalist from Luxembourg, Rosch Krieps, succumbed to the charisma and outsized physical bearing of the “doyen of American photography”. Krieps painted a very similar portrait in his many pieces, especially in *Kultur im Kleinstaat*, 2006. Éditions Schortgen, Esch-sur-Alzette. p. 151.

⁶ Letter from Edward Steichen (Museum of Modern Art, New York) to Lucien Clergue, dated 19 July 1961. Clergue family private archives. Reproduced on catalogue page xxx.

We have no written traces of the MoMA opening and what the photographers discussed, but a letter from Grace Mayer in answer to Lucien Clergue's expressing his sorrow on Edward Steichen's death in 1973 is testimony to the long relationship first established at the 1961 exhibition. Mayer describes the funeral service for Steichen at the museum and the room decorated with delphiniums, his favourite flowers. She refers to his friendly relations with Picasso and the singular coincidence that “the Spaniard” and the “Captain”, as Steichen liked to be called, passed away in the same year at around the same time. Both men were mentors for Clergue and had guided him in his choices and his career.

Mayer's letter ends on a touching, personal note. She asks simply: “When are you and Yolande coming over? I miss you and we have many things to say to one another.”⁷ We may not know what was said during their conversations, but these letters sustain the memory of the authors, which resonates clearly and distinctly in the photographs chosen for this catalogue.

Françoise Poos

⁷ Letter from Grace Mayer (Museum of Modern Art), dated 15 April 1973. Reproduction on catalogue page xxx.