

The “Cosmopolitan Art”: FIAP Yearbooks of Photography, 1954–1960

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“It is a diversified, yet tempered picture book containing surprises on every page, a mirror to pulsating life, a rich fragment of cosmopolitan art, a pleasure ground of phantasy”—this is how, in March 1956, the editorial board of *Camera* magazine introduced the latest photography yearbook by the International Federation of Photographic Art (*Fédération internationale de l'art photographique*, FIAP). By examining the first four FIAP Yearbooks, published between 1954 and 1960 on a biennial basis,¹ this paper aims to reconstruct some of the ideals behind the work of FIAP and to understand the “cosmopolitan art” of photography promoted by this organization.

FIAP, a non-governmental and transnational association, was founded in Switzerland in 1950 and aimed at uniting the world’s photographers. It consisted of national associations of photographers, representing 55 countries: seventeen in Western Europe, thirteen in Asia, ten in Latin America, six in Eastern Europe, four in Middle East, three in Africa, one in North America, and Australia. As with many non-governmental organizations established around 1950, its membership was global, but the founders and leaders were based in Western Europe—Belgium, Switzerland, France, and West Germany.

FIAP epitomized the postwar idealism which it shared with organizations such as UN or UNESCO. “The black and white art (..) through its truthfulness also stimulates one to

¹ Three more FIAP yearbooks were published in 1962, 1964, and 1966.

understand, respect, and love other nations' customs and beliefs," in 1950 wrote the secretary-general of FIAP, Ernest Boesiger.² FIAP brought this postwar idealism into the field of non-governmental cultural exchange. This idealism promised equal opportunity to all members and mobilized photographers in countries emerging from colonial rule, especially in Asia.

FIAP was an all-volunteer, non-profit initiative and did not have an office or paid staff. The organization's finances consisted of the small annual membership fees. The organization avoided involvement with governments, political authorities or art institutions. Instead, FIAP leaned towards photographers' unions and leaders of the photographic trade such as the world's photography fair *Photokina*, taking place annually in Cologne, West Germany, since 1950. These choices secured FIAP an authority within a community of photographers, but unfortunately their work remained largely unknown outside of it.

One of the major accomplishments of this organization was the FIAP Biennial, an international exhibition of creative photography of an unprecedented scope at this time.³ Works for the FIAP Biennials were selected by each country's national association of photographers, and neither the organizing committee of each biennial nor the board of FIAP intervened in this process. Some of the FIAP Biennials that took place between 1950 and 1966 were documented in the FIAP Yearbooks. The first four Yearbooks were published in 1954 (with works from 1952 Biennial), 1956 (1954 Biennial), 1958 (1956 Biennial), and 1960 (1958 Biennial).

² A. Wermelinger, E. Boesiger, [untitled preface], *FIAP Biennial 1950* (Bern, 1950), 9. Boesiger was also the secretary-general of the Swiss Amateur Photographers' Association (*Schweizerischer Amateur-Photographen-Verband*)

³ The first seven FIAP Biennials took place in different European cities: Bern (1950), Salzburg (1952), Barcelona (1954), Cologne (1956), Antwerp (1958), Opatija (Yugoslavia, 1960), Athens (1962), and Basel (1964). Later they would travel to other FIAP member countries, typically in Europe and Latin America.

The FIAP Yearbooks were published in Lucerne, Switzerland, by the arts and photography publishing house C. J. Bucher. They were distributed to all FIAP member countries as well as to the publisher's retail network, which included an additional dozen countries that were not FIAP members. Each Yearbook was a hardcover, large format photo-book (9 x 11.8 in), clothbound with title letters embossed in gold and a glossy dust jacket featuring a selected photograph from the book.⁴ The Yearbooks contained 120–150 full-page high quality photogravure reproductions, grouped by the photographer's country of residence. Minimal amount of information was provided. The photographer's name and mailing address, short title of the work, and a few technical details (such as the model and make of the camera, the film stock used etc.) were listed separately from the images. Introductions and forewords were published in all three official languages of FIAP—French, German, and English. These brief texts were signed by the president of FIAP, Maurice Van de Wyer (Belgium) and the vice-president and board member, Roland Bourigeaud (France).

The method of sourcing the works set the FIAP Yearbooks apart from most other photo-books of their time. The images were selected from the contributions by each member country's national association. Thus the FIAP Yearbooks showcase the works which the photographers themselves—not magazine editors or museum curators or other “outsiders”—had chosen to represent the best photographic art from their country.

The professional background of contributing photographers varies dramatically. High-level photojournalists working on assignments for the most popular illustrated magazines like

⁴ Approximately 5,000 copies of each Yearbook were printed. The contributing photographers received a free copy and were able to purchase another one for half the price. The retail price of the Yearbook was thirty Swiss Francs (the equivalent of an annual subscription to twelve issues of the official FIAP magazine, the international photography monthly *Camera*, also published by C. J. Bucher).

Life (for example, photographers Dimitris Harissiadis from Greece, Gianni Berengo Gardin from Italy, or Jean Dieuzaide from France) were listed side by side with hobby photographers whose interest in photography was limited to a creative pastime. Some of the leading avant-garde artists of the decade (such as José Oiticica Filho, one of the key figures in Brazilian Neo-Concretism) appeared next to members of upper-class elites like K. L. Kothary, a medical doctor from India who saw his participation in FIAP as a means of establishing a modern cultural identity for his nation.⁵ Approximately one third of around 500 contributors to the first four FIAP Yearbooks were established and well-known photographers or artists. The FIAP Yearbooks thus capture a brief, but fascinating moment in the history of postwar photography when the interests of professional photographers, photojournalists, artists, and hobby photographers coincided and overlapped.

Subject matter of images in the FIAP Yearbooks was also diverse. Street photography, landscapes and seascapes, female nudes, posed studio portraits, ethnographic studies, architecture, nature, sports reportage, and experimental works all coexisted. Some subjects were more popular than others, but no single type of subject matter was explicitly dominant. Besides, there was a great variety also within each type of subject matter. For example, genre scenes comprise the most popular group based on subject matter—approximately 26% of all images in these Yearbooks. They cover topics such as labor, leisure, everyday life on the streets, religious practices, traditional rural festivities, and so on. Among the images focused on particular individuals, depictions of children make up the most popular thematic group.

Lack of textual comment was typical—most titles were only one or two words long, and they were separated from the images. Prioritizing pictorial form over narrative was one way of

⁵ K. L. Kothary, “Federation of Indian Photography,” *Camera* 2 (1954), 96.

asserting the independence of photographic art, but the form itself varied. Most works share some elements of a common visual vocabulary, such as increased contrast, dramatic lighting, tight framing or cropping, vertical composition, and simplicity of form. They, however, represent various aesthetic paradigms. Humanist photography coexists with the legacy of the turn-of-the-century Pictorialism, and formal devices of European interwar modernism (such as Surrealism and New Vision)—with the postwar avant-garde (like Brazilian Neo-Concretism, Italian *Neorealismo* or West German *Subjektive Fotografie*). Some of the leading aesthetic paradigms of postwar photography have been studied individually, but in the FIAP Yearbooks they appear detached from their local cultural context which often is tied to the concept of a nation-state.⁶ This eclecticism reflects the variety of local photographic cultures across the world that coexisted in the 1950s. In general, the diversity of professional careers of photographers as well as the stunning variety of the images in terms of aesthetics and subject matter reveal the complexity, and often uncertainty, of the social and cultural position of photography at this time.

One aspect that all these photographers shared was a common notion about the “art function” of photography. These photographers were struggling to define themselves as artists. The underlying concept of photographic art distinguished a type of photography which was made to be exhibited and evaluated as singular, independent images, and not to be judged for their informational value only. Yet FIAP did not provide a single, unifying definition of photographic art. If there were any vague attempts to define photographic art, they were directed against photojournalism. More precisely, against the ways in which the photographers’ daily work was

⁶ See, for example: Peter Hamilton, “Documenting Frenchness in an Era of Reconstruction: Humanist Photography 1935–1960,” in *The Documentary Impulse in French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 177–219; José Oiticica Filho, *A Ruptura da fotografia nos anos 50* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1983); Ute Eskildsen, ed., *Subjektive Fotografie: Images of the 50's* (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 1984).

treated in most newspapers and magazines. Three features were seen as particularly threatening to the photographers' creative autonomy. One was the format of photo-essay because it prioritized narrative over the pictorial qualities. FIAP, instead, had a strict policy of accepting "one work per author" for their Yearbooks, and each work had to be a self-sufficient unit. The second was the decision-making power in the hands of editors. In the magazines of the 1950s, the editor was the star, not the photographer.⁷ Meanwhile, in the process of selecting works for the FIAP Biennials and Yearbooks, control was in the hands of the photographers. Finally, photography as craft, including making one's own prints, was important for many photographers. But the typical workflow of a magazine, newspaper or news agency denied the photographers an opportunity to practice this craft.⁸ Because of the restrictions of their daily work, many photographers longed for a place to explore their creativity and exercise full authorial control over their images. Many found such place in the exhibitions and publications of FIAP under the label of photographic art.

Through self-curated and self-financed exhibitions and self-edited publications, FIAP strived to defend the creative autonomy of photographers. It was a radical gesture at a time when

⁷ Wilson Hicks, the picture editor of the *Life* magazine from 1937 to 1950, wrote: "The efforts of writer, photographer, reporter or researcher, assignment editor, art director, and others converge when the editor performs the crucial act of selecting the photographs for a picture story and determining, if it has not been previously determined, the point of view from which the story is to be presented." Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism* (New York: Harper, 1952), 48. See also, for example, a historical account of the *Life* magazine: Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine: An inside History of "Life"* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

⁸ Photographers were expected to supply "raw material"—exposed film. The responsibility of a photojournalist was to press the shutter, often following the guidelines developed by the editors. The rest was done by others, including developing the film, making contact prints, selecting shots for enlargements, composing the narrative of the photo-essay and making layouts for the page. See, for example, Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 27–30.

the daily work of most photographers depended on decisions made by others—magazine and newspaper editors, exhibition curators, and commercial customers. FIAP envisioned an environment where the photographers themselves would make all the creative decisions.

The FIAP Yearbooks reveal the complexity of photographic culture in the 1950s. FIAP stood for photographic art as an aesthetically autonomous practice. Such a claim was valid because globally circulated photo-books, magazines, and exhibitions popularized photography as an art form, but, in practice, the photographers' creativity was often limited. The leaders of FIAP vaguely defined photographic art as different from photojournalism and commercial photography, although these fields often overlapped within a single photographer's career. The very existence and popularity of an organization such as FIAP in the 1950s suggests that the boundaries dividing different photographic practices were weak and that they were not uniform throughout the world. FIAP strived to put the postwar humanist rhetoric into action, and the FIAP Yearbooks were intended to survey the cultural diversity of the world. These Yearbooks present a groundbreaking attempt to reject Western Europe as the only center of creativity in favor of a model of global participation. But this ambition was challenged by too many practical limitations such as the lack of financial resources, political influence, and visible theorists among the board members. Because of these limitations, the ideals of FIAP were never theorized and not even clearly communicated. Therefore, the FIAP Yearbooks remained largely unknown outside the community of photographers involved in their making.