

An Introduction to José Oiticica Filho's "Setting the Record Straighter"¹

Alise Tifentale

A key figure in Brazilian postwar photography, José Oiticica Filho (1906–1964) established a link between Brazilian modernist photography and the international photo-club culture of the 1950s. Although his legacy today remains overshadowed by that of his son, artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980), scholarship in Brazil acknowledges him as an important experimental photographer.² Little, however, is known about his work as a statistician. During the 1950s, he compiled extensive data tables pertaining to the activities of hundreds of photographers throughout the world. Oiticica Filho laid the foundation for his innovative statistical work in an article he wrote, titled "Setting the Record Straighter," part of which is reprinted here. The original article was published in three consecutive issues of the magazine *Boletim Foto Cine* in 1951, a publication of the São Paulo photo club Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante (FCCB).³ FCCB was founded in 1939 and played a central role in the São Paulo avant-garde art scene during the 1950s, when its members began to explore semi-abstract or entirely non-representational photography. Although based in Rio de Janeiro, Oiticica Filho was an active member of FCCB

¹ The author thanks art historian and curator Marly T. C. Porto for her indispensable help in locating José Oiticica Filho's article and for providing access to the issues of *Boletim Foto Cine* where it was published; and Raul Feitosa, secretary to the photo club Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante for his assistance and kind permission to reprint the article.

² Recent publications include: Andreas Valentin, "Light and Form: Brazilian and German Photography in the 1950s," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 85, no. 2 (2016): 159–180; Andreas Valentin, "Nas asas da mariposa: a ciência e a fotografia de José Oiticica Filho," *ARS* 13, no. 25 (2015): 31–49; Carolina Etcheverry, "Geraldo De Barros e José Oiticica Filho: Experimentação em Fotografia (1950–1964)," *Anais Do Museu Paulista* 18, no. 1 (2010): 207–228; Beatriz Scigliano Carneiro, "Uma inconsutil invenção: a arteciência em José Oiticica Filho," *ponto-e-vírgula* 6 (2009): 107–146. The unavailability of source materials complicates further research, as many Oiticica Filho's prints and negatives are believed to have perished in fire at his brother César Oiticica's house in Rio de Janeiro in 2009. See Francisco Alambert, "The Oiticica Fire," *Art Journal* 68, no. 4 (2009): 113–114.

³ José Oiticica Filho, "Reforçando os pontos dos ii," *Boletim Foto Cine* 5, no. 58 (February 1951): 21–25; no. 59 (March 1951): 28–30, and no. 60 (April 1951): 26–28. Scans of *Boletim Foto Cine* issues are available online at the FCCB website: <http://www.fotoclub.art.br/acervo/>

and among the pioneers of the São Paulo modernist photography scene.⁴ Other notable FCCB members include Gertrudes Altschul (1904–1962), Geraldo de Barros (1923–1998), Thomaz Farkas (1924–2011), German Lorca (b. 1922), Ademar Manarini (1920–1989), and José Yalenti (1895–1967). Oiticica Filho was a regular contributor to *Boletim*, established in May 1946 as a newsletter of FCCB. By 1951, *Boletim* had evolved into an illustrated forty-page monthly magazine under the editorial guidance of Jacob Polacow (1913–1966) and the general leadership of Eduardo Salvatore (1914–2006), the club’s founder and president. Alongside single-page reproductions of selected works by FCCB members and detailed chronicling of the club’s social events, *Boletim* featured photography exhibition reviews and articles on artistic and technical aspects of the medium.

Photo clubs had existed as informal organizations in many countries since the late nineteenth century, but Oiticica Filho was among the first to grasp the unprecedented rate at which photo-club culture expanded on a global level beginning in the late 1940s. The most important clubs of the 1950s united professional photographers, photojournalists, and dedicated artists by providing the principal self-governed institutional structure for the development and promotion of photography as an autonomous and creative field. These clubs offered social structure, organizational framework, and exhibition opportunities for a wide range of photographic practices. As historian Kerry Ross argues, photo clubs functioned as “the primary institutional setting for the democratization of the fine arts,” “venues of aesthetic socializing,” and as “politically neutral spaces to exercise liberal ideals.”⁵ While clubs across the globe shared

⁴ For the history of FCCB, see: Raul Feitosa, *Bandeirante: 70 anos de história na fotografia* (São Paulo: Editora Photo, 2013), and *MASP FCCB: Coleção Museu de Arte de São Paulo Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, 2016).

⁵ Kerry Ross, *Photography for Everyone: The Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 12, 101, 127.

similar organizational structures, the lives and careers of participating photographers, and the kinds of work they produced, varied radically from location to location. What united this diversity was photographers' shared aspiration for respect and prestige, something that photography lacked in the 1950s. The photo-club culture was therefore instrumental in shaping the recognition of photography as an art form, contributing to the gradual professionalization of photography and the conscious separation of the medium into distinct functional fields such as journalism, fashion photography, portraiture, advertising, fine arts photography, and so on, distinctions that are taken for granted today.

The work of most photo-clubs revolved around international juried exhibitions (also referred to as salons) selected through open call. Photo-club salons of the 1950s depended exclusively on the initiative and unpaid labor of photographers who were their organizers, jurors, and participants as well as their primary audience. During the 1950s, there was no market for the photographic prints circulated in photo-club salons and at the end of each exhibition all the prints were returned to their authors. Participants even had to pay a small application fee to help organizers cover expenses. The word *salon*, when applied to these juried photography exhibitions, indicates the photographers' aspiration to elevate the medium to the status of art. During the 1950s, photographers relied on photo-club salons as their primary regular exhibition venues because the established systems of art museums and galleries welcomed their work only as rare exceptions. In Brazil, such exceptions were the solo shows by FCCB members German Lorca and Ademar Manarini at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo in 1952 and 1954.⁶ Moreover, FCCB as a group was invited to participate in the second São Paulo biennial in 1953.

⁶ Helouise Costa, "O Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante no Museu de Arte de São Paulo" in *MASP FCCB: Coleção Museu de Arte de São Paulo Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, 2016: 13–25), 13.

Club's members Geraldo de Barros, Ademar Manarini, Eduardo Salvatore, and José Yalenti organized this participation.⁷ FCCB showcased their work also in subsequent editions of the biennial. Nevertheless, as Oiticica Filho's article indicates, exhibiting in photo-club salons was paramount to the photographers' debates. The term *fotoclubismo*, which describes the creative yet competitive culture that prevailed in 1950s photo-clubs, has since been coined by historians of Brazilian photography, deriving from the term *foto clube*, or "photo club" in Portuguese.⁸ Oiticica Filho's writings about *fotoclubismo* offer detailed insight into the struggle of a diverse group of photographers for recognition of their work.

Oiticica Filho chose to approach the complex, and often confusing, culture of photo-club salons and *fotoclubismo* by using scientific methods including statistics and data analysis, an approach not often used to explain art or art exhibitions. Typical of his colleagues in the FCCB, most of whom had successful careers in the legal, medical, and industrial fields, Oiticica Filho had no formal training in the arts.⁹ Instead, Oiticica Filho came from a family of scholars.¹⁰ In 1930, he graduated from the National School of Civil Engineering in Rio de Janeiro. Between 1928 and 1962, he lectured in mathematics at several schools in Rio, and from 1943 to 1964 he worked as an entomologist at the National Museum of the University of Brazil.¹¹ His interest in photography began by taking detailed images of insects and flowers as part of his scientific work

⁷ Costa, "O Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante," 13.

⁸ Oiticica Filho did not use the term *fotoclubismo* in this article, but it appears in later critical literature, most notably in: Paulo Herkenhoff, "A trajetória: da fotografia acadêmica ao projeto construtivo," in *José Oiticica Filho: A ruptura da fotografia nos anos 50* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1983), 10–19; Helouise Costa and Renato Rodrigues, *A fotografia moderna no Brasil* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004). The most recent contribution to the field is: Marly T. C. Porto, *Eduardo Salvatore e seu papel como articulador do fotoclubismo paulista [Eduardo Salvatore and His Role as Articulator of São Paulo State Photo-Club Movement]* (São Paulo: Grão Editora, 2018).

⁹ See the biographies of FCCB members in: *MASP FCCB: Coleção Museu de Arte de São Paulo Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, 2016).

¹⁰ His father José Rodrigues Oiticica (1882–1957), was a professor of philology and linguistics, a poet, and a political activist and anarchist.

¹¹ "José Oiticica Filho," Enciclopédia Itaú Cultural de Arte e Cultura Brasileiras, accessed April 21, 2018, <http://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/pessoa10674/jose-oiticica-filho>

in the late 1940s. In 1947 he received a Guggenheim Foundation grant for research in organismic biology and ecology at the Smithsonian Institution where he worked from 1948 to 1950. During these two years he and his family lived in Washington, D.C.¹² His background in engineering and the sciences helped shape Oiticica Filho's analytic perception of photographic art as it emerged from photo-club culture, while his stay in the United States broadened his perspective on the international scope of this culture.

In the article partially translated here for the first time, Oiticica Filho illuminates the inner workings of photo-club culture, the motivation for photographers to participate, and their major concerns about the salon system. At the core of Oiticica Filho's "Setting the Record Straighter" is a debate on the participation in salon exhibitions informed by the ongoing rivalry between São Paulo-based "Paulista" photographers and Rio de Janeiro-based "Fluminense" photographers, and especially between members of the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante (FCCB)—of which Oiticica Filho was a part—and the Sociedade Fluminense de Fotografia (SFF) based in the municipality of Niterói in the state of Rio de Janeiro.¹³ Since the salons in which these groups participated depended on a jury selection that was highly subjective and often obscure, Oiticica Filho meticulously accumulated available data to lend a certain clarity, and even scientific logic, to a field where participation, and even the number of prints accepted at different salons, had become crucial indicators of success. A member of FCCB but also a resident of Rio, Oiticica Filho emerged as a mediator between the two groups—an impartial scientist who sought a

¹² "José Oiticica Filho," Projeto Hélio Oiticica, accessed December 11, 2018, <http://www.heliooiticica.org.br/english/biografia/biojof1940.htm>. Data about his Guggenheim Foundation grant: "José Oiticica Filho," John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.gf.org/fellows/all-fellows/jose-oiticica-filho/>

¹³ The rivalry to which photographers attached such significance illustrates the competitive spirit that thrived among them. The principles of competitive photography in the photo-club culture of the 1950s are outlined in: Alise Tifentale, "Rules of the Photographers' Universe," *Photoresearcher*, no. 27 (2017): 68–77.

solution in data, not in clashes between egos.

Oiticica Filho's theoretical work is based on statistical data collection and analysis—scientific methods that are closer to sociology than art criticism or any other branch of the humanities. His research anticipates the sociology of art, a field that was to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s with a focus on “the structure in which art is discovered, discussed, defined, purchased and displayed.”¹⁴ Central to the sociology of art is the influential research of French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu during the 1960s. Like Oiticica Filho, Bourdieu had once been an active photographer: between 1957 and 1960, Bourdieu produced numerous photographs in Algeria, where he worked as a lecturer at the University of Algiers.¹⁵ As was the case with Oiticica Filho, statistics was among the main sources of Bourdieu's sociological study of contemporary photographic practices in France that he conducted between 1961 and 1964 together with colleagues Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Dominique Schnapper, and discussed in the book *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art (Un art moyen; essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie)*.¹⁶ The authors of *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* identify four major social functions of photography and, correspondingly, four types of photographers: occasional family photographers; amateurs; professionals; and photographic artists. Thanks to his choice to study photography rather than more prestigious forms of art, sociologists today recognize Bourdieu's project as a groundbreaking “cultural attack.” Its revolutionary nature comes to light only when we realize, as sociologist of art

¹⁴ Richard W. Christopherson, “Making Art with Machines: Photography's Institutional Inadequacies.” *Urban Life and Culture* 3, no. 1 (1974: 3–34), 13.

¹⁵ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Picturing Algeria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). The first edition was *Images d'Algérie* (Arles: Actes Sud Littérature with Camera Austria, 2003).

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu with Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Dominique Schnapper, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. Trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990). First published in French as *Un art moyen; essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965).

Nathalie Heinich writes, “just how low photography was at this time in the artistic hierarchy.”¹⁷

Bourdieu’s book introduces the idea that practicing photography as art was, among other things, a means of upward social mobility. His sociological perspective helps to explain the amount of attention that Oiticica Filho, a distinguished scientist and renowned photographer, dedicated to the minutiae of salon participation. The photo-club salons were of cardinal importance to photographers in the 1950s because they offered an exceptional avenue to accrue individual recognition. The salons were equally significant for photographers as gallery and museum exhibitions were for artists.

The impetus for writing “Setting the Record Straighter” can be found in an earlier article published in the October 1950 issue of *Boletim* where Oiticica Filho reviewed the 9th International Salon of São Paulo. In that article he criticized photographers from Rio de Janeiro for not participating in the Salon and accused them of diminishing the overall impact of the Brazilian division in the exhibition.¹⁸ Rio de Janeiro photographers responded to Oiticica Filho in several polemical articles in *Sociedade Fluminense de Fotografia* (SFF) magazine and in *Revista Cine Fotográfica* (vol. 2, no. 17, 1951). Among these responses was an anonymous article titled “Setting the Record Straight” which blamed the São Paulo salon organizers for being biased against the work of Rio photographers, eventually leading the latter group to boycott exhibitions organized in São Paulo. To this article from *Revista Cine Fotográfica* Oiticica Filho responded with the three-part “Setting the Record Straighter,” one part of which is reprinted here.

In the first part of “Setting the Record Straighter,” Oiticica Filho illustrates his

¹⁷ Nathalie Heinich, “Bourdieu’s Culture,” in *Bourdieu in Question: New Directions in French Sociology of Art*, ed. Jeffrey A. Halley and Daglind E. Sonolet (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018: 181–91), 188.

¹⁸ José Oiticica Filho, “Os Brasileiros no IX Salão Internacional de São Paulo,” *Boletim Foto Cine* 5, no. 54 (October 1950), 20–22.

methodology of statistics and data analysis with a presentation of his own activity in the field of photo-club culture between 1945 and 1950, represented in the form of extensive tables listing prizes and honorable mentions he received, along with lists of his articles on photography and reproductions of his works in catalogues and photography magazines.¹⁹ After establishing his expertise in the field, the author introduces a comparative data table showing the number of prints by FCCB and SFF members accepted in juried exhibitions between 1947 and 1950. In the article, he claims that he presents these tables “not with the intention of comparing two Brazilian photography clubs, but to reestablish factual truths deeply misinterpreted by disloyal and irresponsible propaganda aimed at harming those who work hard and honestly toward the progress of the art of photography amongst us.”²⁰ Amid all the subjective judgments that characterized the salons and the confusion about artistic criteria that resulted from it, Oiticica Filho calls for objectivity and a scientific approach to evaluating achievements in the field.

In the second part of the article, which is reprinted here, Oiticica Filho suggests how statistical methods can be helpful for grasping the mechanisms of photo-club culture. Most importantly, he makes a distinction between qualitative and quantitative aspects of *fotoclubismo*, which were too often confused in the past, and argues that statistical methods and data analysis, if applied correctly, can be useful for evaluating the quantitative parameters of the field. For example, analysis of the number of participants and accepted works in international salons reveals different levels of activity from a variety of individuals, clubs, and even countries. Yet such an approach, as Oiticica Filho readily admitted, did not help understand the aesthetics and emotional impact of photographs. He also warns that quantitative factors should not be conflated with qualitative ones: a higher number of accepted works does not automatically mean a higher

¹⁹ Oiticica Filho, “Reforçando os pontos dos ii,” 21–25.

²⁰ Oiticica Filho, “Reforçando os pontos dos ii,” 24. Translated by Luisa Valle.

level of artistic achievement. He further admits that there are limitations to statistical methods, and that they cannot explain, for example, the success or failure of an individual photograph. Judges of the juried exhibitions were typically well-established photographers whose personal preferences solely determined the selection of accepted works. These choices, according to him, cannot be measured scientifically.

The third part of the article compares the achievements of FCCB and SFF members by using statistical methods. It begins with the assertion that “the reasons for rejection are varied and impossible to analyze in simple data tables.”²¹ Oiticica Filho argues that SFF members wrongly blamed FCCB for being biased and that their accusation resulted from an incorrect use of statistical methods. While SFF members had compared the *number* of accepted works between the clubs to prove that their work was slighted by the jury of the 9th International Salon of São Paulo in 1950, Oiticica Filho maintains that a comparison should be made between the *percentage* of acceptances from SFF and acceptances from all submissions to any given salon, calculated as a proportion of accepted prints to the number of all submitted prints. The acceptance rate of Fluminense works (for example, 30.4 per cent in 1948 and 16.6 percent in 1949) is then revealed to be close to the average acceptance rate in the São Paulo salon (36.7 per cent in 1948 and 20.7 percent in 1949). This discovery, in the author’s view, blunts any accusation of an existing bias against SFF at the São Paulo salon.

Without other established criteria of evaluation, these numbers provided evidence of various photographers’ activity and a method of comparing their successes. These debates, and Oiticica Filho’s recourse to statistics, also point to photography’s outsider status and the frustration of its practitioners in the 1950s, in Brazil as elsewhere. Collecting statistical data

²¹ José Oiticica Filho, “Reforçando os pontos dos ii. Parte 3,” *Boletim Foto Cine* 5, no. 60 (April 1951: 26–28), 26. Translated by Luisa Valle.

about different exhibitions and their participants served as one way of at least outlining the scope of a field that was, in sociologist Jean-Claude Chamboredon's words, "uncertain of its legitimacy, preoccupied and insecure, perpetually in search of justification."²²

"For me, the most moving aspect of looking at a salon catalogue is seeing the names of Brazilians entangled with names of artists from other parts of the world," acknowledges Oiticica Filho.²³ He continues that, "this is what patriotism means to me, a type of sane patriotism expressed in seeing my name and the name of my country among names of artists from other countries."²⁴ In his conclusion to the article, Oiticica Filho calls for national unity among Brazilian photographers and reminds his audience that "creating a brotherhood between the clubs and societies of photography in Brazil" is the goal of a new organization, the recently established Brazilian Federation of Photographic Art (*Federação Brasileira de Arte Fotográfica*).²⁵ Over the course of the 1950s, the Federation united thirty photo clubs and a total of 4,106 photographers throughout Brazil, strengthening the ties between Brazilian photographers and the world's photographic art community.²⁶

Oiticica Filho played a role in championing the international connectivity of the Federation, which had been established with the intention of joining the International Federation of Photographic Art (*Fédération internationale de l'art photographique*, FIAP), founded in Switzerland in 1950. FIAP perceived photographers as a distinct social and professional group

²² Jean-Claude Chamboredon, "Mechanical Art, Natural Art: Photographic Artists," in Bourdieu et al., *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (129–149), 129.

²³ Oiticica Filho, "Reforçando os pontos dos ii," 22. Translated by Luisa Valle.

²⁴ Oiticica Filho, 22.

²⁵ Oiticica Filho, "Reforçando os pontos dos ii. Parte 3," 28. Translated by Luisa Valle. Elsewhere Oiticica Filho wrote on the Federation's foundational congress, which took place in 1951, and on the ideals of unification that promised to redeem the destructive effects of rivalry among the clubs he had analyzed in "Setting the Record Straighter." José Oiticica Filho, "Se concreto la primera convención brasilera de arte fotográfico," *Correo Fotográfica Sudamericano* (Buenos Aires) 30, no. 653 (February 1951), 38; "First Brazilian Convention." *PSA Journal* (New York) 17, no. 4 (April 1951), 218.

²⁶ FIAP, untitled, *Camera*, no. 2 (1964), 41.

whose geographically scattered members could be united around the idea of the medium's cultural and social autonomy. Embodying postwar humanism and idealism, the founders of FIAP envisioned the organization as a forum that could offer equal opportunity for participation from all countries "regardless of their power or their poverty."²⁷ Each participating country was represented in FIAP by a national federation of photography that united photo clubs in that country. Over the following decade, FIAP mobilized photo clubs in fifty-five countries in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, becoming the first post-World War II organization to provide photographers with an institutional space that existed outside the market and that transcended political and ethnic borders.

The founder and president of FIAP, Belgian photographer Maurice Van de Wyer (1896–1994) visited São Paulo and FCCB on a regular basis during the 1950s, and while it is not clear whether Oiticica Filho and Van de Wyer ever met in person, Oiticica Filho became an active contributor to the work of FIAP.²⁸ He emerged as the pioneering record-keeper and data analyst of FIAP. During the 1950s, Oiticica Filho published several statistical reports about international salons of photography in the FIAP yearbooks and the organization's magazine, *Camera*, thus expanding to a global level the application of the statistical tools that he established to analyze photo-club culture in Brazil.

One such report provides statistical insight into the world's photo-club salons that took place during 1956, based on data Oiticica Filho collected from exhibition catalogues.²⁹ This account reveals the geographic reach of the global *fotoclubismo* in the mid-1950s, with 126

²⁷ Maurice Van de Wyer, [untitled introduction], in FIAP, *I. Photo-Biennale der FIAP* (Bern: FIAP, 1950), 7.

²⁸ For example, in 1956, Van de Wyer participated in the celebration of the seventeenth anniversary of FCCB, documented in detail in the club's official publication, *Boletim Foto Cine*. See an illustrated report on his visit: "O XVII aniversário do FCCB," *Boletim Foto Cine* 9, no. 99 (May 1956), 24–26.

²⁹ José Oiticica Filho, "The FIAP Official List of Pictorial Photography for the Year 1956," in *1958 FIAP Yearbook* (Lucerne: C. J. Bucher, 1958), 159–78.

exhibitions in thirty-four countries, including Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Hong Kong, South Africa, and Yugoslavia. One of the data tables is a list of the 143 most active exhibition participants who managed to circulate tens, even hundreds, of prints at one and the same time in various exhibitions throughout the world, and it included twenty-four photographers from Brazil.

Understanding Oiticica Filho's statistical work is important in establishing a broader perspective on postwar photo-club culture as an international phenomenon. Photo clubs became the major venues for exhibiting photography as an autonomous art form not only in Brazil or Latin America, but also in Europe and Asia. Over the course of the 1950s, FIAP mobilized thousands of photographers from countries all over the world and of all levels of artistic accomplishment and professional involvement to become ardent participants in *fotoclubismo*. While Oiticica Filho's approach does not clarify the contested meanings of photographic art in the 1950s, it makes a thriving, transnational field both visible and quantifiable by providing a helpful guide to the otherwise uncharted field of photo-club culture that firmly establishes Brazil as one of its creative centers.