



International Center of Photography

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media release



Cornell Capa: Concerned Photographer

On view from
September 19, 2008
through
January 4, 2009

Media Preview
September 18, 2008
9:30—11:00 am

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Cornell Capa
[Political dissidents arrested after the assassination of Nicaraguan dictator,
Anastasio Somoza, Managua], 1956
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Cornell Capa (1918–2008) chose the phrase “concerned photographer” to describe those photographers who demonstrated in their work a humanitarian impulse to use pictures to educate and change the world, not just to record it. He was a champion of many photographers, and *Cornell Capa: Concerned Photographer* will present his own work as part of this tradition and focus on eight of his most important stories. The exhibition will be on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) from September 19, 2008 through January 4, 2009.

During a long and distinguished career as a photographer, Capa worked for *Life* magazine from 1946 to 1967, and for the Magnum Photos agency beginning in 1954, covering social and political issues in the United States, as well as England, the Soviet Union, Israel, and Central and South America. While he created some iconic individual images, Capa more fully established his own specific areas of concern with incisive and important photo-essays. “I worked on stories that interested and excited me, stories about which I had strong feelings and high hopes, and I directed all my talents and energies into that work.”

Beginning in 1953, Capa traveled regularly to Central and South America. He focused extensively on the explosive politics of the region, particularly issues such as elections, free speech, foreign investments, and workers’ rights. His first trip was to Guatemala for *Life*. Capa photographed banana workers and peasants, and the complicated relationship and struggle for power between the local leftist leaders, President Jacobo Arbenz and the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company. In his most dynamic news story, he covered the collapse and fiery aftermath of the regime of dictator Juan Perón in Argentina in 1955. A year later he photographed in Nicaragua following the assassination of dictator Anastasio Somoza.

In 1956, he was sent to Ecuador by *Life* to cover the brutal murder of five Christian missionaries. This was to be a life changing experience. Typical of the way Capa was to engage with his subjects over many years, rather than taking the photographs and leaving the scene, he continued to photograph the story over time. In particular, he focused on one of the widows, Betty Elliot, and her extraordinary, understanding relationship with the Indians with whom she and her young daughter lived for several years, as she pursued her missionary work and research into the native language and customs.

Back in the U.S., following his photo essays and publications on political conventions and the careers of Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy, he photographed the 1964 New York senate campaign of Robert F. Kennedy, highlighting all of the drama and frenzy that he found in American politics. In 1972, Capa's photographs commissioned at the Attica prison in upstate New York were used as evidence in the McKay report, investigating the cause of the bloody uprising the previous year.

Again returning to Central America in the 1960s and '70s, Capa expanded on several issues that he had followed in his earlier work. In 1961, he photographed the Amahuaca Indian tribe in Peru, whose indigenous culture was under threat from modern society. In this extensive project, which culminated in the book *Farewell to Eden* with anthropologist Matthew Huxley, Capa shows a sophisticated fascination and concern for tribal life. In 1974, he published *The Margin of Life: Population and Poverty in the Americas* with sociologist J. Mayone Stycos, an analysis of poverty and social conditions in Central America—particularly in El Salvador and Honduras—and their interrelation to war and conflict. These images of itinerant workers, child labor, families fighting for survival in harsh conditions, and changing agrarian systems are haunting and remain relevant today. This exhibition will look at these important stories through vintage photographs, magazine spreads, contact sheets, and original story notes and captions.

Cornell Capa was born Kornel Friedmann in Budapest in 1918. He fled to Paris in 1936 to join his brother, noted photographer Robert Capa, but sailed with his mother to New York the following year. Setting aside his ambition to study medicine, he worked in the darkrooms of the Pix photo agency and *Life*. In 1946 he joined the staff of *Life* magazine, contributing numerous cover stories and international essays. Following the death of Robert Capa in 1954, he became a contributing photographer to *Life* and joined Magnum Photos, the agency founded by his brother, among others, in 1947. Fueled by the lasting importance and relevance of work by his brother and other Magnum photographers who had been killed in action, Capa mounted *The Concerned Photographer* in 1967 at the Riverside Museum in New York City, with the work of Robert Capa, David Seymour "Chim," Werner Bischof, Dan Weiner, and Leonard Freed, under the auspices of his International Fund for Concerned Photography. In 1974, he founded the International Center of Photography in New York and acted as Director until his retirement in 1994.

This exhibition was organized by Brian Wallis, Chief Curator, and Cynthia Young, Assistant Curator, Robert Capa and Cornell Capa Collections.