
Face of Time – Notes on a Rediscovered Exhibition

In looking back at the crucial moment in which an event is condensed into a mythic narrative, it always requires a plausible explanation. David Seymour was aware of this when, late in the summer of 1956, he was entrusted with the task of writing a text about Magnum for the photography industry's *photokina* fair in Cologne.² After all, he would have to explain the special position of the conspiratorial photographers' cooperative to a broad public.

As a founding member of the agency, "Chim," as everyone called the polyglot photojournalist from Warsaw, was almost predestined to capture in words a success story unprecedented in photojournalism. After the tragic death of the group's charismatic founder, Robert Capa, in May 1954, he became the official President of "Magnum Inc.," which also had offices in Paris and New York. Chim's remarks began with a reference to the legendary founders' meeting, which the world-famous war correspondent fixed for the spring of 1947. To this day, it remains the first chronological reference point for the process that turned Magnum into a myth:³ "When Robert Capa proposed Magnum as the name for our newly founded group, all of us instantly agreed. We all felt that the name was right. To us, it meant living in pursuit of great pictures. It also suggested to us the joy of a substantial bottle of champagne, and a good party."⁴

For David Seymour, the brilliant trademark was important, since its allusions to a giant bottle of champagne and a handgun seemed to be just the thing to help the ambitious company establish a bohemian group of international photojournalists outside of the existing photo agencies. However, a crucial moment such as this, upon which a twentieth-century myth is built, also needs, in retrospect, to be precisely embedded in place and time. Yet in his essay, Seymour was only able to provide an imprecise date for the first meeting: "mid-May 1947." Even more astonishing is the fact that Chim's manifesto does not mention a single word about the location of this meeting, since, from today's point of view, he seems to have been the person most suited to construct a source legend. After all, the place where the group first met was the restaurant in the penthouse at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

MoMA and Magnum

Is it possible that Seymour was deliberately silent about this site so significant to the cult of modernism? Today – long after works by members of the first and second generations of Magnum were included in the most important international museums – it seems only logical,

There are ways of communicating our photographs other than through publications in magazines. Exhibitions, for instance ...

Henri Cartier-Bresson¹

1 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye. Writing on Photography and Photographers* (New York, 1999), p. 42.

2 For more on the lack of historical analysis of the Magnum Agency, see Matthias Christen, Anton Holzer, and Christoph Schaden, "Mythos Magnum. Die Geschichte einer legendären Fotoagentur," *Literatur. Beilage zum Mittelweg* 36: 5, 2007, pp. 53–80, esp. pp. 54–55.

3 As is proper for a founders' myth, various versions of it – regarding who participated in the meeting and how the agency's name was selected – are in circulation. See William Manchester, "Zeitblende," in *Zeitblende. Fünf Jahrzehnte MAGNUM-Photographie* (Munich, 1989), p. 18; Richard Whelan, *Die Wahrheit ist das beste Bild. Robert Capa. Eine Biographie*, (Cologne, 1989), pp. 346–47; Russell Miller, *Magnum. Fifty Years at the Front Line of the History* (London, 1997), pp. 49–50.; Alex Kershaw, *Robert Capa. Der Fotograf des Krieges* (Berlin, 2004), pp. 234–35.

4 David Seymour, "Magnum," *photokina* 1956 (Cologne, 1956), p. 144. The fair ran from September 29 to October 7, 1956.