

'THE FAMILY'



Henri Cartier-Bresson

Members of the exclusive Magnum photo agency have always considered themselves one big happy family, and despite the odd domestic dispute, they've stayed together for 40 years

Top-flight photographers are not normally noted for their retiring egos, and collectives are notoriously difficult structures to make work, so 'a collective of star photographers', to borrow Tom Hopkinson's phrase, would seem bound for disaster. Disasters there have

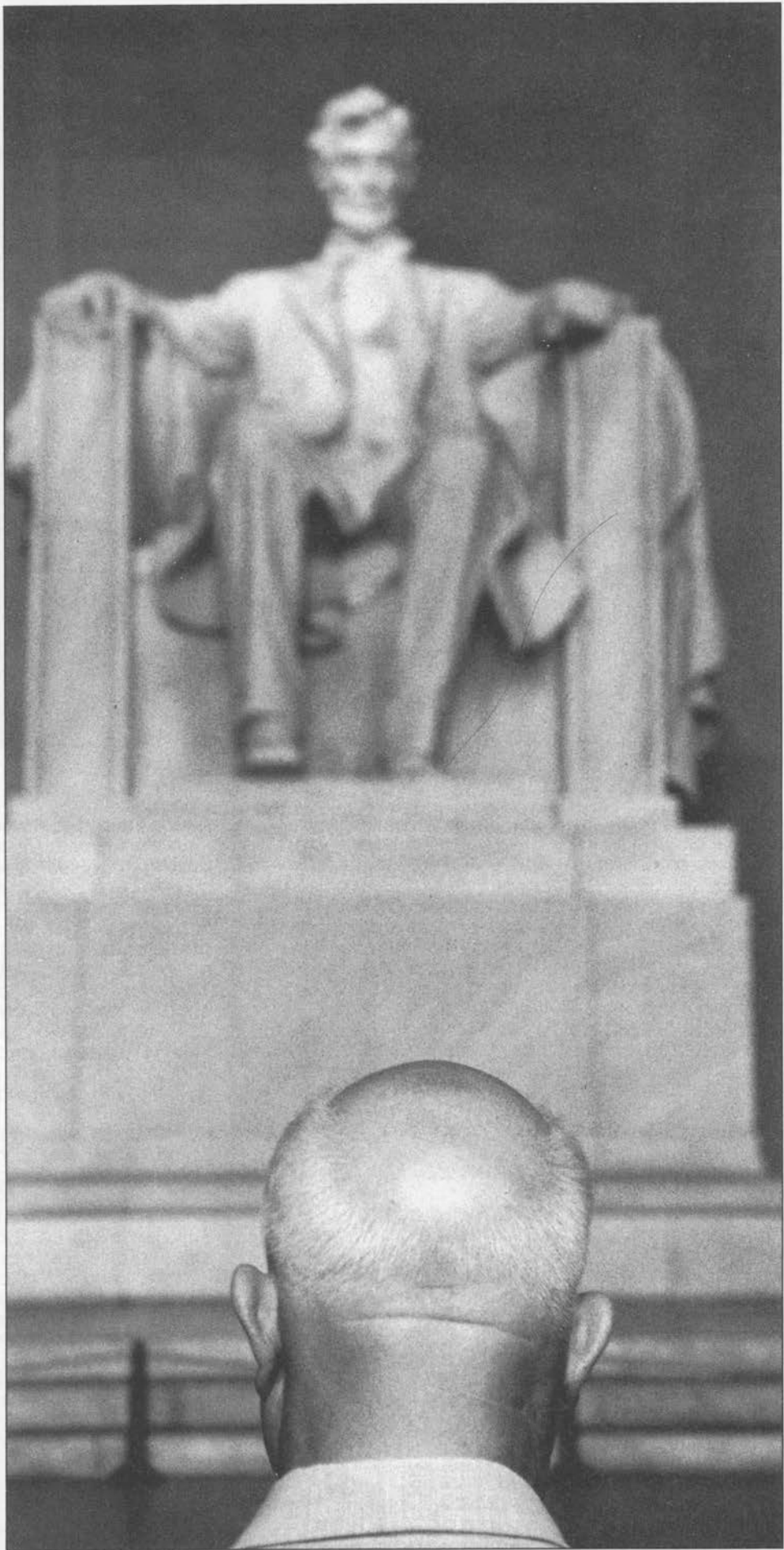
been, yet ever since 1947, when the Magnum photo agency was founded, it has stayed very firmly on top. With stars like Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger, David (Chim) Seymour and Robert Capa on its books, Magnum was, and still is, the world's finest photographers' agency, full stop.

Collectives notoriously generate intense highs and lows, loves and hates, and Magnum is no exception. The pictures produced are often superb, the friendships and fights intense. Occasionally, a lucky new photographer joins, and most of the originals stay, paying their percentage, supporting this 'haven', this 'family', this contentious community. There are now 35 member photographers, and as equal sole shareholders in Magnum, they run the show.

One of the most generous stayers is Burt Glinn. He became a

Magnum member in 1954 after working for *Life* magazine, like many other early members. A former president both of Magnum and The American Society Of Magazine Photographers, he is a highly successful commercial photographer whose percentage, with others, has seen Magnum through the lean editorial years.

In Glinn's opinion, "there's something valuable in this contentious community of people who can argue and fight and scratch and kick and scream, but all of whom are fairly sublime photographers, and all of whom have a shared interest in quality. Magazines, newspapers - all their perspectives are very short-range, very shallow. There's a great deal of pressure on people to make money, to do the things which are most remunerative. Magnum is a counter-cultural pressure. Being a photographers'



Burt Glinn



Elliott Erwitz

collective is the whole thing. It works against the grain of what any other business organisation would do. It encourages people to do things they think are important, rather than what they think will be remunerative."

Magnum began with what George Rodger calls 'pipe-dreams'. "We took our orders from *Life* magazine," he says "but saw our future as an organisation run by ourselves. We would employ people to sell our work, collect the money and do the administration, leaving us free to work at what we wanted."

After the war, the pipe-dreams came true. "We never had it so good," Rodger recalls, "although we didn't know that at the time. There weren't many photographers who knew their way around the world, and maybe only a dozen who could get to a place, do the story and deliver the goods. And we helped each other - what I called 'the family', that was the spirit".

As well as photographers maintaining sole control, Magnum's other founding principle was photographer copyright. Magnum photographers may not sell copyright on their work, and the agency preserves the sole right to syndi-

cate its members' pictures.

Eve Arnold, for example, became a full member in 1957 according to the records. "I can almost live on my archive sales", she says. "I can't eat caviar and drive around in limousines, but I can take taxis and eat smoked salmon occasionally. Because of Capa's idea that the photographer owned copyright, we have one of the best, if not *the* best archives in the world. And it's the archive, the files, which is the glue that binds us together. Maybe I should say people first and files afterwards, but without those files Magnum doesn't exist. They're more than just income. They give us a solidity, a tradition, a sense of the past and goals for the future."

Early in life, Magnum faced tragedies which would have killed off a weaker child. In May 1954 Robert Capa was killed when he stepped on a land-mine in Indochina. Nine days earlier, Werner Bischof died when his jeep went over a cliff in the Andes. And in November 1956, 'Chim' Seymour was shot by an Egyptian machine-gunner at the end of the Suez crisis.

Eve Arnold believes Capa had already lost interest in Magnum before he died. "He was a buccaneer, an iconoclast, an ideas

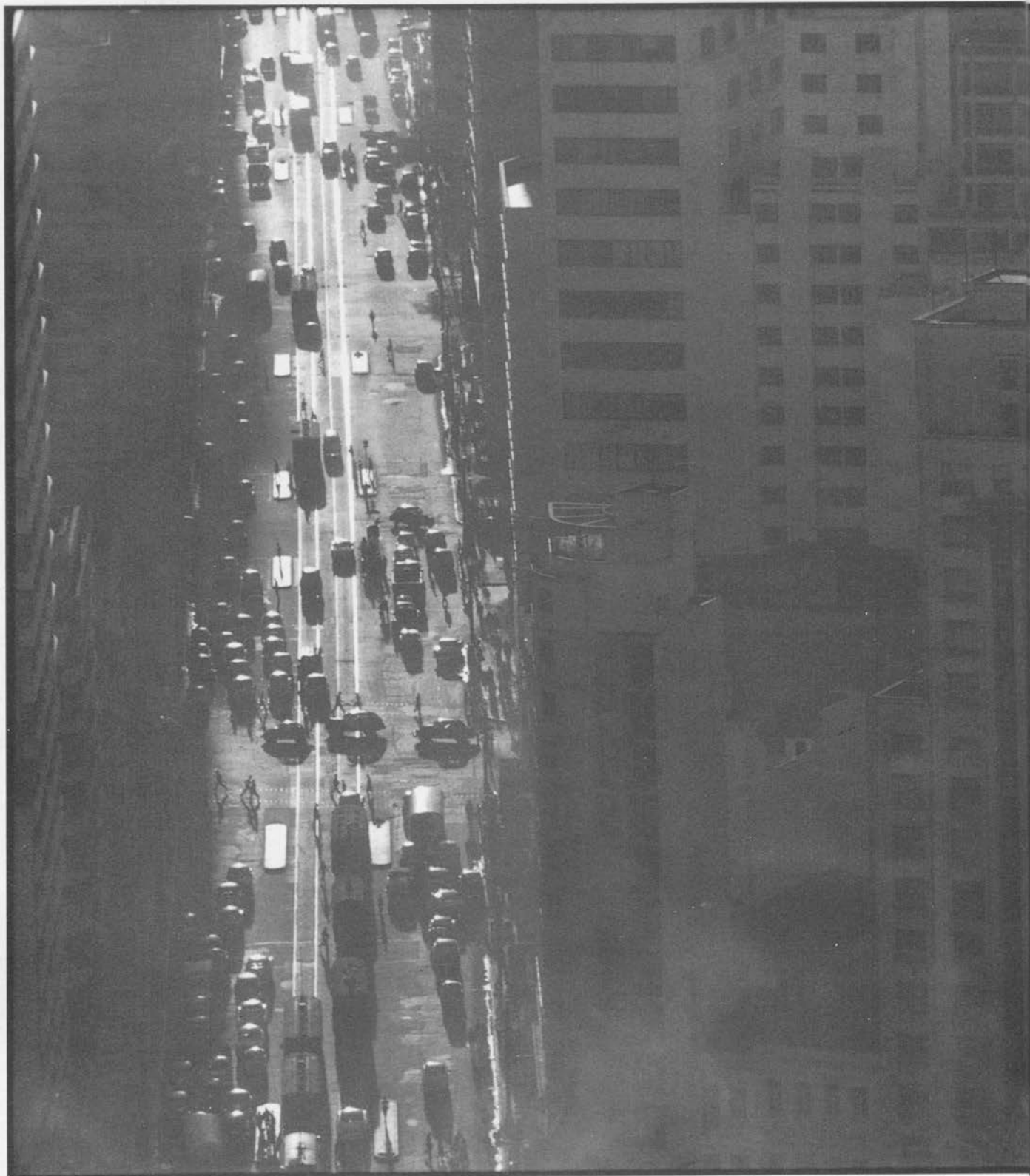
person, an activist. It wouldn't have interested him to sit around and argue about whether we did advertising and industrial work to pay the rent. It would have bored him beyond words." In some ways she believes those deaths held the agency together. "If Capa and Chim and Werner hadn't died, chances are we wouldn't have continued. Those tragedies have been a dedication and rededication. Magnum falls apart frequently, then gathers itself up and continues."

One such sad falling apart came in the early Eighties, when much of Magnum's middle generation resigned - Mark Godfrey, Charles Harbutt, Mary Ellen Mark, Burk Uzzle. Marc Riboud also resigned from the Paris office, but later rejoined as a contributor. There were many and different reasons, but beneath much of this grief, and also Magnum's reputed patchy treatment of its hired staff, lies the agency's founding strength and weakness: its collective structure. Staff have sometimes wanted more control, and collective conflict can be the cruellest of all, almost like a civil war.

Ian Berry was one of the middle generation members who stayed, although he admits he also came



Eve Arnold



Rene Burri

very close to quitting. "Collectively, we can be absolute bastards - it's unbelievable. The egos sometimes are staggering, the 'what's in it for me' attitude. It's very sad."

Berry is rightly incensed by Magnum's most recent sad gaffe, an article in *In Our Time*, Magnum's book to mark the agency's first 40 years. French historian Jean Lacouture wrote the offending piece, entitled 'The Founders'.

Of the original four founders, only two are still alive - Cartier-Bresson and Rodger. Lacouture did not interview Rodger. "Rodger remained in the wings of the organisation," he writes, "as a participant more than an active member." Lacouture reduces the original four to three, "the original trio" he calls them, a travesty of the truth as all agree. Quite apart from his African work, Rodger wrote

Magnum's first constitution. Lacouture has since apologised, but the mistake was somehow noticed too late. It will be rectified in later editions. Ian Berry feels grieved: "George has put a lot into Magnum. I would say stop the book, no matter how much we have to go into the hole in America."

The issue will doubtless come up at this year's annual meeting, when all the members get



together. Many of them are lifelong friends: "It's a big bash" as Eve Arnold says, held alternately in the Paris and New York offices. Every year, the president and vice-presidents are elected, who will oversee daily office management in Paris, New York and now London.

Ethics are often on the agenda - last year there was a heated discussion on whether six invited Magnum photographers should

go to China for the *Day In The Life Of* book. Some felt it was pure propaganda for the Chinese - this was before Tiananmen Square. The photographers went.

Most importantly at these meetings, new members are elected. There are three selection stages, often likened to meeting, engagement and marriage. Portfolios are viewed at each stage - it used to be contact sheets. First there's

'nominee' status, whereby the photographer's work may be sold through Magnum, and the agency commission, usually 40 per cent, subtracted, or the photographer can generate and sell work outside Magnum. Next comes 'associate membership'. Associates, like members, must pay the percentage on all work, regardless of who generates it. They have no stock and voting rights, but can use the *Magnum* byline. The final stage is full membership with shareholding and voting rights. Admittance to full membership requires a two thirds majority.

By no means everybody makes it through from nominee to full member. "The photography is easy to judge," says Magnum member David Hurn, "but personality counts for at least half." Magnum also has a 'correspondent' category, for photographers like Raghu Rai in India, where full membership would not make financial sense. Old members can become 'contributors.'

The nominee category is a relatively new invention, designed to cushion the shock of young photographers suddenly losing around 40 per cent of their earnings to Magnum. Joining Magnum is not the 'open sesame' some imagine. Nobody tells you what to do, and there's no automatic pay cheque every month. It is rare for Magnum to finance members' work out of its own coffers. And the majority of documentary work undertaken by Magnum photographers originates with their own ideas.

The agency's strength lies with its reputation, syndication service, and the ability of its staff to put together 'packages.' Once a member decides on a project, then Magnum looks for guarantees from different newspapers, magazines and book publishers to pay for at least part of the work, or the expenses, or both. Editorial and corporate clients also often contact Magnum with assignments.

Chris Steele-Perkins belongs to Magnum's third generation. Josef Koudelka suggested he apply, and he became a member in 1982. In 1988 he won the World Press Oscar Barnack Award for his story on thalidomide victims, as well as the Tom Hopkinson Award from the Photographers Gallery. "When Magnum is working well", he says, "I can feed in my ideas and the staff will run with them. Magnum allows me to do what I think is important, making the financially successful deals to enable that. Almost everyone from my generation has been involved



Sebastião Salgado

in ludicrously long-term projects – Abbas on Islamic fundamentalism, Salgado on work – which now and then manifest themselves in magazine stories. What Magnum does now is on a different scale than before – there are more photographers. But I think the quality and commitment are as high as ever, maybe higher.”

Chris feels optimistic. “The cycle is on the up at the moment. In this country the situation for Magnum’s type of work is much better than it was maybe five years ago, when every editorial picture looked like an advertisement. We’re getting into a seller’s market – how long it will last I don’t know.”

Magnum has travelled a roller-coaster of highs and lows during the last 42 years. It had it good at the beginning, but when the great picture magazines like *Life* and *Look* folded, many Magnum photographers were forced to do corporate work to pay the bills. Most retained their documentary roots, and when the colour supplements first opened there was another boom period.

Ian Berry has probably had more *Observer* Magazine covers from

those early days than anyone else – until fashion and personality stories came to dominate the market. These days, editorial seems on the up again, partly thanks to the *Independent* factor. Black-and-white work is back in fashion, and advertising favours an editorial look. The new Magnum London office has proved a success, and is run by Neil Burgess, former director of Liverpool’s *Open Eye Gallery*, a telling background. George Rodger reckons that “there’s the same spirit today in London as we had in Magnum in Paris when we first started”. The Japanese office is due to open in January 1990.

Magnum’s David Hurn founded the highly successful School Of Documentary Photography and Film at Gwent College Of Higher Education, which has turned out more than its share of documentary professionals. Two ex-students won Sports Photographer and Magazine Photographer of The Year last year. Who is influencing his present students?

“Gilles Peress’ book on Iran was very influential, because of his involvement and visual power.

They also admire Salgado’s genuine involvement and strong personal visual identity. Then there’s Bruno Barbey, Eugene Richards and the *National Geographic* photographer Bill Allard, who nearly joined Magnum recently. They are all either Magnum or ‘nearly Magnum’ photographers, although the students probably don’t know that.”

To some extent, Hurn believes, Magnum has become a hostage of its own success, and to the ideals it has come to embody. “People think of Magnum as that perfect creature, without warts or arguments, so they get offended when they feel it is abusing their ideals, not necessarily Magnum’s ideals, but their ideals. They are unaware of the level of debate that goes on in Magnum. And they lay on Magnum a burden it can’t possibly carry, although I would say that it carries it better than any other group. If we didn’t have a few warts and disastrous mistakes, we wouldn’t be human. We aren’t talking about God and the angels.”

Tim Malyon