

JOHN GALLO

Quadranscentennial

I am a social documentary photographer and essayist.
I believe we need to focus on people, on human beings; we need to humanize
the planet, to change our relationship with Nature
and assure next generations a much brighter future.

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The message, unveiled.

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Phone booth, from West London Tales

London, West End. Phone booths in this part of the city look like they belong to a different reality – in many cases they look like a time capsule from the eighties. Porn adverts, bad maintenance and bottles of beer all collude to the final result, a derelict, disgusting piece of public equipment no one seems to care about – but the bottle of beer confirms the phone is still put to good use.

If it was in a poor African country the scene wouldn't be surreal, but being in London, in one of the richest cities in the world, it reveals two pornographic secrets: on the one hand, companies running the business do not care about phone booths anymore, although they are a landmark for London. On the other hand, in an extremely affluent city there are still people using them, quite probably because they cannot afford anything else to call their loved ones.

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Four Feet, from Inside out

West Sussex, England. Depicting how people live in the 21st century, Inside Out portrays families and individuals in a very particular way.

The chosen angle prevents the subject from being under the spotlight and thus avoid feelings of exposed privacy.

From this photograph it is possible to infer that mother and son are sitting at the table having dinner – the scene is lit by artificial light, the improvised bib on the child's lap gives away that this family is either poor or completely informal (the lack of shoes on the boy's feet seem to corroborate this) and tear and wear on mum's F&F sleepers confirms they struggle to make ends meet. On the background a baby chair – possibly another child – and a television set left on while dinner was served, denote habits far from a well educated family.

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Bershka, from Falling from the summit

Covilhã, Portugal. In the seventies Covilhã was home to about 200 wool factories. Little more than half a dozen survived the Portuguese revolution and globalization. In the early seventies Universidade da Beira Interior was founded and for many it replaced the once prosperous wool industry of the city. Unfortunately, unemployment rose sharply and there is little one can do nowadays in Covilhã. Migration is on almost everyone's agenda.

This young lady personifies Covilhã's youth fate: she probably went to College at University Interior", a black metaphor for what she may learn there – nothing that will make a real difference in her life. She waits for the bus to arrive fiddling with her mobile – one call centre working on behalf of Vodafone, employing in excess of 400 people, is the main employer around and likely the destination of youngsters that leave university.

Her speech balloon is empty: she has been left with nothing to say; she carries a Bershka plastic bag, one of the cheapest clothing brands on the market, probably the only ones she can afford.

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Cool Britannia, from West London Tales

Piccadilly Circus, London. The moment a rickshaw rider starts to pedal against a green light gives away real Britannia, not cool Britannia anymore. The guy is poorly dressed, probably a migrant as the vast majority of rickshaw drivers in London, framed by the word "look" and by the London taxi with the Vodafone logo on the bonnet – one of the flagship companies of the kingdom. The dotted lines help to create a stage where the whole scene unfolds. The UK, as many other economies in the world, is now a mixture of huge blue chip companies, worth millions, extremely deprived citizens who have no quality of life whatsoever and fancy tourists sharing rickshaw rides driven by underpaid migrants. This photograph was taken in London's West End that continues to be the world's highest-priced office market (2015) – la crème de la crème. Bravo!

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Shine a light, from West London tales

Christmas time in one of the wealthiest cities in the world, London. Wealthy passers-by completely ignore the busker selling magazines. His body language tells us how hard it is to be standing up for hours trying to get enough money for a hot meal. Unfortunately, he knows he is completely invisible, no matter what. Passers by, on the other hand, are either bored or more worried about being portrayed in good fashion. Fancy, expensive fur collars and shopping bags from Ellis Brigham where exquisite and exclusive goods are sold to the privileged (a pair of walking boots may cost as much as £275) contrast with the busker's Tesco bag where he keeps all of his belongings.

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Standpoint, from Zero Two Zero

London Underground, old carriage. A big British fellow sits in a corner of the car, reading Standpoint, Facing up to Islam. He symbolizes the muscled Brit response to the terror attacks, a bit like old styled colonialism – odd, or coincidence, this guy reading such an article in a place the terrorists love to attack, the Underground. Apart from the photographer, no one seems to be comfortable sharing that corner with him. The multiple reflections on the carriage windows seem to amplify his presence, making an impression one cannot ignore. Or maybe it is just form, little substance.

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Should I stay or should I go?, from Zero Two Zero

Canary Wharf was the heart of British and European Finance. Until now; with Brexit the UK faces the prospect of losing the critical role it has been playing within high finance in Europe and in the world. In 2014 campaigners tried to inform the public about the pros and cons of staying or leaving the EU, although there was a clear inclination already back then towards leaving the EU, confirmed in 2016 by the vote of the British people. The commuters are clearly divided here, taking different directions at the platform, with the majority leaving Canary Wharf on the departing train. Premonition? Maybe...

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Famine, from West London tales

London, West End. A famine skeleton looks at an overgrown child sitting on a stroller holding a big M&M's bag of sweets. The child is looking scared and grabs the bag tight, hiding behind it – one never knows when the malnourished will attack and steal our treats.

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The bloody denouement, from 17 into 2015

Burgess Hill, West Sussex, England. After Charlie Hebdo's events in 2015 we all realised terrorists are carefully planning their actions, with military efficiency and special operations tactics. Therefore, from that moment onwards, we all know that the outcome of a complex sequence of events of this sort will involve dead civilians, murdered in cold blood – we didn't know by then but Paris attacks confirmed these fears. A family with kids is also the target of terrorists – save, get a coffin, because you and your children are already dead. You just don't know that yet.

Vive la liberté!

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Behind Bars, from Pilgrims, chapter one: Walking to Fatima

Fátima, Portugal. On the 13th of May 2015, 210000 pilgrims completed their epic journey and flooded the Fátima's Sanctuary willing to pay Nossa Senhora de Fátima a tribute, acknowledging the fact that, one way or the other, she took good care of them, protected them, saved them or their loved ones from becoming sick, from poverty or from something else. This family was expecting the procession to start; given the rise of racism against black people in the United States in recent years, I was struck by the fact that if you're born black the likelihood of getting behind bars is much higher than if you're white, unless you're black and rich; if you are, you may be able to stick your hands out, staying on the "white" side of life. When you are black I wonder what comes first, the colour of your skin or the size of your pocket. I hope Nossa Senhora may give a helping hand to all the penniless black citizens that end up in the line of fire of the American police.

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Dehydration, from 17 into 2015

This photograph is part of one of my conceptual essays, 17 into 2015, depicting media where relevant matters from my point of view were brought to the reader's attention. On the 16th of January 2015 The Times published an article about a scandal of dehydration in care homes. According to the journalist, the staff of several care homes in England were neglecting their costumers, apparently because water was not being dispersed as it should. A severe problem, dehydration can easily kill or provoke serious health problems, although extremely simple to prevent: a full glass of tap water in a country where water is not scarce prevents dehydration. What is scarce in developed countries is caring for each other and that is now apparently also causing dehydration.

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Workers, from Bus stops

Victoria Street, London. Early morning, grey skies; a bunch of workers on their daily commute, walking from Victoria Station to their workplace across London. Their silhouettes lean forward, the weight of the world being upon them. These are the new slaves, many of them left home hours ago, entered an overcrowded train where they had to stand up for the entire journey – in spite of the huge price of the tickets – and then have to walk for a few miles to get to their destination, regardless of weather. Common sight in London, the backpack full with all the stuff workers need to carry back and forth every single day – lunch being one of those items, saving money is mandatory. And back, late afternoon – same penitence, same walk, same train, life doesn't change, it never will.

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R8, England at Home, from It's Christmas again

Brighton, England. One of the most amazing things happening in the western world is Christmas. And the English love Christmas! They buy and buy and buy, non stop from November onwards until madness shopping in December. The funny thing is they're buying essentially imported goods, from the EU, from China, from everywhere. And the British balance of payments is collapsing for 15 years now. While the English reduce themselves to ghostly silhouettes surrendering to consumerism, Germany and other nations fill their pockets with Sterling. Regrettably, this is the only way England feels at home. Sadly, other countries desperately replicate this childish behaviour and Christmas is just about consumerism nowadays – and getting in debt.

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Our Empire State, from No surrender

Viséu, Portugal. Social Security building, downtown Viséu. For some an icon of the city, part of Viséu's recent history, for other nothing but rubbish. Opinions have been divided over the years. Black or white, never grey, it is all or nothing when it comes to this building. 16 floors do cast a shadow on its surroundings and the building imposes itself on the city's landscape.

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Untitled, from Black Forest, Environmental Series, Volume Two, blue sky

Serra da Estrela, Portugal. My oldest daughter – she is 15 – sat beside me and asked what essay was this I was working on, why was I photographing burnt forests. “It is my legacy, the legacy of an entire generation – this is what we are doing to the planet – to your home. When I’m gone you’ll be left with less resources, in a position where little, if anything, can be done to reverse the disaster. Climate change has many faces and this is just one of them. I’m sorry, but it seems my generation is not committed to do something substantial to assure you a brighter, sustainable and greener future. I would change the world for the better, if I could, for you and for all the other children on the planet. This is my small contribution, with the tools I know how to use.”

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Royal Walk, from West London tales

The Golden Jubilee Bridge, London. The Houses of Parliament are behind bars and the lady pedestrian – dressed as an executive – steps out from monarchy onto a smaller, brighter and humbler manhole cover.

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Penitence, from Pilgrims, chapter one: Walking to Fatima

Fátima, Portugal. The priest in the centre of the image seems to magnetically attract everything around him. The people inside the chapel, the statue of Nossa Senhora de Fatima and the believers paying their penitence on their knees around the chapel, in endless circles of pain. Shame seems to dominate some, they prefer to do it wearing a hood and having someone walking 'round and 'round besides them. Bystanders observe the show, believers seem to be on a parade. Jesus Christ seems to approve, the Portuguese Church and the Vatican surely do. Every year, on the 13th of May, Fatima opens for business; the show must go on.

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MEO, from No surrender

Viseu, Portugal. MEO is a Portuguese triple play provider. “É outra vida” meaning “It’s other life” is their slogan. On a Sunday morning in Viseu, one of Portugal’s district capitals, life couldn’t be as it ever was: meagre, no customers, a very old taxi car from the time when telephones were connected to wires – shouldn’t be allowed to run anymore – and two taxi drivers communicating the good old way, eye to eye.

A very old van, 1992 plate, parked in front of the theatre that bears Viriato’s name, the Portuguese General that fought the Romans – the only unfiltered bit of the image – the real thing. Through the glass, like a reality filter – the old taxi, senior drivers, the old wired phone that still rings but no one picks up anymore. Indeed, this is other life, but not the life MEO advertises and promotes.

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David & Goliath, from A home with a view

Ilha da Culatra, Algarve, Portugal. A massive excavator runs to Farol on Culatra's Island, a premonition that demolitions will relentlessly continue. POLIS, the public consortium in charge of demolishing the houses of many inhabitants of the island uses state money to fight in court against a handful of determined residents that won't leave the island, unless dead. Private citizens have little power against the endless resources, cruel tactics POLIS has been using for many years. The lighthouse itself will stand up, not the same will be said of the village built around it for the past four decades. And then, who knows, luxury resorts may germinate around the island...

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Pride, from The last of the tile makers

Keymer Tiles, West Sussex, England. Keymer Tiles was a traditional tile factory, founded in 1588. In 2014 the remaining workers were told that the factory was closing. Production of tiles was not economically viable anymore, the site was demolished and the land sold for 8 Million Pounds, for real estate. For generations, from grandfather to grandson, Keymer Tiles workers engaged with their hard duties with pride, with a sense of dignity my generation never heard of, that we've experienced. They were a family, all of them embraced Keymer as their home. Now, that they are all gone, the brand was sold to a state-of-the-art company, that propagates the word they're manufacturing Keymer Tiles as they were always made by Keymer. Maybe, but I doubt the new tiles carry the sense of pride the old ones did. Customers like the Queen, members of the Rolling Stones and of the Beatles will surely feel the difference. Will they?

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Untitled, from The six strings of a guitar

Guildford, Surrey, England. Brian Cohen is a guitar maker; he builds mainly "Concert Guitars" which are firmly based in the Torres/Hauser 'Spanish model' tradition, lightly built using the traditional Spanish method.

What is relevant about Brian is the fact that he represents a craft – or many crafts if you wish – that are disappearing overnight.

Brian Cohen is the oldest guitar maker in England, a master of his art. I followed his work on a weekly basis for a few months and I realised the knowledge this man has about wood, how it behaves, about tools, some of them he made to match the exact need he had for a specific task, some more than a century old he bought from other masters like him. But Brian's mastery is about people, about life, about the world we live in. Not only his craft will disappear, people like him are rarer and rarer – regrettably on the blink of extinction as well.

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Picking strawberries, from Back to the Future, unpublished

Orca, Fundão, Portugal. Grandmother and grandson picking strawberries. We have been running away from farms and agriculture to cities that are now so packed with human beings that have become inhabitable. Millions and millions of us, lured by the promised wealth cities can give us, end up living in subhuman conditions, being explored by greedy companies and corrupt, scrupleless individuals. Family farming is something we should go back to. Small, environmental friendly farms, providing families with good quality food – huge progresses have been made in farming; hard tasks are now easily done, efficiency is paramount. But beyond farming itself, this is a healthier way of living and probably the only way to balance the economy, the environment and society. Sometimes less is more and this is definitely the case where less is much more.

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Eat as much as you like, from 1841

Brighton, England. What we've become: for £3.50 (happy hour) one can eat as much as one can. In this city alone, hundreds are homeless, many have nothing to eat, scavengers multiply. What if we go in and for £3.50 we may pack as much as we'd like to give to people in need? What about if we could be less greedy, what about if we could share more? Happy hour for people starving... This buffet, hidden in a corner in Brighton tells us what we really are: envious, greedy selfish bastards that try to have as much as we can for as little money as possible. Politicians and economists have been legitimating this behaviour – they call it neo-liberalism or ultra-liberalism and it is on show on every street of the developed world.

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Untitled, from Inferno

Pedrogão Grande, Portugal. A truck crosses road 236 in the same place where many lost their lives in the summer of 2017, a few days earlier. A huge blaze killed those who were trying to escape from the deadliest forest fire Portugal has ever faced. In October that very same year tragedy happened further north, killing dozens more. Portugal is the most affected European country when it comes to forest fires. In 2017 more than 100 people died from May to October. If trees have been cut down as required by law at this road side, probably the vast majority of the victims would have survived.

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Behind the Scenes, from "Fora da Caixa"

This photograph is part of a set of 14 produced to illustrate Viseu Municipality and APPACDM Official Calendar and Agenda for 2018. The main theme, equal opportunities for disabled citizens, led to the production of images where equality is taken one step further. In a 50's and 60's scenario disabled citizens fulfil roles and tasks like any other citizen. This particular scene – a porno movie set – is partially inspired in Manet's Olympia from 1863, which was extremely controversial at the time. Regarding the painting and the crown with the cross, I'll let you take your own conclusions.

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