

Interview...

INTERVIEW WITH JULIA JOHNSON, BRITISH PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILM DIRECTOR

Using the camera in order to address the issues surrounding education and social welfare within disadvantaged communities is what fascinates British documentary photographer and film maker Julia Johnson. Having discovered her dual passion for teaching photography to young people, she furthermore developed collaborative programmes involving diverse communities in the photographic process.

In Easter 2013 she is going to run a project in Europe's largest Roma community, Lunik IX in Slovakia, home to some 15,000 Roma gypsies. In collaboration with Slovakian photographer Artur Conka she is going to teach the children photography and develop a body of work with them, addressing the community's issues with regards to health and education. Julia Johnson's work was presented as part of the 2011 Portrait Salon exhibition. Art Media Agency was delighted to have the opportunity to interview the photographer about her current projects.



Julia Johnson

Would you please introduce yourself in a few words?

I was born in Glasgow in Scotland and then moved to the Middle East when I was a young child. I lived in a variety of different countries, only returning to England as a teenager. I studied Photography from the age of eighteen years onwards in Cambridge and in London and I am now studying for my Masters in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at London College of Communication.

Your passion has always been photography and working with people from different social and cultural backgrounds. How did you come to realise this passion?

I think that when I was a child I moved around the Middle East so much, it was kind of a nomadic style of existence and a bit chaotic but I met such a variety of different types of people in that time. I think that my passion for working with different groups derived from those experiences in my younger years.

During Easter 2013, you will deliver an educational project with Roma Photographer, Artur Conka, at Europe's largest Roma community, Lunik IX, that you have visited recently. Could you tell me more about this community and how you personally felt while visiting it?

I visited the community in March 2012 with a Roma photographer, Artur Conka, whom I am now collaborating with on my new project and who was born in Lunik IX. At that time I was shocked to see such a devastated place in Europe. Water is only switched on for an hour in the mornings and in the evenings, there is no electricity. Lunik IX owns something like € 80,000 to the electricity company, and unfortunately there are corrupt individuals that have been taking control and manipulating the wider community. There are electrical blocks, where people have been breaking into and controlling when the electricity is circulated; it currently does not go on at all. Of course, these people are desperate, so it's possible to see how issues like this arise; they have no support from their country and the rest of society seem to expect the worst of them. The community now owes

the electrical company this vast amount of money. It was really sad to see all this, there are also huge issues with alcohol and drugs, yet at the heart of the community there is a nursery for the children of Lunik IX and also a school. This is where we would like to run the project from, giving them the opportunity to highlight the issues within their own community. The sad part of photojournalism is that photojournalists often fly into an area and then leave. So what we are going to do is to avoid that and instead collaborate with the community to develop an empowered voice and this will hopefully generate financial support and more awareness.

How did you come up with the idea for the project in Lunik IX?

I have been documenting gypsies and traveller communities in the United Kingdom for a couple of years now; in 2011 I documented the eviction of travellers at Dale Farm in Essex, where eighty-six families were evicted from their homes by the local council. This was a huge issue in the UK. The children of Dale Farm had lived there all their life, they were born in the local hospital, attended the local school and then they were expected to uproot and leave. I started to see the issues with education within gypsy and traveller communities and decided to initiate and run a programme here in the UK called "Life through a lens". I approached a charity organisation called 'Ormiston Children and Families Trust', who thankfully saw the potential of such a project and gave me a lot of funding and was of great help for running this project: they contacted a lot of young people from the communities, raised awareness and provided the necessary provisions. So it was thanks to this charity that I could run the course. That has now lead me on to developing an international perspective on the Roma community and on the use of collaborative projects like this. That is why I decided to visit Lunik IX after having read about what happened in the community.

(more next page...)



Lunik IX © Julia Johnson

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(more...) **Would you tell us more about the Lunik IX project and what your objectives are?**

The main objectives of the project are to give young people there an opportunity to develop a skill in photography, to address issues within their own community and to raise awareness and financial support through the exhibition of work. We wish to hold this exhibition in London in order to raise as much awareness as possible with non-governmental organisations, charities and organisations that can provide financial support for the community.

You already told us about the educational project "Life through a lens", that you recently lead in order to help young gypsies and travellers living in Cambridgeshire to challenge the increasing levels of stigmatisation and racial hatred they suffer. What improvements or changes in attitudes did you notice through this project?

As there are issues with education in traveller communities, it was important to give these young people the opportunity to gain a nationally recognised qualification through this project. To me the biggest development was emotional and psychological, a sort of belief in themselves that they could achieve something and dare to hope for a better future. That is something I think that these young people have grown up without, they do not realise their own potential. The project gave them an opportunity to realise this potential and to produce some beautiful photography work that was exhibited in Cambridge.

Do you think your project also changed the population's general attitude towards gypsies and travellers?

We exhibited the work in a venue on Trinity Street in Cambridge which is opposite Kings College, University of Cambridge and we acknowledged that academics have influence on the Houses of Parliament, on the Government Chambers. The fact that these academics were walking past this exhibition — attracting around 2,000 visitors a week including a huge amount of diverse, international communities from around the world — makes me think that, yes, the exhibition has definitely raised awareness.

Do you think that gypsies and travellers living in Great Britain are more stigmatised by the media than in other countries?

No I do not think so. I think that there are much bigger issues going on in the rest of the world. One of my other objectives in visiting Lunik IX was to bring the photographs back to the young travellers here and to show them the actual contrast of what is happening to Roma living in Europe. We also got the Roma photographer Artur Conka to come along and talk to the young people, showing them that they actually have provisions here, for example better welfare and educational opportunities, and that they could count that as something positive.



Washing hands © Julia Johnson

Which other projects do you have for the coming months?

One of my main personal projects is to challenge the TV series "My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding". This is a documentary series produced by Channel 4, documenting weddings that are going on in gypsy communities, often presenting gypsy couples that have over the top weddings. It is entertaining but it is definitely an incorrect way to document this ethnic group who is currently experiencing many serious social problems, stigmatisation and stereotyping. For my personal project I am actually documenting a traveller who is getting married. But unlike "My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding" I want to show a whole narrative of the events running up to the wedding and show the very strong emotional ties between the family. It will be a big contrast to "My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding".

Interview with with Julia Johnson