

The Photographic Depiction of Populism: Christian Lutz in Conversation with Julian Stallabrass

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Populism is a theoretically diverse, elusive and much disputed concept. It has been theorised as essentially right or left leaning, or as a style of doing politics capable of being attached to any ideology, as an empty insult, and as constitutive to the ground of politics itself. While any political power is based in the use of force, the declaration of enemies and the oppression of outsiders, populism in power has taken more or less extreme forms, spanning Podemos and Bolsonaro. In some places, it has been manifested in fleeting loyalties to transient movements and leaders, in others to durable, identity-based movements, founded especially around fundamentalist religion. In recent years, there have been striking examples in which populist ways of making politics have taken overtly violent forms, from the Hindu fundamentalism of the Modi regime, to the murderous operations of government-sanctioned death squads in the Philippines. And it has gone to war: the invasion of Ukraine is justified in part on a vision of a 'traditional' Russian people—religious, authoritarian, virtuous and imperial—set against the decadences of the West. In the destruction of Gaza, even young children are targeted with line-

of-sight weapons on the grounds that there are no innocents among the enemy population, and no measures are unjustified in defending the rights of a singular people to occupy the land. Populism in much of Europe has taken milder forms, despite the serious concerns about the state of democracy in Hungary, Italy and—until recently—Poland. Photographer Christian Lutz embarked on a major project to describe right-wing populism in Europe, and in doing so implicitly posing a fundamental question: can the circumstances in which such populism grew, and its vaporous characteristics be grasped visually? And, given the extent to which populist movements present themselves through visual forms, can that grasping be offer viewers a critical perspective on this form of association and politics, or indeed on politics as a whole?

JS: In your photographic series and book, *Citizens*, you make something like a chart of European right-wing populism, in an almost entirely pure form of visual description.¹ You fix in part on the shoddy and unkempt character of the poorer areas of the EU, which are set alongside the often careless and cack-handed attempts at order and cultural assertion. You show historic buildings that have become dilapidated and neglected, or are jammed up against ugly modern structures. In this environment, your subjects, when they are not drifting alone through the dispiriting landscape in what appears to be desolate ennui, gather together in quasi-military parades, brandish weapons or even dress up as monarchs. At the same time, in this otherwise bleak set of scenes, there are moments of lightness—of apparent human connection, an impromptu and makeshift beauty, and a sense of struggle against circumstances.

When you show these photographs in exhibitions, they are without captions; and while the book includes a very short text which you wrote about the project's origins, otherwise the images are left to speak for themselves. And they do, as they contrast and parallel each other forcefully and affectively, as the different streams of subject matter diverge and converge.

The book was published in 2021; a recent report on voting intentions across Europe shows that the forces that you depicted have only strengthened in the years since. How did you come to this project, and how did you decide to shape it as you did?

CL: The *Citizens* project started in Geneva, where I was born and grew up and where I still live. In 2010 there was a populist party there that started to have quite a bit of success, and in 2013, shocked by the level of their support, I tried to understand the reasons why. I was not scared or anxious about it, although of course I disagreed with what the party was saying, but I was trying to figure out what was happening. I found across the state of Geneva the locations, the different towns in which that party had most support, and I started going to those towns where I did not normally go—to the suburbs, to the workers' areas. I tried to observe, take images, to see what I could—what is expressed by the architecture, on the walls and in their effect on the people around them. How you are affected by your environment—the signs of desperation, of what could make this happen.

¹ See Christian Lutz, *Citizens*, Edition Patrick Frey, Zurich 2021; and <https://www.christianlutz.org/projects>

I believe that all of my projects start that way: I have a reaction, an emotion, a disagreement, and I immediately start to photograph. I don't conceptualise, I don't read, I don't prepare myself, I don't talk to others much about what I am doing before I start. I am very bad about making materials to support the images and their production—files, texts, and so that could be used to help finance a project. Rather, it is an image, one photograph, that helps me to start to answer the issue that has stimulated me. I tell students: first you need images, that is where it starts. The story starts from the first results.

I got some results in Geneva, I think. I followed a political campaign in which a minister from that party was elected, so I depicted the party members, who were at that time very active. Then I thought: unfortunately, this is a more universal issue, and then the Front National suddenly won the local elections in Hayange, in the north of France, so I did the same. I put my bicycle on a train, and I stayed there for two or three weeks. This is really the way I love to work, all by myself, in a room, with a bicycle if possible, immersing myself in the area. The images from there were suddenly stronger, and very importantly I found that there were links between Hayange and Geneva, which was unexpected. And those links, seen in the images themselves, pushed me to continue.



I thought that it could be a European story if I went to the places across the Continent where those parties had a lot of success. And I did go there, although not only to those areas. In the UK, I went to Rochester because that is where the pro-Brexit party, UKIP, led by Nigel Farage, won its first parliamentary seat. In fact, one of the book's main images of manipulation was shot

there: the tank covered in flowers. So I needed to know: is there something visually of use there that can express this political nightmare?

I shot another image in Rochester, showing a dog, wearing a plastic cone collar, tied up outside some expensive houses, and it is about what we call 'la préservation des acquis'—holding onto what the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy consider to be theirs by right. We see the same in Switzerland: there is a type of right-wing populism which attempts to preserve privilege: you don't look further or wider than your own interests.

So that's the way I worked. I did not only work in poor and desperate areas but also in places where people have a much better quality of life, as in central Switzerland, to which I returned, and where people voted for the far-right populist party that we have. They do it to protect their lifestyle, not to improve it, which they do not think possible, but merely to protect what they have. I also went to meetings and social gatherings of Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) in Dresden, and to Auschwitz to face emotionally the worst that can happen, and to bring back images that might connect to our threatening present. The whole trip felt very profound, very lonely, full of silences, and was very difficult emotionally.

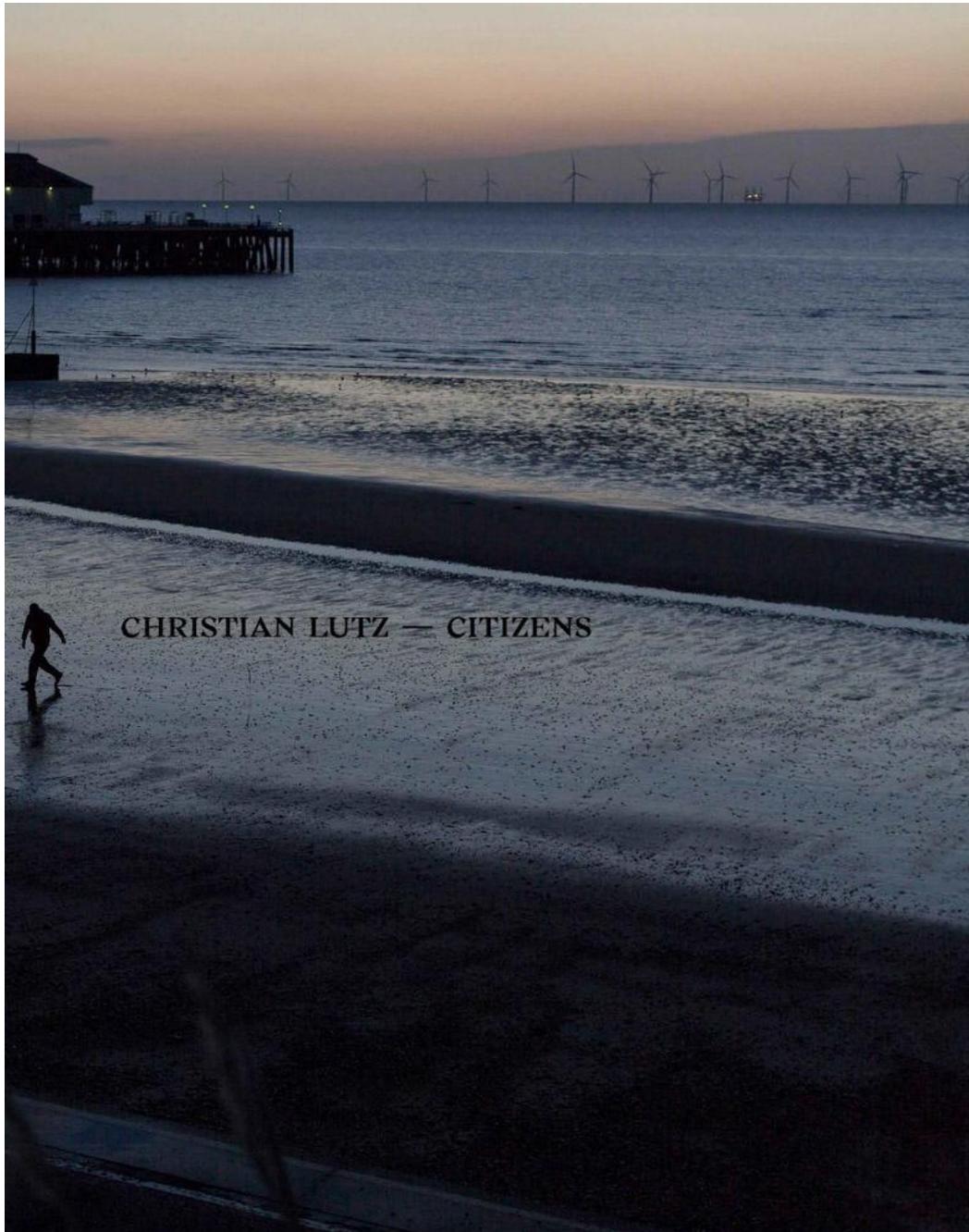
As you know, I don't trust words so much. There is a gap between the feelings I had making *Citizens* and the words I may find, especially in English, to say why I was making those images. Shaping the project as I did was a big challenge. It's the first project in which I let the image dialogue work by itself, without specifying where the images were taken but relying on their inherent energy and their effects, in trying to extract and depict this long, European nightmare. In this way, it is less documentary than some of my other work. Of course, people often say that they need to know more; but I think that they also need to feel. That long trip finally ends up with one composite image, so that the book can be condensed into one derangement, one disturbance.

Not only was the process of making the images very solitary, but I also then took a two-year break between the end of that stage and starting on the edit. During the Covid period, I edited and returned to the emotions of taking those images, which was the only way to order them properly.

JS: The book, as you say, is full of deep and bleak emotions, particularly of isolation, alienation and desolation, with an undercurrent of the brutality that may be the consequence of feeling trapped in a continually worsening situation. The book has its analytic as well as affective dimension which we will return to. But for now, I am reminded of the excellent account of left populist movements by Arthur Borriello and Anto Jäger, which highlights the underlying conditions in which populism as a whole thrives.² They stress the steep decline or disappearance of all the social institutions that once sustained durable political blocs—for instance, the socialist nexus of trade unions, co-ops, health and pension funds, libraries, choirs and all kinds of clubs that meant that much of working-class life could be spent in environments that built solidarity.

² Arthur Borriello/ Anto Jäger, *The Populist Moment: The Left After the Great Recession*, Verso, London 2023.

Lacking all this, they argue, isolated individuals flock towards pop-up political movements and charismatic leaders.



You frequently photograph people in isolation—as in the book cover image of the person stalking a bleak-looking beach in the twilight, who is entirely alone, or the ‘king’ standing on a street corner, his sceptre resting on a prosaic utilities’ cabinet, while police gather in the background, who is a truly pathetic figure. Even when people are seen in groups, they often do not interact but exist in their own—often apparently desolate—monads. Or if they do interact, they don’t seem to be too happy about it. Even the gatherings of the Right, or the sorry parade

of military re-enactors seem sparse and ill-at-ease. They remind me of the similar thinning of wildlife, the ragged flights of starlings, for instance, where once many thousands would fill the sky. It is as if the environment and civil society have been similarly poisoned.

How intentional was all of this? Was your own isolated process of making the work projected onto your subjects? Or did you go looking for such alienation, thinking it as a foundation of right-wing populism from the start? Or did you unearth it as a theme through the making of photographs?



CL: I don't think that my solitary way of working has to do with the way that I pictured individuals, but as I may have mentioned before, I focused on the citizens to see if there was some psychological expression on their faces that would register their fear, anger, suffering and desperation—all those emotions that are easily manipulated by the leaders of populist groups.

Actually, there is common ground with my previous projects, especially *In Jesus' Name*, about fundamentalist evangelical churches and movements.³ It is pretty much the same: if people are all by themselves, feeling lost, they are easy to grab. So there was this intention during the shooting of focusing on faces, and then during the edit it was important to select the right ones and to set up a dialogue between groups and individuals. There is one image from the very beginning that I shot in Geneva, during the election of that minister I mentioned before, and it was one of the

³ Christian Lutz, *In Jesus' Name*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich 2012.

first images that pushed me to continue with the project: in a party, there is one man leaning on a table with his arms crossed in a very expressive and revealing gesture.

JS: It's a very interesting image in which the man you talk about it is placed more or less at the centre of a complex arrangement of figures, and is picked out partly by differential focus, and partly because the arm of the woman to the right both draws the eye to his face, but also partially obscures it with a wine glass. While otherwise the party seems as though it might be quite convivial, you draw our attention to a moment of alienation in which the man appears to stare into a plastic beaker of wine, made more expressive by the presence of the wine glass which is not, after all, being offered to him.

Populism is a dangerous subject, of course, as Hilary Clinton found to her cost with her remarks about the Trump-supporting 'deplorables'. The lines between analysis, critique, condescension and even the repulsion that those on either side of the populist divide sometimes view each other can be hard to maintain. Your work in *Citizens*, it seems to me, is both critical of the right-wing populist movements and largely sympathetic to those who are drawn to them. How did you achieve this photographically?

And how did you communicate with your subjects on the *Citizens* project, and what was the range of their reactions to what you were doing?



From *Protokoll*, 2007

CL: Although some of my other work is about the manipulation of people by authoritarian powers, *Citizens* is totally different from my other projects in its approach to the subjects. Before, I worked in a limited sphere, moving inside that sphere, interacting with limited communities—for instance politicians in *Protokoll*, businessmen in *Tropical Gift*, or they were limited by particular locales, for instance the spaces of Las Vegas or Macau.⁴ *Citizens* was the first time that I was moving freely, beyond limits, following my own feelings, and guided by my feelings about photographic expression. And I worked in a solitary way, as I have said, but also without interacting. In Las Vegas or Macau, I had also worked silently and without interaction. There were two reasons for this: to hold myself back, both to protect myself and so that I can remain completely focused on what is going on around me visually. Talking to people is a distraction from that focus. Out of that visual bubble I produce my own fiction or something that can seem like one—allowing me to have a better dramatological relation to the subject, and sometimes touching upon the surreal.

Of course, with *Citizens*, sometimes I was asked questions, especially during meetings or when I was working with the party-political events. I was very clear with those questioners, as always: I would say, I see your growing success, and I want to focus on how you are organised to figure out how you are achieving that success, and what are your exact ideas. Usually, people are open to that.

I saw a documentary yesterday by Frederick Wiseman about French gastronomy, and I saw how he is always able to go where he wants, and to picture people in that social scene.⁵ That movie, *Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros*, shows how through a good documentary approach, people can become legitimate public interests, and I always defend that process. Without invading privacy, the public has an interest in seeing what should be public, and in being informed about the political, social and economic sphere, and how it is changing.

Sometimes I had to talk, sometimes I had to open some doors. In Italy there was a get-together, and I had to tell them: I am Swiss, I have heard about you guys, I want to know more, tell me more. This usually works, as it did with the evangelical church and the oil and gas business gangsters in Nigeria. People love to talk about what they are doing, although sometimes they lay down limits, as they did with *In Jesus' Name* so that there were certain events that I could not photograph. In *Citizens*, I did mainly street photography, and there I stick to the straight photography ethos of not interacting.

JS: If we look at the opening five images of the book, which form a finely controlled and composed sequence, we see first a junction at dawn in which cheaply constructed low buildings line a patched-up road and a café sign reads 'Sweet Tina's', while a car approaches in the distance; then a man in a crumpled suit, seen from above, walking with head bowed along a wooded road that stretches far away into the background; then another dimly lit street scene in which an old Mercedes is parked by a nondescript collection of walls and buildings which obstruct a view of

⁴ Christian Lutz, *Protokoll*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich 2007; *Tropical Gift*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich 2010; *Insert Coins*, Edition Patrick Frey, Zurich 2016; *Pearl River*, Edition Patrick Frey, Zurich 2019.

⁵ *Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros*, directed by Frederick Wiseman, 2023.

wooded hills; then a beautifully composed group of people in which kids stand or sit or kick a ball while a man with a fierce-looking dog draws on a cigarette, as he sits by a line of metal garages; and finally a closer view of a man with weathered features and desolate expression, seen from the side, who has a scab on his forehead. I understand that, having withheld captions and contextual information in the book, you may be reluctant to give it here, but what can you tell us about these photographs and their sequencing?



CL: This sequence has something to do with the fiction that I have touched upon, and it may seem like a movie—quite a lot of people say that my photography is cinematographical. Perhaps it is. The first image is like a classic movie opening shot, as we start with a long shot and a car passing by. But it definitely has to do with the feeling, the sensation that I was looking for. I work for many hours at a time. This first image is shot in Clacton-on-Sea, and after hours of walking in the night, you enter into another way of sensing things, physically and mentally. And then this image happens, and in the edited sequence, it could be an introduction to a certain fiction, or a world that I do not want to be real. So it's like theatre: you set the stage, the scenery, and then come the protagonists who also have to do with something unreal. My characters are out of reality but in the way I stage them, sometimes it seems that they have stepped out of a story. This is a tricky area—people may criticize this move to use reality for your own fictions, your own dramaturgy. The injured character among the first images shows something quite brutal and hard to see but it also shows the viewer that the following story will not be poetic or romantic. The story is hard, the world we are in is hard to stand, and the book ends very badly: the penultimate image shows a corpse. It's a dramaturgical question, fiction, sensation... Those first

images are very aesthetic. In one of my exhibitions, in Switzerland some years ago, we enlarged the first Clacton image to wallpaper size where it served as a welcome image to induct and soothe the viewer into a dark, brutal and unbearable world.

JS: Long ago, Henri Cartier-Bresson said that he liked photographing in England because it was like going to the theatre—everyone being dressed up to signal their social role. The drama he usually made there, unlike yours, was a wry sort of social comedy.

Perhaps it is easier to think about the issue of making fiction out of photographic renderings of fragments of the real—a thorny one, as you say—by looking in more detail at the components of your dramaturgical or cinematic story.

There are landscapes, urban and rural, often without a definite point of visual concentration, sometimes dimly or even ominously lit, often at the cusp of day and night. We may perhaps think of this twilight as metaphorical. Sometimes, a figure or two distantly appear, as in the scene of a woman in a wedding dress and a man casually dressed in a vest, walking down a banal urban street, littered with parked vehicles.



There are also many detailed views of facades or fragments of buildings, often with elements that seem ill-fitted together. Decorative pillars lean over comically, for instance, or an old dovecot which seems to bear scorch marks, has been hemmed in with the tarmac of a carpark on which

the lines of its bays have been officiously and awkwardly painted. Some of these scenes make definite comments: for instance, the rooftop area where a large and roughly hewn concrete block partially obstructs a metal door on which someone has penned a swastika. Almost all seem to demonstrate neglect and a clash of time frames, and views onto how the social environment is now treated, as if at some point the care due to it had become deeply fractured.



Then there are the emblematic figures in which the presence of a troubled individual before the lens at a certain moment is met with marked metaphorical resonances. For instance, a man in paramilitary garb tightly grips a padlock in his fist. Or near the centre of the book, standing on a beach at dusk, a lean, shirtless man leans far back, grimacing, with his arms raised in apparent despair. Or there is the Geneva Citizens' Movement activist whose wide, intense gaze contrasts with his comically matching pinstripe suit and hat.

There are also many scenes of social interaction—many, as I have said, of apparent disconnection, but others of political rallies and social events, and a few, mostly shot in bars, showing apparently warm and close interactions. There are also many sub-themes: paramilitaries and weapons, religious observance, the homeless, migrants and the enclaves of the rich.

Are these the main components, as you see them, and is there a play of metaphor and realistic description? And in building your fiction, did you have particular models in mind—not just from other photobooks, in which there is a long tradition of making such stories, but also in drama

and cinema. I am sometimes reminded, in the combination of eerie colour, polluted and degraded landscapes, and mental derangement of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*.

CL: I remember that I needed to see paintings, landscapes, to see romantic British painters such as Constable and Turner. I wasn't looking for inspiration exactly, but I was trying to draw from their atmosphere. I didn't take anything from any particular film-maker.

JS: That's fascinating—why did you turn to British romantic painting? And perhaps we can broaden out to ask about your formation as a photographer? How did you start and whose work did you look to as you began to develop your own voice?

CL: I was looking at landscape painting, especially that made by romantic painters, and I was drawn to their qualities of roughness and darkness. Works that are dark but not completely hopeless, since there are spots of illumination, offering glimpses of a more ideal view of the land. There is a tension between their roughness (in French, their *agitation*) and the quality of their light. It's difficult for me to find words for the feelings that those paintings give me. Painting—and also music—has more influence on me than photography, especially the work of the contemporary Belgian painter Michaël Borremans.

I am from the humanist school of photography. When I studied thirty years ago, humanist documentary was still much taught. Also in the UK you have a big tradition of documentary film and photography. Having made some images, I thought, wow, this could be a Chris Killip image, for instance, like the one taken in northern France that you mentioned, of the guys hanging about in front of a garage. I was very much into the work made about British society at the time that Killip was at work. Photographic street views are also important to me—Stephen Shore had a big influence on what I am doing today, as did Lewis Baltz, the radical manner of his framing situations—the way streets, roads, buildings, stairs and doors are articulated in his frames.

JS: That is very illuminating, both about the use of light in your landscapes and townscapes, and in relation to Borremans' work, about the disposition and often isolation of the figure in a space, and a general sense of strangeness and alienation. And the shirtless man on the beach really evokes Killip, forty years on, as the targeted, regional imposition of poverty and precarity—under Thatcher in the destruction of old industrial areas—has spread and intensified.

When I asked you to show in an exhibition about populism that I curated, *The Spectre of the People*, I initially wanted you to show *Protokoll*, your work about the functioning and rituals of what

seemed to be a stable political system, alongside *Citizens*.⁶ From all that you have said here about how your way of working has changed, I can better understand your reluctance.

But it is remarkable that you have moved—admittedly over fifteen years or so, with many different subjects taken on in-between—from the sometimes bland, sometimes absurdist scenes of polite political life in Switzerland to a dark expression of right-wing populism in Europe as a whole. How do you see that contrast, and have you ever been tempted you to work on what might be seen as a missing part of the puzzle, the rise and partial fall of left-wing populism in Europe, from the movement of the squares to the qualified and temporary successes of, say, Syriza and Podemos?



From *Protokoll*, 2007

CL: There is a big gap between *Protokoll* and *Citizens* and that's why I could not set a dialogue between the two series for the exhibition. Not only because fifteen or twenty years separates

⁶ *The Spectre of the People: Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale 2023*, Macedonia University Press/ MOMus—Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki 2023. It was the main exhibition of the Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale, shown at MOMus-Thessaloniki Museum of Photography and the Contemporary Art Centre of Thessaloniki, October 2023-February 2024.

them but also because in *Protokoll* there is lots of irony, and humour. I was focused on the theatrical way that political power stages itself. There is not much involvement from the photographer I was back then, and I guess that it's the opposite in *Citizens*: there is almost no humour in that book, and that's a first for me. This was my reaction to the continually worsening state of the world over the last twenty years: to find an artistic answer to the state of those towns in relation to democracy and ecology. *Tropical Gift*, about the oil and gas industry in Nigeria, marked a big switch in my work. That was the first book and story in which I was really politically involved, which wasn't what I had planned when I started. I simply found that I had to react to what the world was showing me. People started to say that I was an 'involved' or 'concerned' political photographer. Things have not got any better since 2010, so I follow what I need to do.

On the difference between right and left political populism, on the left side it's part of what I observed, the hope and then the desperation and hope again. The manipulation of people's way of thinking, which as I have said is what links *In Jesus' Name* and *Citizens*, has reached amazing levels, as we see in what is happening in Argentina with the election of Javier Milei, and the US with the comeback of Trump. It's not my role to find political solutions, but to try to find the proper notes or sounds for the images that I produce, to find some light in the darkening scene, some poetry—a sensitive word, but poetry can change the state of the world.