



## La vie grouille

Fabio Valerio Tibollo, April 2024

As he navigates through the recurrent lockdowns of the pandemic, stranded between hitchhiking and muggings, job hunting and separations, Fabio Valerio Tibollo rediscovers photography as a powerful coping mechanism. Recording everything that happened around him for one year straight, from attending momentous events to finding curiosity in shots of simple living, this photo-essay is a craving for life in the multiple ways it unpredictably unfolds.

*Keywords: Covid-19, New York, Paris, Rome.*

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La Vie Grouille (*March 2020-March 2021*)

Paris, December 7, 2023

On March 17, 2020, on the first day of lockdown in France, I was about to put my skin in the game. I had been in Paris for three months attending a Double Master's 2<sup>nd</sup> Level University Degree in cultural management at ESCP Business School, the first *école de commerce* in the world. I would spend my time with my fellow *bourgeois* students and particularly with Anna Le Grix de la Salle, who introduced me to suburban romance and *grasses matinées*.

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It was all about being effective and efficient. My colleagues were sending applications all around Paris to get the highest possible paid internship in the production department of a national theatre; in an architectural consultancy; in an embassy or international NGO; in the philanthropist circle of the Louvre; in a major record label or a private collection of contemporary art.

That day, on March 17, I hadn't been taking photographs for more than a year. I used to say to my new close French young friends that I didn't want to grow up to be a starving artist. It's still true. Recently, in a Direct Message, Greek painter Miltos Manetas said to me that artists sell the privilege of not having to work. Work should be nothing more than a hobby for them.

But when many people in France who were faced with the sole presence of themselves were feeling trapped by that self-encounter, I happily found myself before my former camera, a Canon 5D Mark III with an EF 50mm f/1.2 L USM lens mounted. While working on this project, some of whose results you can see here, this camera was accidentally crushed under the tires of a semi-truck with double trailers.

It happened on July 8, 2020, at 5 am in South East France, near Grenoble, at the entrance to the motorway towards Italy. I was trying to hitchhike to Turin because neither flights, coaches, car-sharing nor trains were available from Paris. Later that day, the official incorporation of Art Workers Italia (AWI) was to take place. I wanted to witness what I imagined to be a historical Italian gathering for something close to becoming a union for arts professionals. I had to be there to take photographs but it was an impossible trip and my luggage ended up slashed as if it had been in a fight with a panther.

But let's return to that day on March 17, 2020, when I used to live in the socially varied 18th arrondissement of Paris and I started "La Vie Grouille". All citizens at midday were informed of a strict nationwide lockdown. And, as tragic as a virus SARS-CoV-2 revealed itself to be, for me this became the most productive period of my early thirties.

I had the chance to put myself in so many situations while walking miles up and down to explore my new neighbourhood, called by some as "red Africa" – the culturally diverse Château Rouge – to the aristocratic Montmartre up the hill. People in the *village* let me do unbelievable stuff. Carrying out this project was about survival at my heart.

The following are some of what I describe as *jamais-vu* moments, ideas to be depicted. Fragments of an ordinary yet unprecedented daily life, as it unfolded through the grip of the world confinement.

I started by exploring the north of Paris by bike, in larger and larger circles. Each time I witnessed a *jamais-vue* scene, I introduced my idea to the person in front of me, asked and replied to questions and, as ten minutes flew by, I proposed to re-enact the moment, without looking at me behind the camera. Every shot therefore has a performative aspect, which was easy to get in return by most of the amused strangers I met.

The vertical framing facilitated direct device viewing and consumption of my 50mm inner voice. I told one story per image, every day for an ever longer amount of time, and everything I looked at mirrored my feelings and thoughts directly.

From March 2020 to March 2021, here are a few of the stories I documented:



1. Found these potatoes under a kitchen cabinet in the apartment I moved into after the first lockdown. Nobody had been there for months, and the potatoes were germinating. As I was arranging them on the table from the newer to the older ones, a metaphor for a virus came to mind.



*2. One day, my roommate Tomás found a caterpillar in the broccoli and decided to adopt it. When it turned into a chrysalis, Tomás, an architecture student, built a triangular structure to host the metamorphosis. One morning, Tomás woke me up: “Bertille became a butterfly.” I then took the picture at the window, where Tomás had left Bertille, waiting for her to fly away.*



*4. She was reading Tolstoy at the street-level reception of a dental office. She was wearing her usual medical uniform, including a surgical mask, a face shield, and a protective gown. Her job was to welcome customers and to invite them to use the hand sanitiser.*



10. *During the lockdowns, many people began to exercise. In the courtyard, my young neighbour was trying to do some push-ups in a comically uncoordinated way.*



28. It was the day of the demonstration against police violence in memory of Adama Traoré, a young black man who died, like George Floyd, while in police custody. In the image, I saw irony in the combination between the girl on the left's accusatory banner and the word "thug" on the T-shirt worn by the boy on the right. The term means "violent criminal" in English.

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31. *We were out at night in Montmartre to celebrate Anna's birthday, my girlfriend at the time, who is the blonde one on the left in the image. Together with Camille and her husband Raduan, we broke the curfew after dinner and we ended up drinking on the top of the hill*



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33. Jonas from @monchatetmoi performing by lip-synching “Holiday” while disguised as Madonna in her iconic conical bra and bodysuit. Their weekly drag shows were dedicated to pop divas like Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Katy Perry, and Whitney Houston. During lockdown, they contributed to the strengthening of the artistic community in the Village Cyrano-de-Bergerac, in the 18th arrondissement of Paris.

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63. *His apartment in Aubervilliers looked like a crack house. In the bathroom, all the sanitary products were covered in brown sludge while dirty and foul-smelling dishes piled up in the kitchen and the desk was covered with opened cans of tuna and empty bottles. The homeowner, a French-Italian director, was moving to Italy. A mutual friend told me he had split up with his girlfriend, a cleaning lady.*



65. It was the day of the breaking of the fast at the end of the Ramadan. In 2020, Muslim worshippers weren't able to join together in prayer because the mosques were closed. That day, the queue was so long to get into the Jamé Bangladesh Mosque in Aubervilliers, near Paris, that people who were in line at 9 am probably wouldn't have managed to get in until noon.



*82. Ibrahim was feeding a canary with the blue lid of a pen. A Berber-speaking Algerian, he was a basketball player in his home country, before he left due to disagreement with the government. He has been breeding canaries at his suburban home in Paris ever since.*



91. A pharmacy technician was testing people for Covid-19 in the San Lorenzo neighbourhood in Rome. The testing took place in a tent on the side of the road, one of the many structures that had been installed in the streets for this purpose.



96. A detail from a black and yellow subway ad for the "Safe Travels and Operation Respect" campaign by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, in New York. The campaign was initiated to educate riders on the importance of mask-wearing and other safe riding practices.

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After the collapse of my enthusiasm-led trip to Turin which I mentioned earlier, other calamities occurred. Anna, my ray of sunshine, would later find that her roller-coaster-like changes of mood caused by our relationship were too much to bear.

What is more, an internship which I was undertaking dismissed me in September after only ten days. Not being a student and without a job, even opening a bank account or finding a place to rent in Paris became extremely complicated. I went from one sublet to another.

On top of that, on August 28, 2020, I got attacked at night by a shoe-less man in the *chic* 17th arrondissement. This guy was behind me as I was sitting on a bench. He approached me in silence, covered my face with his hands and put his fingers inside my nostrils and mouth. My new Californian backpack was gone and so were my bank cards, driving license, social security card, Samsung phone with two SIMs, keys, and a film camera, a Minolta X-700 borrowed from Anna's father.

Despite that, the project kept going, naturally expanded over the months from Paris to two other cities. One was Rome, where I am originally from. The *sampietrini* aligning the bricks; the grumpy bar owners; as well as my partially lost accent made the task tricky. And then there was New York, where, during my last semi-annual-lottery-won-Green-Card-back-and-forth, I met some of the animals who come out at night.

But this project was school to me and film photography was the subject that enabled my recovery. The urge to photograph included people and animals, plants and objects, places and events. I would take thousands of pictures and reject most of them before trying film.

Now I own my last camera, a Fujifilm X-Pro3 that resembles a film one, with a Fujinon XF 50mm f/1.0 R WR. So much light enters the lens. I will use this lens to shoot my first feature film between Brittany, France and New York. The high-pitch of the sun in Brittany is breathless and the landscape is a character on its own. *La vie continue de grouiller.*

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## About the author

Fabio Valerio Tibollo (Rome, 1989) lives and works between Rome, Paris, and New York. He graduated in 2017 from Università Iuav di Venezia (IT), concluding his studies in time-based art at UNSW in Sydney (AU). In 2021, he attended a Specialized Master in management of cultural heritage and activities at ESCP Business School in Paris (FR). Over the years, he has taken part in several group shows such as "Elvis Has Left the Building" at Istituzione Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in Venice (2014), "Prologue" at Three Foot Square in Sydney (2015), "Log In" at Darb 1718 Contemporary Art and Culture Centre in Cairo (2016), and "Political Kitchen" at the Society of the Friends of the Virus in New York (2021). Fabio Valerio Tibollo's artistic practice is focused on different uses of photography, but he also experimented with video, drawing, and installation. His works allow us to peek at someone else's daily moments. Usually captured in the streets of the big cities he lives in, those subjects are depicted in moments of simple activities revealing all their humanity.