

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

## Envisioning the English Outdoors:

### Stephen Daniels, Ruth Kitchin and Simon Roberts in Conversation

In response to the exhibition *We English* which was on show at the National Media Museum (UK) in 2010, the museum's *Archive* magazine conducted an 'In Conversation' between Simon, Ruth Kitchin (Curator of Photographs, National Media Museum) and Stephen Daniels (Professor of Cultural Geography, University of Nottingham).

Simon Roberts (SR):

I think it's important that my photographs are given some context within which to see and read them. What we have selected are photographs from the National Media Museum's Collection which follow a tradition of photographic representations of the English landscape, through the gaze of leisure activities.

Ruth Kitchin (RK):

Your work is part of a rich British tradition of landscape photography and also of British photographers looking at their homeland and searching for an idea of national identity. Both of those things are represented in this selection from the National Media Museum Collection.

Stephen Daniels (SD):

I agree. It's a tradition that is rich in what you might call documentary photography. There are some pictures from the archive that you might not classify as landscapes at all. They are about events and there may not actually be that much topographical landscape in them at all. The landscape is a sort of backdrop to what's going on, they bring different ideas and traditions into the landscape photograph. We use landscape as a kind of frame for these. It's a way of ordering pictures, or ordering items from the archive which makes us think about them in a particular way. I find that interesting.

SR:

I suppose I define myself as a documentary photographer rather than as a landscape photographer. Most people, when they think of landscape photography, imagine beautiful empty spaces, un-peopled, I think there is only one picture in my series which doesn't have a person in it [Ingoldmells, Lincolnshire, 28<sup>th</sup> December, 2007], and even here there is a direct reference to humans; in every other photograph there is a human individual. In most of the pictures it's about a collection of people, or constellations of groups in the landscape, I think this is reflected in the photographs from the archive. Although not all are from a documentary tradition, all of them relate to people in landscape. I think that is quite an important distinction to make.

SD:

I agree. Sometimes when you look at some of Simon's pictures that are seemingly just landscapes, if you look at them closely they turn out to have quite a clear documentary

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

incident. For example, the photograph of Camel Estuary [Padstow, Cornwall, 27th September 2007] fits into notions of the coastal sublime, of shore, sky and sea. There is fantastic detail of natural incidents occurring. There are two parties on the beach, one going one way, and one going another. They each have a couple of dogs who are straining towards each other while the people are, in a very English way, trying to ignore each other. There is an Englishness in that social encounter. Some of the pictures are full of people, like Ladies' Day, Aintree Racecourse [Merseyside, 4th April 2008]. You can just smell the sweat and the spilled drink. Yet others are the complete opposite. But that sense of documentary remains absolutely central. There is always more than meets the eye. You can wander around in these pictures.

SR:

I like to think of an archive as an organic structure in the way we use it to frame our interpretation of the work. However, the voice of an archive is really dependent upon who is interpreting it. Any number of people could go into the archive and re-imagine or present a completely different view. From your point of view Ruth, being somebody that knows the archive well, having leisure as your starting point for exploring the contents, was anything interesting revealed to you that hadn't been before?

RK:

There is a great sense of responsibility as a human guide to the archive! My knowledge is based on my own personal experience of working with the collection and in that way it is inevitably subjective. Also, the selection that Simon and I made has very much been shaped by the nature and history of the archive, which has grown quite rapidly by gathering together a number of large collections, all very different from each other. The Kodak Museum Collection is particularly strong in snapshot photography, whereas the Royal Photographic Society Collection contains more examples from the pictorial tradition. As press images, photographs from The Daily Herald newspaper archive also brought something quite different. We started off by looking at other photographers who had portrayed ideas of Englishness - there are obvious connections with photographers like Tony Ray-Jones who had also done this sort of 'road trip' searching for Englishness through leisure activities. But it was also really interesting to find images of people at play in the work of photographers not normally associated with that sort of subject matter, such as Roger Fenton, or Fay Godwin, or a very political documentary photographer like Chris Killip - it was a very different way of thinking about them.

SD:

I am fascinated by that because all these photographs must, in a sense, have been in different mental compartments for you. The point about mass leisure is that when photographers were first recording it, it was seen as a real problem. It was seen by some as an invasion of the countryside, a transgression. I am not sure how these pictures would have been viewed in their time.

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

RK:

Mass leisure wasn't much recorded by photographers for decades. It wasn't seen as a suitable subject for serious photography, or something that people would want pictures of. A photographer like P. H. Emerson who recorded traditional ways of life in the Norfolk Broads was doing so, partly as a reaction against the huge influx of holiday crowds there. That's why Paul Martin's work is a very unusual part of the selection. Partly because he was a working man, he was a wood engraver, but also because he photographed the people he was surrounded by, working and having fun. It's very unusual to see photographs of Victorian working class people at play, being natural and relaxed. Often, the only photographs of working class people are tintype portraits taken by beach photographers as souvenirs of their day out.

SD:

It's hard not to be charmed by all of these, similar to the way in which you might be charmed by old technology such as steam trains. However, some of these photographs at the time they were taken might have seemed quite shocking. Is that true?

RK:

Well certainly Martin Parr's series New Brighton was seen as shocking when it was first shown; both in what it captured and because it was seen by some people as middle class voyeurism and condescension.

SD:

But it registered that sense of disgust didn't it. A lot of that runs through the notion of ordinary people having access to leisure and enjoying themselves and leaving a mess.

SR:

But that's a class interpretation. Presumably, there would have been the same reaction, for example, to the Boulter's Lock [1888, Paul Martin] photograph.

SD:

This was a favourite subject of Victorian paintings as well as photographs, Boulter's Lock was seen as a kind of class theatre, this Thameside site as a microcosm of London. So a bit like your subject in Derby Day [Epsom Downs Racecourse, Surrey, 7th June 2008], an echo of older pictures of the way that all the classes came together and nobody could securely guard their space, a classic vision of the aristocracy and the working class meeting, coming together and enjoying themselves.

SR:

I would be interested to know about the Roger Fenton photographs, Ruth. Would they have been deliberately trying to portray a kind of picturesque vision of England?

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

RK:

Yes. He was producing very beautiful, large format photographs of traditionally picturesque landscapes and architecture that showed a stately, historic England. There was very little intrusion from modern life in them.

SD:

Would that be seen as art photography rather than documentary?

RK:

Yes it was definitely seen as art photography, even though it's a form of record. I think Fenton was trying to show photography was an art.

SD:

This juxtaposition made me reflect again on Fenton. I have never really looked at the figures in Fenton's photographs.

RK:

A surprising number do have figures in them. They are carefully positioned, compositionally, and provide a sense of scale.

SD:

I think this is an interesting case of where the archive selection is a map or a framework. This makes us see pictures together that we never would have dreamed of being juxtaposed. I think Fenton's figures would make an interesting comparison to Simon's work.

SR:

There is a real intimacy, even though the people are so small in the scene, in terms of their relationship with the space.

SD:

That's a really interesting point, I would apply the same thing to your work. In some way there is a sense of detachment, but in another these are real intimate glimpses because you are catching people off guard, as if they can't see you. Thinking about the stepping stones in the Bolton Abbey [Skipton, North Yorkshire, 27th July 2008] photograph, there is a sense in which this is a delicate ballet. We all remember jumping across stepping stones, there is a kind of instant click memory to it. Paradoxically, these are very public images, but they are also full of very intimate private moments. In fact, often they are a collection of intimate moments.

SR:

I suppose what I was trying to capture was the intimacy between what people choose to do and the places they choose to do it in. The most graphic example is probably the couple in the photograph Fountains Fell [Yorkshire Dales, 3rd August 2008]. They have gone to the same place continuously for over fifty years to enjoy this landscape, but it's not just about

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

enjoying this landscape, it's about the relationship between them and the geographical space.

SD:

Yes, it's about them as a couple.

SR:

One of the challenges for me, when considering the project, is the fact that everybody is a photographer these days. Everyone has got a camera on their mobile phone and people are a lot more aware of their own image than ever before. By using a cumbersome 5 X 4" plate camera, which is a very old fashioned way of photographing, there was an intimacy that was gained. Perhaps people didn't feel threatened by my presence, particularly as I was making an overt statement that I was there to photograph the scene and therefore, perhaps them.

SD:

I think you're more like a painter with an easel, with your large plate camera. You appear more akin to a much more traditional, long term, carefully composed form of representation. There is a sense in which, yes, it is all photography, but there is a world of difference between your practice and that of a snapshot or flashing the camera of a mobile phone. So, yes, they are both photography, but in a sense they are a world apart. You are almost in a different time zone when you are there with your camera.

RK:

And, of course, the technique has resonance with Victorian photography.

SR:

Stephen, you were talking about the archive reflecting and contextualising my work, and my work, in turn, being informed by the archive. What do you mean by that?

SD:

To me, the archive provides a kind of lens on this material. You notice things that you wouldn't usually and you see the pictures together in a way that I don't think they ever would have been seen at the time. So it's a form of historical understanding. It's a dialogue between past and present. I also see a lot of this reciprocated in your own work. It's a kind of conversation that's going on. The pictures speak to each other. It's a sense in which the pictures take on a meaning they could not possibly have had for people at the time, so this has to be for us now. That's what it meant for me. I am interested to hear what it meant for you, Ruth?

RK:

Any collection like this is an artificial gathering and juxtaposition of pictures, plucked from their original context. But, actually, exploring the archive by subject or theme is a common approach to researching the collection. It's something I often do with researchers who are looking at how a particular subject has been represented across time. I have worked with

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

the archive for eight years so it's quite exciting when I get a chance to spend time exploring it from a more personal point of view, drawing very disparate groups of material together.

SD:

When I was working on the selection I was amazed at how some of the works almost jumped out at you. For example, the Fay Godwin photograph Al Halal Supermarket, Asia Day [1987] leapt out at me. All discussions of Englishness are shadowed by certain kinds of political issues about cultural make up. For example, who has access to national heritage sites, or whether ethnic minorities are represented enough in national parks. Yet here are some Asian kids in Manningham, Bradford, playing football. It just seemed to be part of the same tradition that everyone has. There was something about this. They were kicking a football about and so there was a sense of belonging, I found this continuity very heartening. But I was also troubled because a lot of the concern about so called 'home grown terrorism' was often precisely about kids who have grown up in a very English environment in Leeds, and then seemed to turn against the values which you might consider to be traditionally English. Looking at the photograph, I thought, here is an image that I probably wouldn't have noticed, but in juxtaposition with these, it made me think about Englishness as a kind of predicament. Not as a badge of identity but as something which will always be troubling. I think that it probably should be too. I don't think I would want to live in a nation which had an untroubled sense of itself.

SR:

I think that is one of the reasons I wanted people to be able to invite me to photograph things or to suggest ideas. It was a way of engaging with other people in my representation of a place, of England. This was a secondary element where people could talk about their relationship to England.

When I invited people to post ideas on the website, rather than just suggesting things that they were doing now people often suggested things that they used to do as children. There is a sense of harking back, it is an experience of by-gone-years. With these two bodies of work together in the exhibition there is a sense of collective nostalgia.

SD:

Some of your pictures will age quickly, for example with the inclusion of a car. However, others won't. Looking at your Bolton Abbey photograph, unless you look closely, there is nothing really in that picture that identifies when it was taken.

RK:

In many ways, the beach scenes look no different to photographs taken in 1900.

SR:

I would be interested to know, Ruth, which photograph you are particularly delighted to see included in the exhibition?

# SIMON ROBERTS

---

RK:

If I had to name one photographer it might be Paul Martin, because his work is so different from what you might think of as Victorian photography. He was an early street or documentary photographer. His photographs are so spontaneous and vibrant. You see people's faces, their emotions and their interplay, and wonder what they're thinking, so you feel a human connection with them, going back over 100 years. I also see similarities with Simon's pictures, looking at the interaction between people even though they are entirely different types of photograph.

SR:

They are also full of details that reveal more the longer you look at them. Stephen, do you think one could frame this exhibition in the context of contemporary cultural geographic thought?

SD:

Yes you could. The jargon term 'liminal spaces' refers to spaces on the edge of things. A good example from your work would be your beach landscapes. We discussed earlier that many of these places are just slightly at a tangent to regulated gathering places. Liminal spaces, so the theory goes, are always places where people are able to relax, to be off-hand, be impromptu. So it certainly would fit in with the idea that if you want to catch people unawares these would be good places to do so. Transgression is probably a too edgy a way of putting it.

RK:

Simon, did the project change your outlook? Did it make you feel more English?

SR:

I certainly feel more connected to England, and it certainly has opened me up to places that I wasn't aware of. I suppose that is the joy of any journey, the unexpected things that challenge your preconceptions.

For more information relating to this exhibition, please visit:

<http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/PlanAVisit/Exhibitions/TouringExhibitions/SimonRobertsWeEnglish.aspx>

For more information on the project, please visit:

<http://www.we-english.co.uk>