

SIMON ROBERTS

Occupying the Frame

by Alexander Vasudevan

Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another.

—Jacques Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics'

It was the American writer and essayist Susan Sontag who famously described photography's unique capacity to freeze and seize hold of both time and space. For Sontag, the photograph's ability to capture time was matched by the image's propensity to 'take possession of space'.¹ Sontag was, of course, writing in the 1970s amidst certain developments within photographic theory and practice. These were developments that, on the one hand, pointed to the mass popular appeal of photographs and picture-taking. But they also heralded, on the other hand, a newfound interest in producing large-scale photographs that would prompt us to look at them as artworks in distinctively new ways.

Where Sontag detected a new aesthetic consumerism and an increasingly anxious world of disposable images, others discovered a medium that challenged the very nature of how we look and, as such, the status of photographs as pictures or representations. Starting in the late 1970s, art photographers began making work that was primarily designed to be viewed on gallery walls rather than in books or magazines. This includes the work of artists such as Roy Arden, Beate Gütschow, Candida Höfer, Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Thomas Struth, and Jeff Wall, to name just a few.²

The work of the British photographer Simon Roberts must also be seen in this context. For more than ten years, Roberts has been making photographs that explore the relationship between landscape and identity. Much of Roberts's work focuses on the role of leisure activities in cultivating a sense of

Englishness and his photographs reveal a landscape shaped by various (and often conflicting) connections between land, leisure, and cultural identity. Where possible, his pictures were shot from elevated positions, offering a detached viewpoint rather than a brief and fleeting encounter with the subject. The sheer scale of Roberts's panoramic landscapes yields an imaginative experience that recalls an earlier tradition of landscape aesthetics, not to mention a perspective more commonly associated with history painting.³

In more recent images, however, Roberts has turned his attention away from a conspicuously idyllic conception of the English landscape to a more uneasy understanding of a nation in crisis. We are reminded that landscape is a tensile concept that often conceals as much as it reveals. It is perhaps not surprising that the title of this collection—*Merrie Albion*—is a deliberate play on two concepts. It points to the enduring legacy of a 'Merrie England' as both a pastoral way of life and, for some, including the nineteenth-century campaigner and journalist Robert Blatchford, a socialist utopia.¹ 'Albion', in turn, is widely believed to be the oldest known name for the island of Great Britain. Its full etymology is uncertain though some speculate that it originally referred to the 'world above' as the 'visible world'.

For Roberts, the 2008 financial crash and the economic downturn that followed in its wake provided a real challenge to his working practice and how we might come to visualize a 'crisis' that places particular pressure on more idyllic understandings of the English landscape. This is reflected in the collection's cover. It uses two pieces of cardboard. One is raised above the other, marking a schism in the shape of a downward economic graph that was itself produced to highlight the crisis in the banking system.⁴ At the same time, the material imprimatur of the graph discloses, according to Roberts, a topographical logic. It serves as a reference to the coast of Britain, which has itself come into sharper focus in the wake of the 2016 vote to leave the European Union. This is ultimately a crisis that prompted Roberts to produce a series of remarkable photographs that document the impact of and opposition to austerity across Britain. These are photographs that are closely associated with specific events: the student protests of 2010; the riots that erupted in August 2011; the various protests and demonstrations against cuts to social services; and the camps that sprung up as part of the Occupy movement.

¹ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (1873; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2017).

While the body of work produced by Roberts in this period reflects, in many ways, his main working method, it also points to the *presence* of the political itself as a new theme. Photography has long been instrumental to the act of protest and its representation. In the case of Roberts, what distinguishes his photographs is their strong sense of distance and non-engagement. These are not images that seek to immerse themselves within a particular event. They do not provide the sense of dramatic immediacy and incident that we often associate with photojournalism. Rather, they offer a vantage point that underscores their status as representations of wider historical narratives. In *Budget Day, Leeds Civic Hall Council Chamber, West Yorkshire, 23 February 2011*, it was the very prospect of being visible and *representable* that prompted the Council to move to another chamber, where a series of severe cuts were then passed.

Take also *National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, Parliament Square, London, 9 December 2010*. The image is shot from a seemingly raised point of view behind the lines of riot police facing off against students protesting plans to raise tuition fees in England and Wales. The detail and perspective invite the viewer to look carefully and intensely at what the image offers. Different aspects of the image slowly emerge, including details of the crowd that can be glimpsed through the tinted windows of a police van. We see an injured student receiving treatment from police medics. We also see a police officer—possibly a member of a Forward Intelligence Team (F.I.T) used to gather intelligence—standing on the tyre of another van, recording the actions of the students. This only serves to reinforce the sense of distance adopted by Roberts. What matters here is a pictorial field that points to a rather different relationship between the event and the spectator.

The interplay between proximity and distance can be seen in other images produced by Roberts during the same period including *Communication Workers Union Protest, Church Green, Witney, Oxfordshire, 9 January 2011* and *National Union of Teachers Strike Rally, Guildhall Square, Southampton, Hampshire, 30 June 2011*. These are concerns that are taken even further in *After the Riots, London Road, Croydon, Greater London, 10 August 2011* and *Trading Floor of Lloyds Banking Group, City of London, 30 November 2011* where the 'event' has either already taken place (*After the Riots*) or is reduced to a small screen in which a reporter can be seen broadcasting from a protest (*Lloyds Banking Group*). The latter image—and the connections it establishes between a banking system and the crisis it precipitated—points to a form of visual imaging that is both political *and* historical.

Unlike their photojournalistic counterparts, the sequence of images produced by Roberts in the wake of the 2008 economic crash is inconceivable outside the historical narrative that it constructs. If much of Roberts's work has sought to examine the question of landscape as a way of exploring England's 'shifting cultural and national identity', the images of protest captured by Roberts speak to a renewed sense of the political as a way of seeing that matters.⁵ At stake here is an insistence that the political can and must occupy a visual field in much the same way that the Occupy camp in Finsbury Square captured by Roberts represents a demand for 'presence, an insistence on being heard'.⁶ These are not images of a putatively 'Merrie Albion' but rather documents that speak to a discordant and divided Britain. We can't overlook austerity and the crisis it has precipitated. If anything, it should prompt us to think carefully about how and why we look.

Epigraph: Jacques Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics', trans. Rachel Bowlby and Davide Panagia, *Theory and Event* 5.3 (2001): thesis 8, para. 3.

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977; repr., London: Penguin, 2008), 9.

² See Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

³ Stephen Daniels, 'National Property and a Pilgrimage to the Picturesque', in Daniels, Ben Cowell, and Lucy Veale, *Landscapes of the National Trust* (London: Pavilion Books, 2015), 12.

⁴ The actual graph is one depicting the value of the Eurocoin in August 2010, available online at the blog *True Economics* (<http://trueeconomics.blogspot.co.uk/2010/08/>).

⁵ Simon Roberts, 'Commentary', in *We English* (London: Chris Boot, 2009), 109.

⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation', *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2012): 10.