

SIMON ROBERTS

The Election Project Public Gallery - an anthropology of ourselves?

by Sean O'Hagan, 2010

We are all photographers now. The mobile phone and the digital camera have revolutionised the way we look at the world around us and the way we look at ourselves. Images that used to take days, even weeks, to process, can be viewed - and re-edited - in mere seconds, and the results posted on the internet for anyone to see. For better or worse, this is where we live now.

The age of great documentary photography and reportage may be coming to an end. Today's young students of photography are steered towards the theoretical and the conceptual. What once would have been considered oxymoronic - "conceptual documentary" - is now accepted practice: a way we are told, of making sense of a postmodern world. In the post-digital world, though, the images posted on Flickr, Facebook and countless lesser-known websites dedicated to photography, would seem to suggest that what might be called casual observation is the dominant mode. We have become chroniclers of the quotidian and the mundane as well as the embarrassing, the outrageous and the odd.

At street level, though, photography has found itself under suspicion of late. In January 2010, an estimated 2000 photographers gathered with their cameras in Trafalgar Square to protest against police harassment. The protest was organised by a group whose rallying cry was I'm A Photographer, Not A Terrorist. It was a reaction to what many felt was a misuse of police powers to stop and search suspicious members of the public under Section 44 of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Street photographers, in particular, had been stopped, questioned, and in some cases, arrested, with alarming regularity over the previous year.

It is, to say the least, an interesting, and indeed uncertain, time to be a professional photographer. The Election Project Public Gallery is, among other things, a reflection of, and a reaction to, this uncertainty. It is, as befits its title, an exercise in democratic photography albeit one conceived and curated by a photographer whose practice adheres to the traditional strategies of patience, observation, cunning, formal rigour and intense concentration.

When the House of Commons chose Simon Roberts as its official Election Artist, it was the first time a photographer had been selected for the role. One senses that it was the understated reportage of his most recent book, *We English*, that swung it for him. The images he made for that book suggest not just a definable sense of place, but a national identity that survives even in these fractured and uncertain times. They possess a cumulative power that is both charming and slightly odd. Quintessentially English, in fact. For *We English*, Roberts invited the public to suggest locations for him to photograph. This time around, though, he chose to involve the ordinary English – and Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish – in an altogether more proactive way by inviting them to post their own election photographs on his website (www.theelectionproject.co.uk).

Their subject, like his, would be a nation going about its daily business in the three weeks of intense political campaigning that would culminate, as it turned out, in a hung parliament and the formation of a coalition government.

Given that this was the first election where the candidates interaction with the public was monitored relentlessly on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, and where the power of the blogosphere, as well as the traditional media, surely helped determine the result, Roberts wanted, he said, to “create an alternative photographic vision alongside my own” and one that will “add a collaborative and democratic dimension to the overall work”.

For those crucial three weeks, Roberts travelled the length and breadth of Britain, wielding his large-format 5x4 camera - a camera that, by its very nature, imposes a certain kind of reflective gaze. At the same time, a citizen's army of mostly digital photographic volunteers across Britain were shooting anything that took their fancy pertaining to the election. The results of this democratic photographic process are intriguing, not least because, given the general feeling of distrust bordering on disdain directed at politicians during last year's protracted scandal over their expenses, one might have expected more cynicism, more cruelty: politicians tripping up, falling down, grimacing,

hectoring, guffawing, constantly caught off guard by the unforgiving eye of the mobile phone camera.

Instead, the general tone is one of stoical scepticism tinged with an undercurrent of surreal black humour. What, though, do these disparate images really say about the political landscape of Britain in 2010? Do they add up to a kind of Mass Observation experiment for the digital age, albeit without the kind of anthropological analysis that the original project brought to bear on the British public from 1937 to the early 1950s? Or, are they a glimpse – or hundreds of glimpses – of a nation in the grip of election fever or election overload? Do they denote excitement or apathy, idealism or cynicism? Or, all of the above in unequal measure? A general election, after all, is not just a protracted moment when the big political parties are forced to engage at close quarters with their voting public, but when the public are forced to endure their presence and listen once again to the pledges and promises that will be broken or diluted as in the years that follow as surely as night follows day.

The 1696 submitted photographs that make up the public part of The Election Project are intriguing and revealing on many levels. Firstly, they are a wilfully unruly retort to the increasingly stage-managed campaign events that the mainstream press cover often unquestioningly. (David Cameron went so far as to employ his own official campaign photographer, Andrew Parsons, whose photographs were distributed free to the local and national press, a move that speaks volumes about the increasingly blurred line between politics and public relations.)

Viewed in their entirety, the public photographs show both the mundane reality and the heightened atmosphere of a British general election campaign. Certain tropes recur: candidates – posing with members of the public, or campaigning on doorsteps, or sweeping through towns with their entourage; election posters – often defaced, or written over, or photographed alongside suddenly metaphorical road signs – Right Turn Ahead, No Left Turn; election leaflets – stuffed in letterboxes or stuck on windows or consigned to the litter bin; polling booths and polling stations in all their drab, makeshift peculiarly British ordinariness.

The media circus that attends the election campaigns is another recurring subject and one or two contributors have even submitted shots of the press gang that feature Simon Roberts himself, perched expectantly atop his mobile home intent on getting the bigger – and wider and deeper – picture.

Sometimes, someone catches a moment of high drama: Duncan Morris's brilliant shot of a long-time Labour Party member handing his membership card back to Jack Straw at a public event. Sometimes, too, there are images that show a rare moment of utter connection between a candidate and a supporter: Jonny White's great photograph of a woman listening with rapt attentiveness to Green Party leader, Caroline Lucas. White is one of several contributors who posted a series of photographs around a single theme. (His five black and white shots of Lucas in her election HQ and on the streets of Brighton are low-key reportage at its intimate best.) Both Jennifer Hainsworth and someone called Catherine chose to photograph polling stations, albeit from the outside and the inside respectively. Both series evoke a peculiarly British democratic process, and possess an added resonance given the subsequent furore over people being denied the right to vote because of the chaos that erupted at several polling stations when volunteers simply could not contend with late-evening surges in voting numbers.

Several contributors have opted for a conceptual approach to what is, in many ways, a surreal process: Matthew Wealt has posted a black and white image of a man, possibly himself, with his jumper pulled up over his head as if to say, "I've already had enough!" Dick Jones has turned David Cameron into David Chameleon, complete with scaly body and protruding tongue. M.Clark has posted a series of vacant shops in Bradford city centre; Mill Hill Mike a series of litter bins around Mill Hill Broadway tube station, all of which contain Conservative Party paraphernalia. The current trend in photography for detached observation is not reflected here.

There is, of course, a kind of conceptual chronology to these images. Many early contributors, for instance, focus on the campaign posters that appeared on cue all over Britain as soon as the election date was announced: Cameron as Kitchener,

Brown as, well, Brown – reliable, steely, inscrutable. In Hackney, Banksy's old turf, Russel Higgs captured the work of an unknown political prankster who had created a giant billboard on Kingsland Road featuring Cameron's face above the words, "suck my goldman sachs". Etta James has photographed what she calls "an item left outside a bank during election": it is a glass case full of coppers with the words 'In Case of Emergency Break Glass' written on it. Political sleaze and corporate greed, the two giant shadows that stalked the campaign, are reflected, often with jet-black humour, throughout The Election Project.

Elsewhere, though, things take a more playful turn. Bill Scanlon has had some fun with a 3D camera outside the Houses of Parliament making William Hague, Peter Mandelson and Jack Straw look blurred and unfocussed. I think there's a metaphor in there somewhere. Several people have made and photographed political puppets or toy figures; others have photographed the more madcap characters that appear on cue when an election is called. Here is a great photograph of Ed Balls kicking a rugby ball and another of him taking a picture of some red balloons.

Amid the humour and the simmering anger, a definable kind of English eccentricity still seems to be the order of the day. Where else would you find a Del Boy look-alike on the campaign trail? (He was wandering around Barking and Dagenham on behalf of UKIP, and S Anderson caught him sharing a joke with some Sikh shopkeepers.) Where else, too, would you find a photograph of a street named Crooked Usage? It's in Finchley and local, Julia Hines, posted the street sign with the caption, "Expenses are still a big topic on our street."

My favourite photographs here, though, are often the most oblique or the most surreal. I loved the window sign in Bath with the words "Vote For I Don't Know" scrawled on it as if in desperation. It was taken by Byrony Jade Ball, who also submitted the wonderful series of snapshots of Bath's mystery candidate, A.N.On, who, swathed in fabric, refused to reveal his or her identity or answer any questions throughout the campaign.

Perhaps most oblique of all is a portrait by Joe of a young couple on a red couch, the television remote control lying between them. It is captioned, "On the sofa in the early hours of the morning on 7 May watching the election results come in." We've all been there in that strange, half-exhausted limbo land where statistics, predictions and polls lose their meanings and a strange anti-climactic torpor takes hold.

There are lots of mundane photographs, too, but they, perhaps even more than the immediately arresting ones, may reveal much about the nature of this election to social historians of the future. One of my favourites, posted by PicturLife, shows Margaret Hodge's constituency headquarters in Barking. It is a small, detached house with a red door surrounded by tall blue railings. In an upstairs window, a hand made sign reads SAVE KING GEORGE. In the front yard, there is an upturned chair that looks like it has been flung over the railings. In the bottom right of the picture, a pair of garden gnomes seem to be discussing how it got there. Martin Parr, I suspect, would approve.

Back in 1937, the founders of Mass Observation described their ambitious social experiment as an “an anthropology of ourselves.” The Election Project is not quite that, but it does provide a fragmented panoramic view of ourselves at a time when our political future literally hung in the balance. British parliamentary democracy in motion, then; viewed from the ground by a curious cross section of the general public that, on this evidence, view their elected representatives with a scepticism that, despite everything, only occasionally shades into cynicism. One hopes that politicians of every hue will take time out to look at The Election Project Public Gallery when it is unveiled at the House of Commons. It may surprise them.