Interview
Simon Roberts

Signs of the times

A year-long trip across Russia helped former editorial photographer Simon Roberts forge a new career in the art world before he attempted a similar approach to capturing his own country in We English. With hindsight this work captures the calm before the economic storm that followed, a subject his latest project addresses, obliquely capturing the changing landscape of recession-hit Britain. Diane Smyth meets the photographer at his Brighton studio.

Diane Smyth

1 Protestors occupy Leeds City Council Chamber on the day the annual budget was due to be agreed, 23 February 2011. The meeting was delayed by 90 minutes while protests were removed by police and the budget was finally agreed behind closed doors, with cuts of £90m and the loss of 1500 council posts. All images © Simon Roberts.
Although Wills English took a consciously Elysian look at his countrymen, photographing people enjoying their leisure within the landscape, Simon Roberts had a sense “that something was unwrapping” while he was shooting it. Having bought a camper van to go on the road, he started work on the project just as Northern Rock hit crisis point in 2007, the first clear warning that all was not well with the British economy. He finished it a year later, just after the crash of Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, by which time it was obvious that we were entering a major recession of global proportions.

Roberts had a sense “that something was unraveling” while he was shooting it. Having toured 16 venues across Europe and the Americas, enhancing Roberts’ reputation of people voicing their dissent. “I’m trying to interrogate it from a number of different angles, one being photography, but another is semiotic; it’s about the language,” he explains.

Up until now I felt very constrained about what it means to be a photographer. But now that I’m more established, I feel I can be more expressive in using different media to talk about the things I’m interested in. The photograph is still a major part of that – the visual image – but why not use other elements if it helps the work, and try to bring them together in one coherent piece? “It’s quite difficult to visualise the cuts – it’s not like the Depression in America in the 1930s with its breadlines, although it’s certainly going to get worse. And it’s not like Paul Graham [and his images of daily life offer a “Death of Britian”], because you can’t get into a Job Centre. Poverty is a very hidden thing now, and quite difficult to visualise without falling into cliché, plus a lot of the recession is about the middle class – people losing child tax credits, losing a few thousand pounds a year. It makes a difference but it’s very difficult to visualise.

Roberts has collected a lexicon he has collected takes phrases bandied about in political speeches and the media, for example, including choice samples such as “Death spiral of the euro’. It’s this kind of over-inflated language that seems to be much more about the individual, even anger and frustration; we’re still verging on this display of politeness.”

Roberts has shot a series of videos that also play with this idea, recording movement within a single frame and showing the action both before and after a key moment. One video shows a protestor shouting at a council meeting, for example: after her outburst she turns to a friend and says, “I’m not standing on my soapbox shouting out socialist ideology,” says the photographer who originally studied Human Geography. “I’m not trying to present a clear argument because actually none of us know where this is going to end up. One of the interesting things for me is how politics is being localised – there seems to be very little argument from Labour or Conservative, but in every town it’s quite a visible political force and are starting to look at the smaller parties.

“Historically what’s interesting about signs is that they were about the mass demonstration, the collective, and as you would see the same union poster held by everyone. Now it seems to be much more about the individual, so you’ve got people writing personal messages [4]. They’re identifying themselves with an opinion or that they’re joining the crowd, but they’re personalising their messages. Even the terminology ‘probsouda’ has something a bit middle class about it; it’s quite soft and even jokey compared to the demonstrations in Spain or Portugal or Greece. Over there, there’s a lot more anger and frustration; we’re still verging on this display of politeness.”

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4 The work is faintly political but it’s not overt – I’m not standing on my soapbox shouting out socialist ideology,” says the photographer who originally studied Human Geography. “I’m not trying to present a clear argument because actually none of us know where this is going to end up. One of the interesting things for me is how politics is being localised – there seems to be very little argument from Labour or Conservative, but in every town it’s quite a visible political force and are starting to look at the smaller parties.

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Residents affected by rioting in London’s Peckham neighbourhood posted their thoughts on a “Peace Wall” on a boarded-up window of the Poundland discount store.
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“A photograph records that second, or that a 1/50th of a second, I was really interested in seeing what’s happening either side of that, what would happen if you keep watching,” says Roberts. “So in almost all cases the camera is in the same frame, but you just keep going. There’s this subtlety that you wouldn’t get with who are protesting.”

“Some of this is like a mirror,” says the former press photographer. “A lot of what I was trying to do in The Election Project was commenting on the media and photography. I was always photographing behind the press commenting on how much of us see the election, which is on TV.”

Elsewhere Roberts creates meaning through straight comparisons, using diptychs to contrast different scenes from the same geographical region. His shot of the Royal wedding celebrations in London’s Hyde Park is put with a TUC rally captured in the same place, for example, both showing crowds of people with flags and placards, but to very different effect.

As with The Election Project and We English, Roberts shot most of the landscape image from above, climbing a ladder with his 8× camera (no mean feat at a protest), to a sociological slant to the work, emphasizing the group over individuals. He says he’s “not really into equipment; it’s just a way of recording what I need” though, and has also used digital cameras and some 6×7 shots. That ad-hoc approach plus the mixed media he’s presenting make for a much less constrained aesthetic than in previous projects, which were presented in beautifully printed and framed exhibitions.

He’s exhibiting Let This Be A Sign as part of the London Festival of Photography this month (until 01 July), and is happy to have found a gallery for it in a public space at Swiss Cottage Library. Some of the images will be allowed the public to make talking-head videos about the cuts, and their suggestions for alternative approaches.

“I want to give people a voice, recording the here and now, how the landscape changing, and these signifiers pointers to what’s coming next,” he says. “It’s a lot less about the perfect print in the perfect frame in the perfect gallery.”

This approach and his use of different media, means it’s probably less likely to result in the kind of print sales generated by previous projects, which is entirely self-funded. But Roberts believes it’s important to make the project for posterity, and will continue working on it through the London Olympics and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. “I got accreditation from the IOC [International Olympics Committee] to do a leftfield look at the Olympics, and I want to do a street party [celebrating the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee].” he says. “You look at all of these books about the 1940s and 50s and the Coronation and you always get these lovely photographs of a tea party on a street; I’d like to have a photograph like that for 20 years’ time,”

he adds. “I’m looking at these major events taking place – the Olympics, the Diamond Jubilee, the Royal wedding, devolution, there are some really interesting things happening at the moment.

“We English was an exploration of the English landscape, then I did The Election Project, an exploration of the British landscape through the prism of politics. Now this work is questioning what is the direct consequence of these economic matters and how are they going to affect the landscape of Britain. Taken all together, this is a huge project made at a hugely significant time.

It is about creating a piece of work that will have some significance in 20 or 30 years’ time recording this era.”

Let This Be A Sign is on show as part of London Festival of Photography and is at Swiss Cottage Library, 88 Avenue Road, London NW3 3HA. 
www.simoncroberts.com

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7 Media and technology tech, Occupy London Student Square camp photographed on the “Day of Action” strike, London, 30 November 2011.