

Shen Wei Chinese Sentiment



Susan Worsham Some Fox Trails in Virginia



Interview:
Andrew Phelps

"The best I can do is tell the story of my three weeks of traveling and responding visually to a place I don't necessarily understand."



Simon Roberts
We English

"I was interested in the fact that leisure is something we do very self consciously, given that we have relatively little 'leisure time'."



Interview:
Ron Jude

"I wanted to make images that pretend to fulfill the dubious empirical and narrative promise of a photograph, while quietly pulling out the epistemological rug."



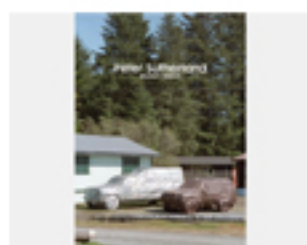
Justin James Reed
Mark Ruwedel. Westward the Course of Empire

"We see what has drawn Ruwedel out into the abandoned West, we see where the longing to walk or drive along the remains of some 130 railroad lines comes from."



Interview:
Karin Apollonia Müller

"I would stand on the roofs with shivering knees looking down at the city and marvel at how things came together. I felt I was on a stage and detached from the world."



We Recommend:
Peter Sutherland. Muddy Treads

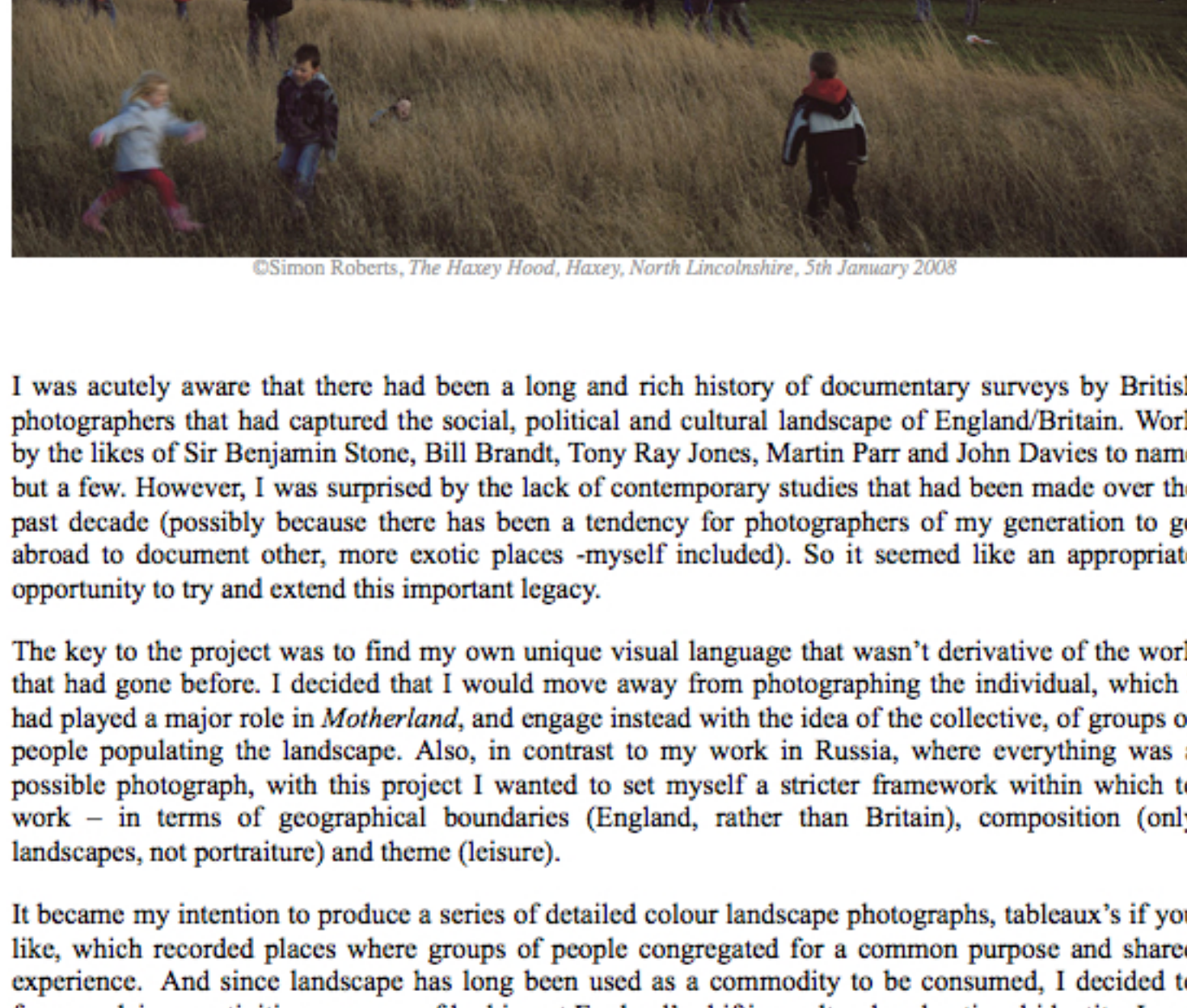
"There was a large chunk of land behind my junior high school known as 'The Hills.' It was an unclaimed no man's land, where you could do whatever you wanted."

Simon Roberts: *We English* by Simon Roberts



©Simon Roberts, Skegness Beach, Lincolnshire, 12th August 2007

I was born in Croydon, South London, in 1974. My mother is a Northerner, hailing from Cleator Moor in Cumbria, who met my London-born father when they were both working in the capital. My formative years were spent in the provincial town of Oxted, in Surrey's commuter belt, while holidays were often spent walking in the Lake District (normally in the rain) or visiting my grandparents in Angmering, a retirement town on the South Coast. Alongside these childhood memories, and the range of associations and images they suggest, the starting point for *We English* was to explore themes of identity, memory, history and attachment to place - of belonging - which had been an important part of my first major body of work, *Motherland*. Having returned from Russia in late 2005, where I'd spent the year travelling across the country with my wife I began to pursue the idea of another journey, this time around my own homeland, England.



©Simon Roberts, The Hassey Hood, Hassey, North Lincolnshire, 5th January 2008

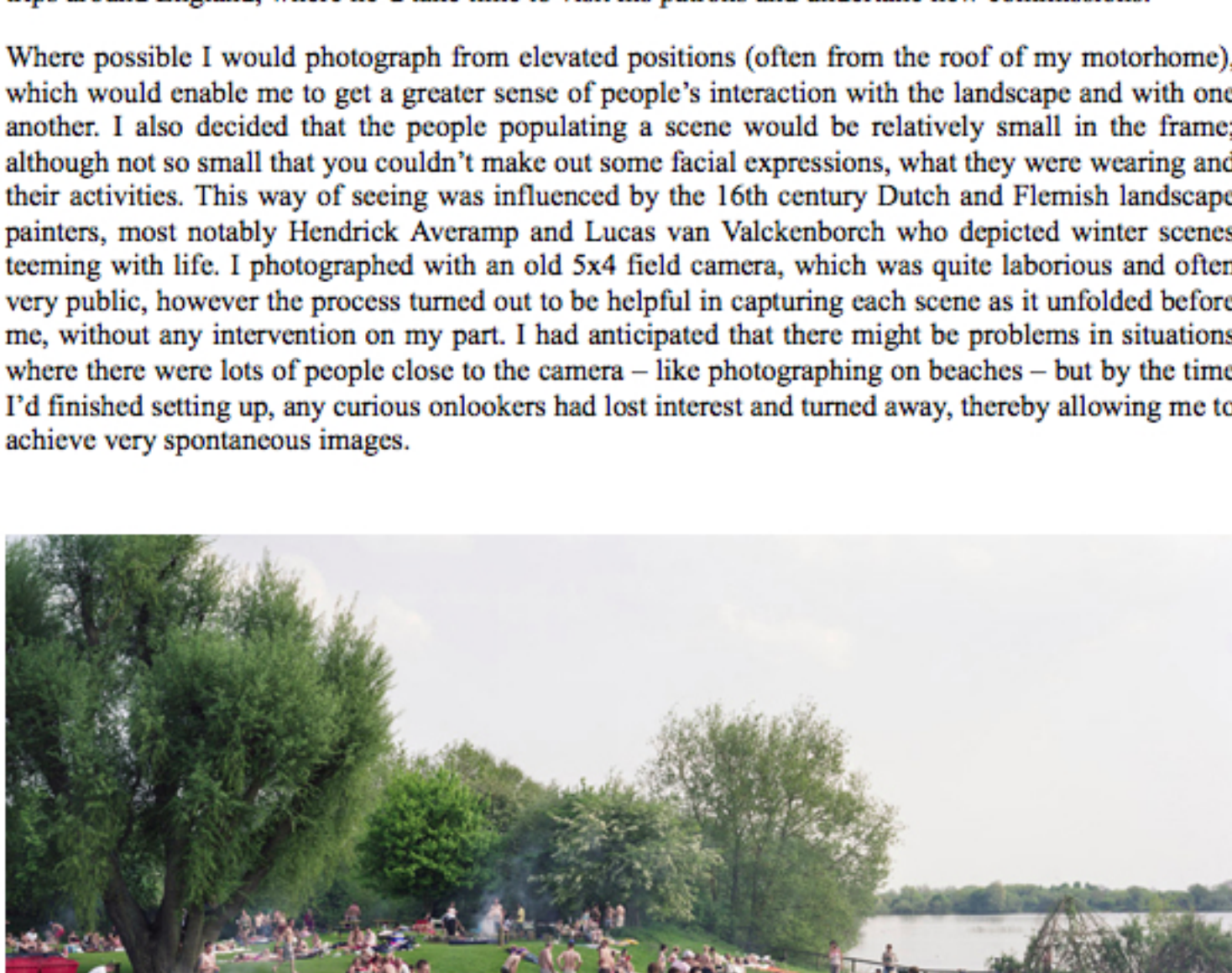
I was acutely aware that there had been a long and rich history of documentary surveys by British photographers that had captured the social, political and cultural landscape of England/Britain. Work by the likes of Sir Benjamin Stone, Bill Brandt, Tony Ray Jones, Martin Parr and John Davies to name but a few. However, I was surprised by the lack of contemporary studies that had been made over the past decade (possibly because there has been a tendency for photographers of my generation to go abroad to document other, more exotic places -myself included). So it seemed like an appropriate opportunity to try and extend this important legacy.

The key to the project was to find my own unique visual language that wasn't derivative of the work that had gone before. I decided that I would move away from photographing the individual, which I had played a major role in *Motherland*, and engage instead with the idea of the collective, of groups of people populating the landscape. Also, in contrast to my work in Russia, where everything was a possible photograph, with this project I wanted to set myself a stricter framework within which to work - in terms of geographical boundaries (England, rather than Britain), composition (only landscapes, not portraiture) and theme (leisure).

It became my intention to produce a series of detailed colour landscape photographs, tableaux's if you like, which recorded places where groups of people congregated for a common purpose and shared experience. And since landscape has long been used as a commodity to be consumed, I decided to focus on leisure activities as a way of looking at England's shifting cultural and national identity. I was interested in the fact that leisure is something we do very self consciously, given that we have relatively little 'leisure time'. It therefore seems to say much more about us than what we do for work, which for many is done out of necessity rather than choice.



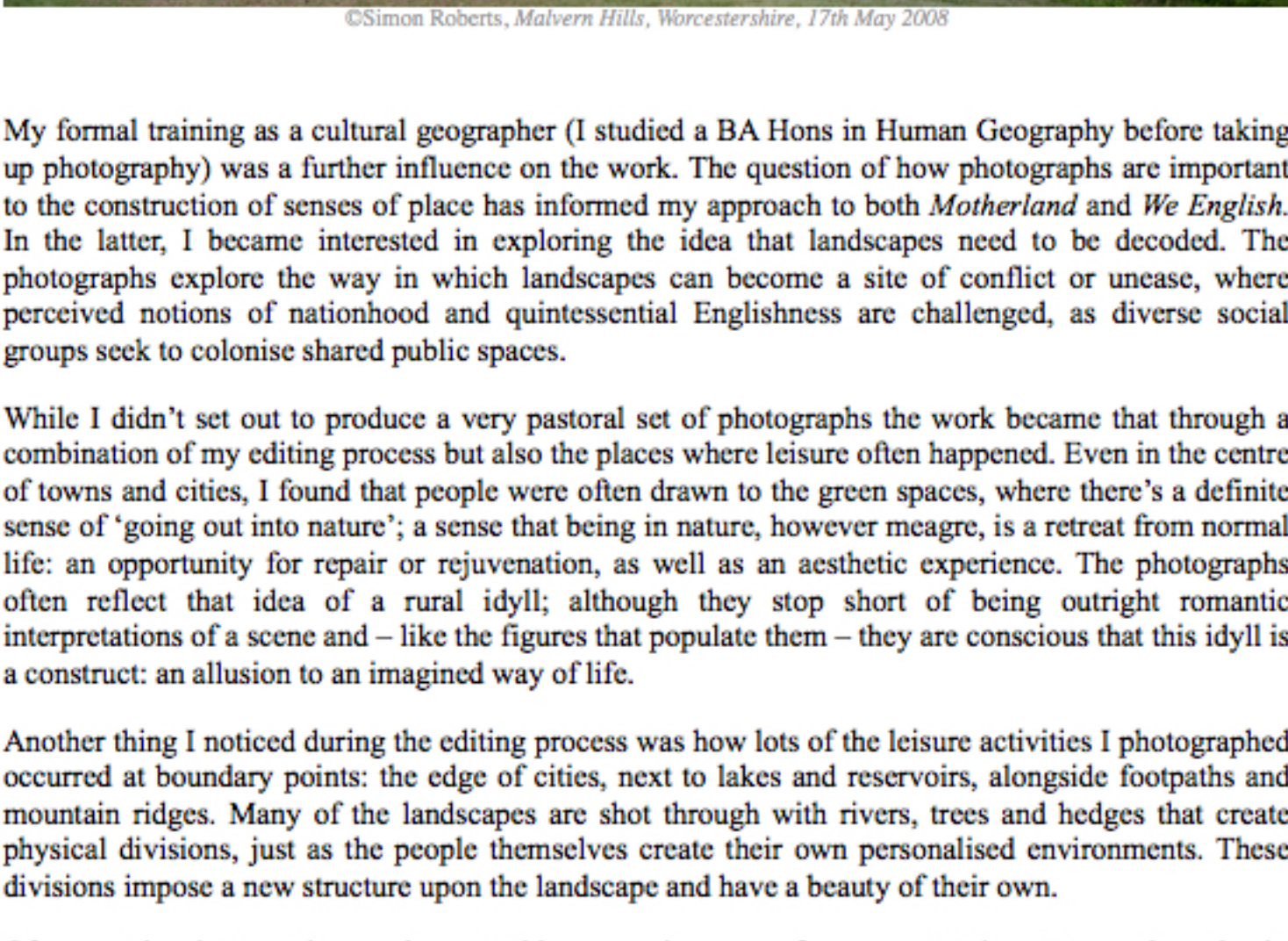
© Simon Roberts, Holkham National Nature Reserve, Norfolk, 18th February 2008



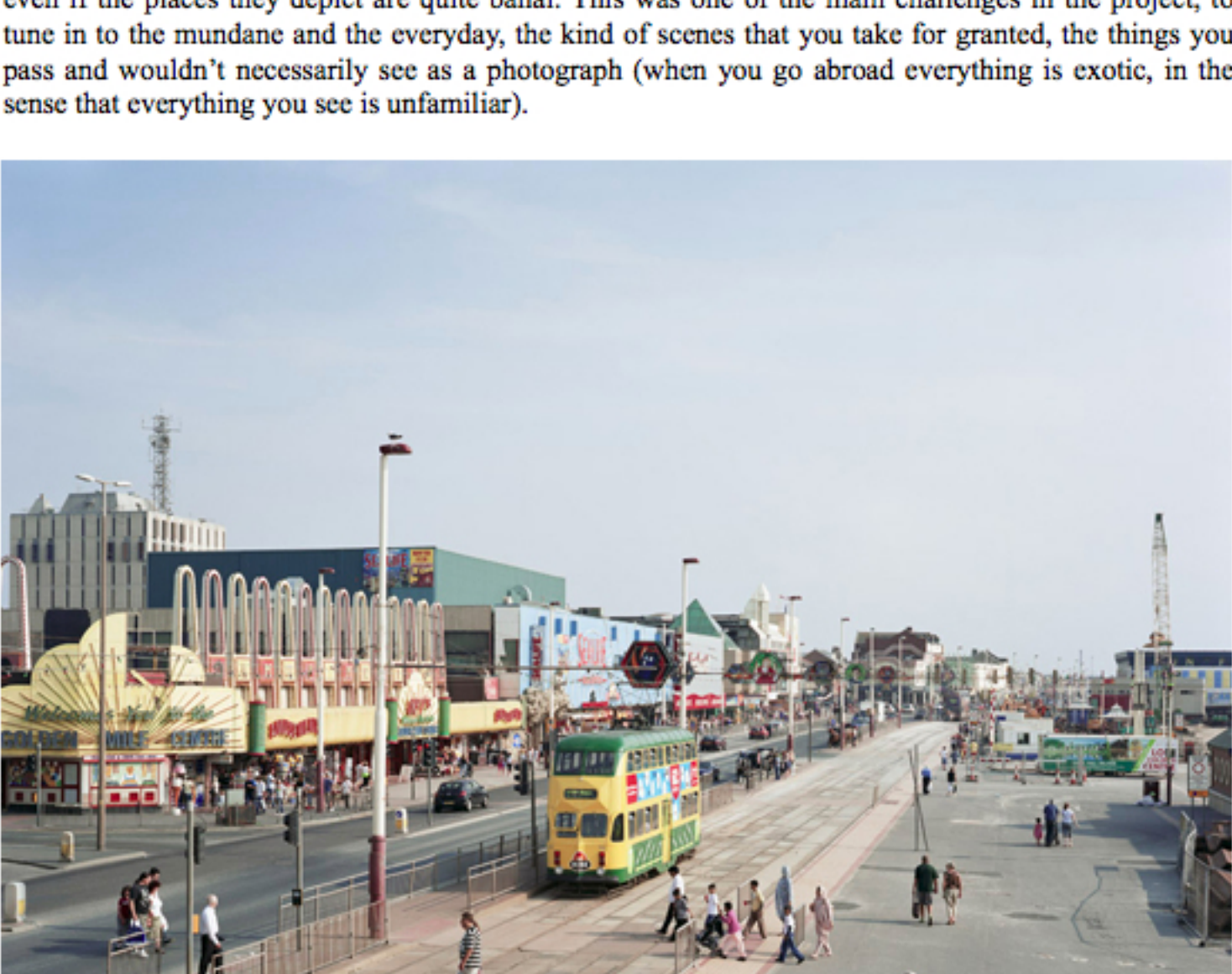
© Simon Roberts, Tandridge Golf Course, Oxted, Surrey, 2nd April 2008

From August 2007 until April 2008 I made a number of exploratory trips around the country before deciding to purchase a motorhome (a 1993 Talbot Express Swift Capri) and make a continuous six-month journey the length and breadth of England, this time joined by my wife and our two-year-old daughter. I've long been fascinated by the tradition of the road trip in photography. Two of my early influences, the photographers Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld, have both employed extended journeys as an avenue for exploring America's cultural landscape. Similarly, many writers and artists have also made extensive journeys to produce work, from H.V. Morton's *In Search of England* (1927) and J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) to Daniel Defoe's *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26). In his diaries, J.M.W. Turner talks about extended summer trips around England, where he'd take time to visit his patrons and undertake new commissions.

Where possible I would photograph from elevated positions (often from the roof of my motorhome), which would enable me to get a greater sense of people's interaction with the landscape and with one another. I also decided that the people populating a scene would be relatively small in the frame; although not so small that you couldn't make out some facial expressions, what they were wearing and their activities. This way of seeing was influenced by the 16th century Dutch and Flemish landscape painters, most notably Hendrick Avercamp and Lucas van Valckenborch who depicted winter scenes teeming with life. I photographed with an old 5x4 field camera, which was quite laborious and often very public, however the process turned out to be helpful in capturing each scene as it unfolded before me, without any intervention on my part. I had anticipated that there might be problems in situations where there were lots of people close to the camera - like photographing on beaches - but by the time I'd finished setting up, any curious onlookers had lost interest and turned away, thereby allowing me to achieve very spontaneous images.



©Simon Roberts, Keynes Country Park Beach, Sharncliffe, Gloucestershire, 11th May 2008



©Simon Roberts, Malvern Hills, Worcestershire, 17th May 2008

My formal training as a cultural geographer (I studied a BA Hons in Human Geography before taking up photography) was a further influence on the work. The question of how photographs are important to the construction of senses of place has informed my approach to both *Motherland* and *We English*. In the latter, I became interested in exploring the idea that landscapes need to be decoded. The photographs explore the way in which landscapes can become a site of conflict or unease, where perceived notions of nationhood and quintessential Englishness are challenged, as diverse social groups seek to colonise shared public spaces.

While I didn't set out to produce a very pastoral set of photographs the work became that through a combination of my editing process but also the places where leisure often happened. Even in the centre of towns and cities, I found that people were often drawn to the green spaces, where there's a definite sense of 'going out into nature'; a sense that being in nature, however meagre, is a retreat from normal life: an opportunity for repair or rejuvenation, as well as an aesthetic experience. The photographs often reflect that idea of a rural idyll; although they stop short of being outright romantic interpretations of a scene and - like the figures that populate them - they are conscious that this idyll is a construct: an allusion to an imagined way of life.

Another thing I noticed during the editing process was how lots of the leisure activities I photographed occurred at boundary points: the edge of cities, next to lakes and reservoirs, alongside footpaths and mountain ridges. Many of the landscapes are shot through with rivers, trees and hedges that create physical divisions, just as the people themselves create their own personalised environments. These divisions impose a new structure upon the landscape and have a beauty of their own.

Of course the photographs are also rooted in a consciousness of my own attachment to my homeland - during the journey, I occasionally sought out places that I believe helped shape my own feelings of Englishness - and are sometimes an intentionally lyrical rendering of everyday English landscapes, even if the places they depict are quite banal. This was one of the main challenges in the project, to tune in to the mundane and the everyday, the kind of scenes that you take for granted, the things you pass and wouldn't necessarily see as a photograph (when you go abroad everything is exotic, in the sense that everything you see is unfamiliar).



© Simon Roberts, Blackpool Promenade, Lancashire, 24th July 2008



© Simon Roberts, Maidstone Young Bird National Pigeon Race, Maidstone, Kent, 13th September 2008

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We English

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Introduction by Stephen Daniels
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