

GATHERINGS

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Imagine walking along a crowded street in any British city. It is morning, and the people around you are in a hurry. Most will be on their way to work and have a purposeful stride and an air of thinking ahead about them, and most are looking at their mobile phones. Some are smiling as they work their fingers across the handsets; others are talking loudly into the morning air, spoken names, places, and events conjuring that fleeting sense we all know so well of multiple lives – instantly recognizable but remote – colliding briefly with our own. Now imagine being in a shopping mall. It is later, maybe the weekend, and the pace here is less frenetic. People are ambling with their bags, looking in shop windows, lingering, waiting around and relaxing (retail having long since been resold to us as a space of recreation, as a kind of therapy). Many of the shoppers are also using phones, involving those elsewhere in their leisurely acts of looking and choosing. And all around, the amblers hold long, remote conversations as they move slowly through the mall, waving their arms in exclamation, making open demonstrations of their connectedness, as if being connected was an expression of their well-being and their relevance.

We have become accustomed to this distractedness, and it is a central paradox of our public experience that those drawing most attention to their physical presence on the street or in the mall are often openly declaring an absence of mind. Being there but not there, being explicitly detached, would seem to be a common sign not only of an increasingly affectless public realm, but also of fundamental shifts in the way we understand and

value communal experience. It would be tempting to assert, as many have done, that new technology has begun to radically alter our behaviour, diverting us away from physical contact with others towards immobile screen-based forms of communication in a digital space where constant competition for our attention undermines our ability to concentrate, and dissolves or complicates the distinctions we make between what is public and private, social and intimate. Whether or not this is true, it is becoming clear that we now inhabit a plurality of publics and communities, manifest in overlapping physical and digital spaces that have reconditioned our senses of belonging as well as changed our patterns of social interaction.

The nature of public, communal experience has been an implicit theme of Simon Roberts’ photographic work of the last ten years or so. Since he embarked on his project *We English* in 2007, he has documented events and places across Britain that have drawn people together, all the while compiling evidence that the desire for common presence and participation, for sharing a sense of being ‘in place’, not only endures but might also harbour something distinctive about our national character and identity. That these gatherings are also set in specific landscapes and are embedded in unfolding social histories of place has been a distinguishing feature of Roberts’ investigation, one that has enabled him to critically conflate elements of a British landscape tradition – in which the land is seen as central to the idea of a national culture and identity – and those of social documentary photography in this country, drawn at particular moments in its history to exploratory national surveys. At first sight, the resulting work has often seemed tinged with nostalgia, with communal continuities and a sense of national well-being largely detached from the conditions and atmospheres of metropolitan life. But the experience of looking more closely at Roberts’ projects is that, collectively, his photographs never quite confirm those initial romantic associations. Instead, from picture to picture, Roberts’ work presents the viewer with complex relationships between people and places, and incongruous juxtapositions of history and contemporary culture that create gentle ironies and underlying tensions across the images. Played out through particular local and regional contexts, it is these tensions that ultimately deny any consistency of mood and resist the coherent, and possibly seductive sense of binding national characteristics.

This decade of work has reflected debates in art and cultural geography that understand

landscape not simply as territory or a mode of representation but as an active process, shaped over time by politics and economics as well as by geological and environmental forces. This process is largely one of incremental change, manifest in different ways and at different speeds across diverse spaces, and in Britain Roberts’ interests have gravitated towards evolving patterns of leisure, the consumption and commodification of history, militarization, and to lines of demarcation and exclusion in the landscape. But in parallel to this, he has also chosen to photograph events and places that have a more immediate, topical significance in the turning of Britain’s recent history, and which – again summoning the sense of a national survey – might collectively offer a form of pictorial chronicle of these times. It is these particular photographs that provide the structural focus and thematic substance of this book.

Merrie Albion ranges across various projects, both commissioned and independently produced over the last ten years, from single photographs made around the time of *We English*, to Roberts’ subsequent photographs of the General Election of 2010, his series *The Social Landscapes of Leisure* (2013) and *National Property: The Picturesque Imperfect* (2013–15), and his photographs from the 2012 Olympics in London. The book also registers a distinct shift in approach, and tone, from *We English*. In *Merrie Albion*, Roberts has exchanged the element of discovery and revelation that came from his prior speculative journeying around England to many new and, for him, unknown sites, for a form of ‘reporting’, where he has responded to subjects and places that have already entered the public consciousness and can be seen as defining locations in the recent national story.

Roberts’ work on the 2010 General Election can be seen as representative of this change of emphasis, and its photographs assume a pivotal role in *Merrie Albion*. Importantly, they distinguish Roberts’ particular manner of recording events from that of the photojournalists and reporters who often appear in his pictures, as one not primarily concerned with capturing newsworthy aspects of the election but with observing what might be called the broad and multifaceted choreography of the electoral process as it unfolded in British social space. One abiding effect of this approach is that the photographs undercut the sense of politics constructed for us by the media, both by revealing that process of construction taking place and by giving equal status to scenes that would be deemed un-newsworthy, affording a monumental quality to the prosaic drama of the election embedded in

the everyday fabric of British life. As Roberts steps back with a large-format, five-by-four-inch camera to take up his customary elevated, detached viewing position, the activities and incidents of the election, the jostling, walking, waiting groups of people, are not simply diminished in scale by the expansive space surveyed by the camera lens, they appear now as figures set against a much broader arc of social time, that slower course of history within which the towns and villages they live in – the housing estates, the communities, the streets, pathways and networks of communication – have developed into the familiar landscape of this country. This is the dialectical space/time of *Merrie Albion's* social panorama.

Roberts' apparently quiet, detached chronicling of the events and public atmospheres of Britain's recent past – charting the mood swings of a diverse national culture – is also a discreet opening up of a set of complex ideas about places and their histories, and about the abiding influence of the country's past on its present. Like Robinson, the elusive, central character whose journeying in Britain is the subject of Patrick Keiller's great trilogy of films, *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997), and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), Roberts would subscribe to the transformative potential of images of landscape, proposing to find out more about his subjects simply by looking at them. He might also understand Robinson's dreamy speculation that 'if he looked at the landscape hard enough, it would reveal to him the molecular basis of historical events'.¹ In his comparative observations and contextual annotations Roberts provides his own form of narration here, and invites us to look with him, to think again, and maybe to think differently about Britain at a time when ideas of our national identity, our national culture and our international relations have never been more fiercely contested.

In the following essay, I will reflect on the photographic lineage of Roberts' work and offer some thoughts about how his images of people and places in Britain might be more widely contextualized and understood.

One apparent irony of Simon Roberts' *We English* is that, despite its preoccupation with a very British landscape, culture, and history, the book appeared to gain much of its artistic authority from its relationship to a long-established international photographic style, which grew largely from developments in the United States and Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and which links the work of photographers such as Stephen Shore and Andreas Gursky (to mention just two of the most obvious and important examples). Indeed, an important part

of Roberts' achievement in *We English* seemed to derive from his unique application of this style – fundamentally based around the wide perspective gained from an elevated viewpoint, coupled with a sense of psychological as well as physical detachment from the subject – in a country whose dominant documentary traditions have gravitated towards the telling of a more intimate, immersive, human story. However, understanding Roberts' work solely through the filter of these contemporary international influences tends to obscure the much richer set of connections his images make across photographic history, particularly in Britain, where, at various times and in various ways, strands of documentary photography have stepped away from the intimate subject to engage with the national narrative on a grander scale, casting a wide view across the social landscape to record the collective, shared endeavours of people at work and play.

From the 1850s onwards, in Britain, photographic developments and practices were bound up with the landscapes and social transformations of an emerging modernity. Particularly in rapidly expanding British cities and industrial centres, the pace of change and the complexities of multi-layered social spaces and experiences – where modernity has been characterized as a period of 'pleated or crumpled time, drawing together past, present and future into constant and unexpected relations'² – demanded new forms of representation. In particular, the desire to make these complexities visible, legible, and classifiable suggested encompassing processes of mapping and social panorama. This was reflected in forms of writing: in the panoply of London scenes and characters that make up Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* (1836), for example. But by 1851 visual images were being credited by some as ideal conveyors of the new knowledge: artists, illustrators, and photographers becoming the chroniclers and archivists of history, working in a universal language.³

An important, and perhaps symbolic, moment for photography in this complex narrative occurred in 1856 when the artist William Powell Frith commissioned the young photographer Robert Howlett to produce images of the Epsom Derby as studies for what would become Frith's epic human tableau of Victorian society, the painting *Derby Day*, completed between January 1857 and March 1858. In Frith's ceding of some responsibility for the accurate documenting of such a vivid panoramic spectacle to photography at this point, we might detect a moment of transference that speaks of the future and the role photography would increasingly play



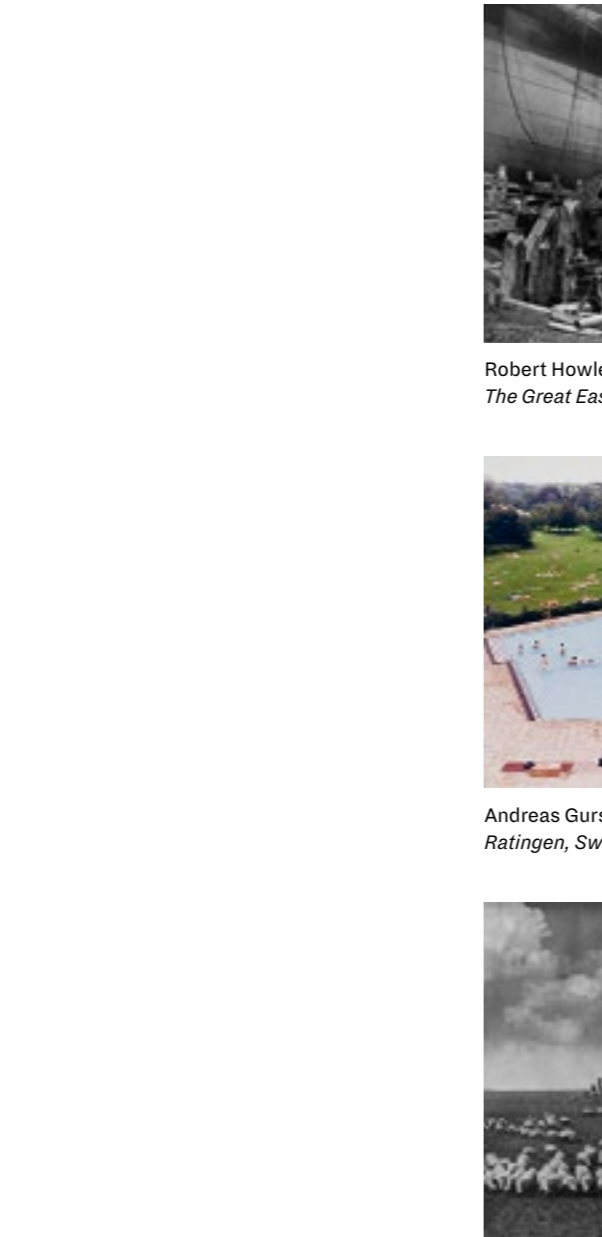
Patrick Keiller *Robinson in Space*, 1997 Film still



Robert Howlett *The Great Eastern*, 1857

^[1] From the script of Robinson in Ruins (2010). The phrase appeared again as part of the first text panel, titled Robinsonism, in Patrick Keiller's 2012 exhibition at Tate Britain, The Robinson Institute.

^[2] Lynda Nead, Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth Century London, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2000, p.8. Nead's phrase follows Michel Serres' idea of 'a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats.' In Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture and Time, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995, p.60.

^[3] Nead, ibid, p.57. Nead's reference is to an 1851 article from the Economist, and reprinted in The Illustrated London News, entitled 'Speaking to the Eye': 'Our great authors are now artists...'


Robert Howlett *The Great Eastern*, 1857

^[4] Many of Henry Flather's astonishing photographs can now be found in the collection of the Museum of London.

^[5] Peter Galassi, quoted by Michael Fried in, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2008, p.162.

^[6] Fried, ibid, p.158.

^[7] Fried, ibid, p.162. The term is Andreas Gursky's: 'I stand at a distance, like a person who comes from another world.' Quoted in Carol Squiers, 'Concrete Reality', Ruhrworks: The Arts of a German Region, 1998, p.33.

^[8] Fried, ibid, p.158.


Robert Howlett *The Great Eastern*, 1857



Andreas Gursky *Ratingen, Swimming Pool*, 1987



Clouds Over Stonehenge From The Country Life Picture Book of Britain, 1937

henceforth in bearing witness to the monumental events of Britain's social history. A year later, in 1857, Howlett was commissioned by the *Illustrated London News* to photograph the construction of Brunel's steamship *The Great Eastern*, at that time the largest ship ever built, and the resulting photographs show Howlett's intuitive mastery of the new spaces and disparate scales of modern industry. As in his studies for *Derby Day*, where he photographed from the top of a cab, Howlett positions his camera to survey scenes at the Millwall shipyard in which the drama of depiction derives from the accumulation of forensic detail and the position of the human figure, cast very much on a stage of its time, where it is often overwhelmed by the colossal machinery of its own technological endeavour. In Howlett's pictures, and in other notable photographic documents of the period – such as Henry Flather's stunning record of the construction of the Metropolitan District underground line in London between 1866 and 1870⁴ – groups of workers stare back from the photographs, standing still for the long exposure and as entranced by the performance of this new form of technician (with his tripod, large-plate camera, and an air of mystery about his operation) as the photographer would have been by the extraordinary scenes before him: the image-making process and the radical upheavals across the social fabric unified as part of the same reordering and re-imagining of experience.

Roberts has cited both Frith's *Derby Day* and Howlett's *Great Eastern* photographs as important reference points for his work, as sociological pictures: that is, in very different ways, as formal representations of social spaces, and as images that respond to and mark the significant events and human conditions of their time. Through more than 150 years of history, the resonance of these works can still be felt directly in Roberts' photographs here: for example, in the lethargic human drama at the Croydon Summer Festival or in the relative scales at play in the photograph of Ferrybridge Power Station. And yet, obviously, everything has changed – not least the sense of reciprocal seeing in Howlett and Flather's pictures as the workers gaze back at the relative novelty of the photographer's presence. Despite the fact that a photographer using a tripod and large-format camera is still a notable sight in the age of the camera phone (if only as the shadow of an archaic performance), in almost all Roberts' pictures, we see scenes in which the photographer's presence is apparently unacknowledged; or where, as Peter Galassi has said of Andreas Gursky's work, 'the subject appears to present itself without the agency

or interference of an observer'.⁵ This repeated sense of disconnection, or deliberate negation of 'the possibility of reciprocity',⁶ as Michael Fried has called it, acts to sever any sense of connection between the viewer and the space and subject of the photograph. We see the scene, as the photographer appears to, as if looking on from 'another world'.⁷ Fried has termed this tendency in contemporary art photography 'anti-theatrical', an aesthetic that confirms, and celebrates, the photograph's 'autonomy and self-sufficiency', as Fried suggests, 'in quintessentially photographic terms'.⁸

Fried's complex argument around the notion of anti-theatricality, which he traces back to concerns in French eighteenth-century painting, refers specifically to the linked strategies of contemporary artists such as Gursky, Thomas Struth, and Jeff Wall, and their making of autonomous photographic works primarily for the gallery wall and a gallery audience. And yet, inevitably, these artists' 'quintessentially photographic' pictures also echo back in time through the medium's own formal history to apparently disconnected moments in modern photographic culture where the seeds of their aesthetic choices can be found in the more pragmatic solutions of photographers working in very different professional contexts, and for non-art audiences. It is in these more commercial, editorial, and vernacular areas of production, previously considered peripheral to the history of photography, that an important part of that history is being rewritten, and where photographs can often transcend their immediate contexts to speak directly to contemporary audiences, both of the skills and awareness of the photographers concerned and of the transcendent, haunting potential of photography itself.

In relation to Simon Roberts' work and his representation of Britain's social landscape, two examples from this broader spectrum of photographic history seem particularly relevant: the landscape photographs produced for the long-running Picture Books of Britain series, published from the 1930s to the 1980s, and the now well-known photographs of the John Hinde Studio. In both these cases the photographs were produced for the commercial travel and leisure market, and both dealt predominantly in idealized views of the British landscape from predominantly elevated positions or vantage points that allowed for a broad vista, an expansive space, and, to varying degrees, the sense of a collective human experience of that space. For example, in the Picture Books of Britain's archetypal scenic views, photographers occasionally included figures for comparative

scale or to reference an activity associated with the depicted landscape – mountaineering, sailing, hiking – but in doing they also transformed the way in which the photograph would be ‘read’ or understood by the viewer. In these particular figurative pictures, the formulaic structures of highly composed and conventional ‘picturesque’ views are disrupted by a more contingent sense of human behaviour, often on a micro scale, but still with its visible expressions, gestures, and body language. The momentary, everyday time of that behaviour intrudes into the sentimental ‘timelessness’ of each scene (emblematic of an enduring national heritage) and we begin to understand the pictures in terms of a human narrative, not simply as historic landscapes but as places whose history is animated by and intertwined with the experiences of people. In addition, this contingent human element often adds strange and unforeseen psychological atmospheres to these ostensibly model British scenes, giving them distinctly surreal and even discordant qualities.

These qualities are also present in the photographs of the John Hinde Studio. Here again figures play a crucial role in defining the internal atmosphere of the pictures and how they might appeal to and be understood by those that see them – originally, in this case, people involved in the buying and receiving of postcards. To that end, the detached, surveying eye of the Hinde photographs conjured ideal worlds at once remote and familiar; holiday visions where people and places seemed to exist in a kind of harmony of interconnection but one nevertheless full of recognizable everyday details that invited the viewer into the scene. But the overriding signature motif of the many hundreds of photographs made of the British landscape by Hinde’s staff photographers, Elmar Ludwig, Edmund Nägele, and David Noble, was a foreground figure (or figures) standing with their back to the camera, who, as we look at the picture, appears to gaze with us over the scene. The absorption of these figures in the act of looking both certifies the spectacle as worthy and enticing, and registers seeing itself as an absorbing activity and part of the pleasure of the holiday experience. What Hinde’s pictures sold so successfully was not the glory of picturesque landscapes but the idea of being in them, of playing a part in those landscapes. And, most importantly, they offered the promise of reverie: a slower, more unhurried sense of time and duration, in which the pleasure of contemplation is a form of freedom from the constraints and compromises of working lives.

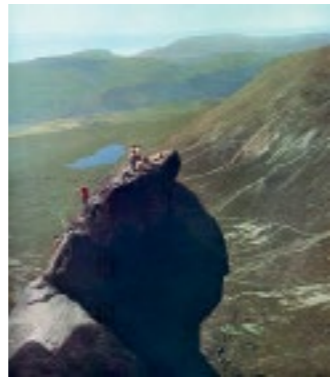
In many ways Simon Roberts’ work revives the Hinde studio’s basic photographic template and atmospherics – with all its intimations of the ‘anti-

theatricality’ of later contemporary art photography – and uses it, through the perspective of human and cultural geography, to explore the socially and politically complex landscape of Britain. When he embarked on *We English* Roberts began to develop a sense of formal composition based, as he said at the time, ‘on the idea of the collective, of groups of people populating the landscape’.

‘Photographing from elevated *positions*... would enable me to get a greater sense of people’s interaction with the landscape and with one another. I also decided that the figures would be relatively small in the frame, although not always so small that you couldn’t make out some facial expressions, what they were wearing and their activities... I like the idea of what appeared to be pastoral landscapes becoming, on closer inspection, multi-layered canvases, rich in detail and meaning.’⁹

To trace all these ideas a little further back in Roberts’ work, we might consider his photograph, *Victory Day Picnic, Yekaterinburg, Urals, May 2005*, from his series *Motherland* (2004–05), one that Roberts regards as a pivotal image in the formation of his subsequent approach. Taken as part of a year-long project photographing social life in Russia, the picture is in fact one of many in *Motherland* that might be seen as possible precursors to his later work. For example, another photograph of the victory day festivities in Yekaterinburg looks down on a crowd wandering across an urban park. It is a quiet overview of a nondescript urban space, but a deflated green blow-up crocodile in the foreground seems to signal the waning of the celebrations and, more obliquely perhaps in the wider context of Roberts’ project, of the nation itself. But the *Victory Day Picnic* photograph is unique for several reasons. It is a view across a river to a wooded, rocky bank on which small, separate groups of people – at this distance particularly reduced in scale – have gathered to talk and enjoy their picnics. The river acts as a physical barrier and so emphasizes Roberts’ detachment from the scene, as does the fact that the groups of people are so absorbed in their conversations they appear unaware of being photographed. The river’s mirrored reflection of the woods, rocks, and picnic activities exaggerates the scene’s sense of tranquil stasis and, in turn, the aesthetic poise of the image. The *Victory Day Picnic* photograph is not simply a studied piece of social observation, it is also a form of pictorial abstraction, an image preoccupied with layers of form and space, and its mesmerizing quality depends on that tension.

In these particular respects *Victory Day Picnic* echoes many of the concerns and stylistic tendencies of Andreas Gursky’s early photographs



Bernhard Seed
On The Cioch, Isle of Skye
From *The Country Life Picture Book of Britain in Colour Volume 1*, 1957



Elmar Ludwig
Motor Racing at St. Ouen's Bay, Jersey
Postcard for John Hinde Ltd, 1960s



Simon Roberts
Victory Day Picnic, Yekaterinburg, Urals, May 2005

⁹ Simon Roberts from the commentary section in his book *We English*, Chris Boot Ltd, London, 2009, unpaginated.



Joachim Brohm
Essen, 1982

from the mid- to late 1980s, and also, perhaps with greater significance for Roberts’ less formally structured later work, fellow German Joachim Brohm’s even earlier photographs from his project *Ruhr*, photographed between 1980 and 1983. But in turn both these examples depended to some degree on the foundational influence of American landscape photography, and in particular on two distinct moments in its history: first, the nineteenth-century geographical survey photographers, such as Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, whose work was revived in a number of important exhibitions and publications during the 1960s and 1970s;¹⁰ and second, a more recent generation who became the inheritors of that seminal nineteenth-century work in the US, some of whom were drawn together in the landmark exhibition ‘New Topographics: Photographs of a Man Altered Landscape’, staged at George Eastman House in 1975.

What the loose affiliation of new topographers, such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Stephen Shore, and Frank Gohlke, drew from their nineteenth-century forebears was specifically a non-dramatic, utilitarian rendering of the landscape, one that played to the inherent descriptive capabilities of the camera. It was a ‘more or less passive, inexpressive’¹¹ form of recording by photographers making pragmatic choices, who were employed, essentially, to provide geographical information and evidence. Not only did this nineteenth-century approach chime with the deliberately artless attitude to photography adopted by influential artists such as Ed Ruscha during the 1960s and 1970s, it also served as a welcome counterpoint to the prevailing overblown landscape style, typified by Ansel Adams, for example, whose dramatic depictions of the West had come to represent a kind of aspirational orthodoxy for the art of American landscape photography by the 1960s. In contrast, for curator John Szarkowski, the pictures of photographer-explorers like O’Sullivan were ‘objective’ and ‘non-anecdotal’, and therefore ‘radically photographic’¹², and by translating their utilitarian priorities into aesthetic ones, the new topographers were able to establish a template for their own self-conscious ‘stylelessness’, an approach of apparent cool, detached indifference. It has been said that the new topographers reconciled ‘beauty and ugliness, love and hatred, progress and degradation’ in a contemporary American landscape undergoing immense urbanization and change at the time; that they epitomized the ‘paradox of indifference’ by ‘being both boring and interesting’¹³. But one of the more telling, and subtle, expressions of the new topographic attitude can be found in an essay

by Robert Adams from 1985, where he summarizes what he and his colleagues found so appealing and inspirational about the work of American nineteenth-century landscape photographers:

‘At their best the photographers accepted limitations and faced space as the anti-theatrical puzzle it is – a stage without a center. The resulting pictures have an element almost of banality about them, but it is exactly this acknowledgement of the plain surface of things that helps legitimize the photographer’s difficult claim that the landscape is coherent. We know, as we recognize the commonness of places, that this is our world and that the photographer has not cheated on the way to his affirmation of meaning.’¹⁴

The importance of the new topographers’ preference for a primarily descriptive photography that responded to the decentred, ‘anti-theatrical puzzle’ of landscape is immeasurable for subsequent photography in America, Germany, and internationally, and its legacy remains a fundamental context for Simon Roberts’ work. It is there as an underlying principle in this book, implicit in the photographer’s thinking as he arranges his camera to oversee the streets of Blackpool and Totnes, for example, or when he contemplates the more domestic scene unfolding on a pavement in Bombay Street, Blackburn. But, as is hinted at in Adams’ statement, the sense of detachment achieved, that lack of reciprocity, in fact disguises a form of connection to the ‘commonness of places’, and, especially in the case of overtly figurative images, an empathy with the subject of the photograph.

Having completed his work for *Motherland*, Roberts returned to Britain in 2005 with the intention of exploring further his interest in the idea of ‘homeland’, the sense of identification with and attachment to a national landscape that had helped to define his Russian photographs. He had come home at a moment of intense and conflicting national emotions, arriving on 7 July, the day of the terrorist bombings in London – his plane being held for several hours on a runway at Heathrow as part of the spreading security response. The 7/7 attacks swiftly darkened the mood of a city that had been enjoying a brief moment of celebration following the announcement on the previous day that London had won its bid to stage the 2012 Olympics. In the weeks and months that followed, Roberts’ initial reaction to these events fed into a growing impression that the social climate in Britain had markedly changed in the year he had been away, which raised a more insistent and personal question for him about his own relationship to Englishness, something he had always felt ‘an intrinsic part’ of his identity. In this

¹⁰ Exhibitions such as: *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York and the Allbright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1975. Stephen Shore recalled seeing pictures from this exhibition early as 1971, the year of his first solo exhibition at the Met. See: *New Topographics*, Steidl and the Center for Creative Photography, Tuscon, 2009, p.64, footnote 142.

¹¹ From Britt Salvesen’s introductory essay to *New Topographics*, *ibid*, p.38.

¹² *New Topographics*, *ibid*, p.37.

¹³ *New Topographics*, *ibid*.

¹⁴ From Robert Adams’ essay, ‘Towards a Proper Silence: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of the American Landscape’, *Aperture*, No.98, Spring 1985, p.8. See, *New Topographics*, *ibid*, p.64, footnote 140.

sense Roberts was echoing the personal motives that lay behind much of the journeying through Britain undertaken by a previous generation of photographers in the 1970s and 1980s, whose desire to investigate the question of our national identity – and in the process to discover something about themselves – proved to be one of the defining impulses of a period of energetic development and radical change in the highly contested arena of British documentary photography. Books and exhibitions such as Tony Ray-Jones' *A Day Off: An English Journal* (1974), Homer Sykes' *Once a Year: Traditional British Customs* (1977), Ian Berry's *The English* (1978), John Davies' *A Green and Pleasant Land* (1987), and, as the visual language and artistic ambitions began to change, new colour work of the 1980s and early 1990s, by Martin Parr, Anna Fox, and Paul Reas, for example, all represented attempts to come to terms with what was, especially after the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, a period of far-reaching change across the social landscape of Britain.

By the time he embarked on his photographs for *We English* in 2007, these earlier projects had long been absorbed into the historical consciousness of British photography¹⁵, long enough at least for Roberts to sense an opportunity to revisit what he saw as their inspirational ambitions for new times. But, as well as the distinctiveness of his approach to the landscape, that pronoun *we* in Roberts' title also cradles a significant shift of attitude from the earlier period.

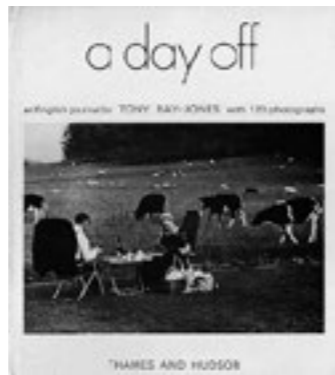
For many of the independent photographers in Britain who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, photography was to take them away from traditional working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds into an unconventional creative life that was itself at the time somewhat dislocated, one that neither subscribed to the existing commercial and editorial frameworks for photography nor was fully accepted by the established spheres of art and high culture. These photographers' sense of independence was both artistic and cultural, and although this helped to provide the impetus for some ground-breaking work with specific disadvantaged and marginalized communities, in many cases it underlined these photographers' self-conscious stance as outsiders in relation to the society they were photographing. By the early 1970s the tastes and aspirations of young photographers such as Tony Ray-Jones were also reflecting the oppositional or alternative perspectives of 1960s counter culture. Ray-Jones' influential discovery of Benjamin Stone's photographs of old folk customs first published in 1906, which suggested an irreverent weirdness

and eccentricity to set against the modernizing forces of 1970s Britain, chimed closely at the time with the underground folk revival's interest in arcane rural ritual and mythology as might be seen, for example, in the folklorist imagery decorating the sleeve of Fairport Convention's album *Liege and Lief* (1969). By the 1980s, the new colour documentary photography of Parr, Fox, Reas, and others was in general terms a critical response to the kind of society Britain was becoming under Thatcher's Conservative government, and their pictorial language of jarring high colour, discordant angles, absurd juxtapositions, and visceral tensions – by turns ironic, humorous, grotesque, angry – was a combative expression of antipathy and estrangement from the new social order.

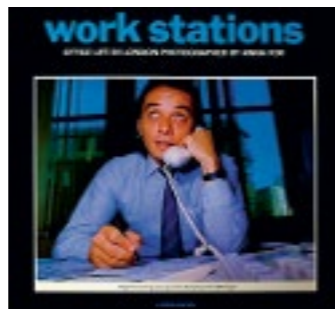
Despite his decision to adopt a consistently detached, elevated viewpoint for his work in *We English*, Roberts was not adopting the stance of an outsider, nor was he expressing any sense of alienation from the social activities he was photographing. Rather, a primary motive of his work was to explore quizzically his personal connections and sense of belonging to the culture and the national narrative that these activities seemed to embody. This is Roberts reflecting at some length on his picture, *Tandridge Golf Course, Oxted, Surrey, 2nd April 2008*, and more generally on the process of photographing for *We English*:

'During the journey, I occasionally sought out places that I believe helped shape my own feelings of Englishness. This scene on the 17th hole of Tandridge Golf Club is near my parents' home in Oxted and is a place where I used to toboggan as a child. Seeing the families playing there, and now accompanied by a young family of my own, it became apparent that childhood experiences of holidays and leisure are a complex influence, sometimes inspiring love and loathing in equal measure, but often making an indelible imprint on our consciousness of who we are and where we come from. Since I went tobogganing as a child, I would think to do the same with my children. Our history and its associations are vital to our relationship with the landscapes around us. I hope that this photograph captures this esoteric sense of the traditions that inspire belonging without being sentimental and despite the simplicity of the activities.'¹⁶

Roberts' tone here is markedly inclusive, and as his work for *We English* progressed, he decided to consolidate the idea of the project's collective identity by setting up a website on which other people could post their own ideas about places and events he might photograph. As he said: 'It struck me as a suitably democratic way of working,



Tony Ray-Jones
A Day Off: An English Journal, 1974
Book cover



Anna Fox
Work Stations: Office Life in London, 1988
Book cover

¹⁵ One of Roberts' most significant encounters with this work was in the survey exhibition *How We Are: Photographing Britain*, curated by Val Williams and Susan Bright for Tate Britain in 2007, where it was contextualised as part of a history of British Photography.

¹⁶ Simon Roberts, from the commentary section of *We English*.



John Constable
The Hay Wain, 1821

positioning me as it did alongside my fellow countrymen – a citizen, not just an onlooker – and attempting to involve people, to a certain degree, in their own representation.'¹⁷

While this 'democratic' approach has not dictated the subject matter for *Merrie Albion*, the implications of Roberts' important idea, that he is 'a citizen, not just an onlooker', remains crucial to understanding the photographs in this book. While his photographs suggest his withdrawal and separation from the scene and from the people in it, in each case he is necessarily immersed in the activities around him. The act of photographing that brings the pictures into being can be convivial and interactive: the laborious setting up of the five-by-four-inch camera providing opportunities for conversation and allowing time for people to accept his presence. As in *We English*, Roberts identifies with the people in his pictures; he is part of the society and the history he represents. But the photographer's controlled act of observation and description and his intention to open up the timeframe of the photographs, to set these transitory human events against the slower time of social history, requires a discipline and a distance that not only renders detail over an expansive space but also hides, as much as possible, the fleeting time of the exposure.

And so we enter the world of Roberts' photographs, the world of *Merrie Albion*: the subdued, anti-theatrical space, with its slower time and sometimes daydreaming sense of duration, and its social panoramas displaying the consciously style-less, apparently detached and indifferent attitude that declares the photographer's sociological interest as he journeys through the landscape of Britain over the course of its recent history. Yet, as this book so quietly suggests, this history is one of dramatic change and extreme social contrasts, and it is precisely that drama, the drama of difference and upheaval, matched against Roberts' dispassionate recording of its representative events, places, and social gatherings, which gives his photographs their distinctiveness and unique value.

In fact Roberts' history is a series of events and non-events, the civic and the domestic, the national and local, from the stage-managed and the ritualistic to the shapeless passing of the everyday. But the contrasts of landscape, environment, culture, and the weaving in and out of the national narrative, slowly build a distinctive, composite picture: from the whimsical seaside antics at the Broadstairs Dickens Festival to the downbeat, urban languor of the Griffin Youth Club

event in Blackburn; from the 2011 Royal Wedding watchers in Hyde Park, to a bleak, riot-damaged Croydon street a few months later. Throughout, Roberts' sequence is punctuated by scenes of different communities on the move, gathering in celebration and in protest, and with instances of public remembrance, all with their distinctive underlying themes of conflict and division. Strange architectural settings are also structured to foreground contrast and conflict: the edifice of a BAE systems building that looms over a backstreet in Barrow-in-Furness, or the gathered tents of an Occupy London camp set against a row of office blocks in Finsbury Square. Even in images where tensions are not explicit, they register their affect almost subliminally, such as the young girl who leaps from rocks into an apparent dark void on the River Esk in Cumbria, or in the repeated, accumulative references to militarism and the waging of war. Scenes that suggest ingrained tradition and our national obsession with the past, such as the crowds gathering on Fellows' Eyot to watch the annual Eton College Procession of Boats on the River Thames, or the assembled tourists at Willy Lott's house in Flatford, site of Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821), are offset by images in which Roberts charts a growing sense of political unrest and instability: during the budget day occupation of Leeds City Council chambers, for example, or at the 2010 student protest in Parliament Square, or among the anti-fracking 'No Dash for Gas' campaigners in Balcombe, West Sussex.

In many ways these marked shifts of place, culture, and atmosphere create, in themselves, an overriding sense of uncertainty and anxiety in Roberts' national chronicle as it moves slowly towards the referendum and Brexit, and then culminates in the terrible iconic image of social inequality, injustice, and trauma formed by the blackened high-rise tomb of Grenfell Tower. At its heart Roberts' work seeks to quell the visceral drama of events. He does not trust his camera into the action, but steps back to see the wider picture, to create photographs that embody a kind of weighing up of complex tableaux of comparative information – whether that be a political rally winding away down a city street or a family on a beach, pausing for a moment to stare out to sea. *Merrie Albion* is a partial account; it is selective and subjective; but Roberts' pictures draw us into the slow unfolding of social time and provide points of connection that encourage us, from one picture to another, to think not only about the varied scenes as part of a unified historical process but ultimately to reflect on our own place in that history.