

SIMON ROBERTS

A review of *The Brexit Lexicon*

by Kitty Bew, 2018

Simon Roberts' *The Brexit Lexicon* depicts the turgid wordiness of life in a mid-breakup Britain. In the dampened, yet austere surroundings of a Regency basement in Brighton plays the latest video work of the photographer, a work that highlights the hyperbole and verbiage that is now firmly the reserve of the Brexit negotiations, a rhetoric of truths and untruths, of overstatement, and underestimation. As suggested by the piece, this is a rhetoric articulated almost entirely by the media, caricatured in the form of a seemingly impassive newsreader, who reels off a list of Brexit watchwords and phrases from the last two years, taken from newspaper headlines, political speeches and poster slogans by the artist himself. (Here Roberts plays the role of collector, indulging in a process of mass accumulation and contemplation.) The absurdity of the performance is accentuated by the use of a vivid green screen backdrop that mocks the aesthetic of the televised evening news; a nod to forms of mass broadcast, for the masses. As Roberts assures me when I meet with him, facets of the video's production are truly authentic. Filming was carried out at a prominent news studio (that will remain nameless), and a trainee newsreader was chosen as his leading man. These features also serve to highlight the film's own artifice and its essential performativity, yet this is delicately betrayed by the newsreader himself. Filmed in a single take, his monologue is peppered with moments of genuine vulnerability, evident in his inaccuracies, and his anxieties. As Roberts acknowledges, "there is a part of him that becomes quite human." Here, contrivance rubs up against sincerity, producing a notional dialogue between one, and the other.

Dialogue takes pride of place in *The Brexit Lexicon*. Roberts purposefully spotlights the role of language; its significance, but also its hazards. The photographer put together his Brexit glossary in the months following the

results of the 2016 referendum, and it is a diverse mix of both pro-Remain, and pro-Leave sentiment, forming a panorama of Brexit-concentrated media. The work certainly draws attention to the vitriolic nature of Brexit rhetoric in general, a rhetoric that blow by blow, mutated into something grotesque. Misled by the speculations of the popular press, an ugliness that had been sprouting within the British populace was made manifest; thoughts of isolationism, and nativism were drawn out into the open to become a part of our everyday. Roberts alludes to this by laying newspapers at the foot of his exhibit; a tactile focal point that marks a departure from the playful ambiguity of his moving image. In the video, the photographer also chooses to soften the perniciousness of his chosen words and phrases by alphabetising them; imposing order onto disorder. Systematised into an A - Z, the lexicon is (to some extent) free of the artist's own touch and via its categorisation, the video matures from artwork, into oral document, as if created for an archival purpose.

A fitting visual counterpart within the space is a projection made up of, not just the lexicon, but footage of the White Cliffs of Dover. The moving picture is also echoed in a series of posters; a photograph taken by Roberts of Beachy Head - a similar stretch of English coastline - the day that Theresa May triggered Article 50. He offers a skilful fusion of word and image, also playing off Britain's identity as an island, which has come to form a visual language "that we are familiar with when we come to talk about the idea of us as a nation." Yet it is clear that the exhibit fundamentally relies on one to read or to listen, looking in the typical sense, is somewhat left out of the equation. There is a veiled tension between the visual and the verbal, the visual and the scripted. But as the photographer notes, "There's nothing worse for me than having a piece of work that doesn't say anything other than being purely for the visual aesthetic." As Roberts points out, the circumstances of Brexit, its meanings and implications, are visually underwhelming. In a way, this relates to the partial nothingness of Brexit. Whilst its circumstances are representative of immense, fundamental change, not much has actually taken place. Brexit is both transformational, and unchanging - existing in a state of eternal contradiction. It is a state of confusion that is conveyed in a Virginia Woolf quote, that accompanies Roberts' posters - "They looked at what they knew, to see if what they knew might perhaps be different today. Most days it was the same." It embodies a notion of before and after; time marked, but left unchanged.

The Brexit Lexicon was exhibited at the Regency Town House, Brighton, October 2018.