

Let This Be A Sign

One of the ways we remember an economic crisis is through its images. When we imagine Depression-era America, we think of the black and white portraits of men in bread lines wearing placards that beg for work. Recalling Thatcher's Britain, we see news pictures of the miners' strike or those glimpsed, silent moments from the inside of dole offices. While barely a day goes by without more grim economic news, the current recession has been largely invisible, perhaps due to the challenges of representing abstract monetary systems or because the outward signs of today's economic struggles are hard to capture without resorting to cliché, even though the eventual effects – a lost job, a vanishing pension, cutbacks to social services – are intensely personal and painful.

Over the past eighteen months I've been attempting to explore different ways of representing the effects of recent economic changes on the landscape of Britain. In this new series of work I follow in the humanist tradition - employed by some of the most influential British documentary photographers of the last century - whilst incorporating the iconography and language that have become so much a part of this 'era of austerity.'

My approach has been multi-disciplinary, using video, text and objects such as protest banners, as well as digital collages, in an attempt to record our new predicament. The Credit Crunch Lexicon, for example, is a text-based work, which draws upon the diversity of economic, political and philosophical terminology that has now become part of our vernacular. Arranged alphabetically to create a form of concrete poetry, the words and phrases scrutinize the miasma of rhetoric, hyperbole and sometimes, contradictory terms used to describe the economic downturn.

In other work I capture the more visible manifestations of economic change, from the omnipresent sales signs in shop windows and shuttered high street stores to the increase in union strikes, student sit-ins and the manifestation of the Occupy encampments which focused its protest against corporate greed. There are photographs, too, taken inside city halls around the country, where the 2011/12 annual budgets were agreed and major cuts signed off.

This publication and associated exhibition (first shown at Swiss Cottage Gallery as part of the London Festival of Photography) aims to convey a multitude of voices and provide an incisive depiction of contemporary British reality. Our means of organising protests and campaigns may have become more technologically sophisticated, but our means of self-expression: camps, banners, graffiti and so on remains straightforward, primitive even, rooted as they are in our personal experience, our sense of justice, our vulnerability and our expectations of those in positions of power.

As has become commonplace in my practice, I have also added a collaborative element to the project encouraging public participation. If you would like the opportunity to share your experiences of the current recession and its effects, you can leave a message via twitter using the hashtag #LetThisBeASign.

As the new financial year progresses with continued chaos in the Eurozone and recovery slower than predicted, there is no guarantee that the fiscal landscape will improve anytime soon. In this sense, my work is unresolved. The photographs are ongoing, mutable and subject to all of our fears and desires.

Simon Roberts, Brighton, May 2012