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Do we stand to lose these locally managed, informally productive, convivial and nurturing places in years to come?

The *Peckham Peace Wall, Southwark* is an atypical Roberts set up, closer to its subject rather than the more elevated aspect often adopted by the photographer. It's on a level with the people and despite being set in a teeming urban thoroughfare there's barely sense of a crowd. That said the presence of an entire if fragmented community is evident. This work suggests thoughts of communication: the woman on the phone; the boy watching an animated exchange; the still, central figure of a man with a walking stick intently scanning the flurry of messages and behind him someone else using his phone to photograph and presumably send on a close-up of a particular note.

Although we can't read the individual Post Its that have been pressed to the boarded-up post-riot Poundland shop we sense that its hundreds of messages are

causing a stir, holding attention.

Messages left here expressing opinions regarding the violence, vandalism, arson and looting that occurred in the riots of 2011 apparently totalled 4,000. I'm not, however, convinced that this is a portrait of "the community's resilience and steadfastness". Even if a facsimile wall was produced in Peckham Square to commemorate the original, spontaneous, makeshift repository of local comment and concern. Roberts' photograph speaks much more about the fragility, impermanence – the hanging about, just-hanging-on quality – of many 'communities' couched as they are in sites of shoddy, cheaply built but crippling expensive to occupy, households in thrall to exploitative, gaudy chain shop commerce.

We've seen ten years of toxic and myopic attacks on health, education and social welfare. There are those – I'm thinking of pictures ranging from the *Annual Eton College Procession of Boats*

5) Ashley Vale Allotments, Bristol, Avon, 30 May 2008

6) Watching the Royal Wedding, Hyde Park, London, 29 April 2011

7) The Peckham Peace Wall, Southwark, London, 10 August 2011

8) Ferrybridge Power Station, Knottingley, West Yorkshire, 5 July 2016

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to the *Equestrian Jumping Individual, Greenwich Park, London* – who are pictured taking part in or witnessing some grand distraction. And the photographs of political and trades union events similarly show various of the UK's publics thronging together in preservation of what is precious, what is dear to them. These grand occasions, however, through Roberts' lens sizzle with palpable social tension.

And it's not just in the more obvious photographic representations of conflict such as *After the Riots, London Road, Croydon* or *National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, Parliament Square, London* that we're made aware of social discord. With *The Peckham Peace Wall* this apparently mundane scene talks just as effectively about social standing, wealth, privilege and exclusion. A post-riot report bemoaned the "lack of opportunities for young people, poor parenting, a lack of shared values and sense of responsibility among some, an

inability of the justice system to prevent re-offending, issues relating to confidence in the police, and materialism".

Here and throughout Roberts' fascinating, sometimes gently ironic, always thoughtful and considered visual survey, we see not so much a Merrie Albion but rather a fractured UK riddled with complex concerns. This is the land on which we live, the air that we breathe.

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■ The *Merrie Albion* exhibition runs until March 10 at Flowers, 82 Kingsland Rd, London E2 8DP

■ *New Photography Monograph: Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island*, by Simon Roberts, is published by Dewi Lewis