



MELANIE FRIEND

TWO BEWILDERED TOURISTS GET CAUGHT IN THE FLASH AND THE FURY OF THE POLL TAX RIOTS

Working as a photojournalist in the 80s, Melanie Friend's photographs were both key news pictures and what she cryptically describes as "quiet shots". Friend moved away from photojournalism into reportage during the 90s, but her work continues to be political in nature. For this issue, Friend remembers taking this photograph at the Poll Tax riots in 1990, when 200,000 people protested against Margaret Thatcher's shift of the tax burden from the wealthy to the poor... sound familiar?

"Like many of us at that time, I was politically engaged and my work had a political drive. I remember going down to Trafalgar Square and seeing both riot and mounted police, and missiles – bricks and bottles – flying

through the air. I hate having my movement restricted and can get quite claustrophobic. I had been reading about the police's kettling tactics, which have come up in the news again recently, so I retreated. In hindsight, I'm glad I did, as I know there were injuries on both sides that day.

I decided to just hang about on the side streets, St Martins Lane and Charing Cross Road. That is where I saw the two Japanese guys in the picture. I don't remember a lot but I know I must have had a brief conversation with them as I captioned it 'Japanese Tourists'. It was quite surreal. I remember looking at them thinking that they looked bewildered but excited. They must have stumbled into the riot after a shopping trip to HMV on

Oxford Circus. It's interesting how this shot affects me now, looking at it after all these years. I am really interested in the Japanese guys, who they were and how witnessing this riot affected their image of the UK... I hadn't seen the photograph for a while, and in hindsight it has perhaps more resonance. I see the smoke in the background almost as Thatcher's regime going up in smoke – her reign came to an end later that year. It also makes me think about the beginnings of consumerism and celebrity in the 90s – the HMV bags juxtaposed against the fire and rioters. Lots of people talk about that shift towards a less politicised culture during that decade.

The atmosphere was very heady on that day and you felt that you were really witnessing something

extraordinary. Every time I went to document a demonstration I would see the same colleagues there. It was a very intoxicating time to be a photojournalist. I damaged my back and have moved into a slower sort of work now, where I don't have to run around carrying cameras, but it's all still political. I very much admire my contemporaries from that time who are still doing the job now."

Text WILLIAM OLIVER

**STREET FIGHTING MAN:
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**Above: POLL TAX PROTEST,
London, 1991, courtesy of Melanie
Friend and Flash Projects**